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Integration in Different Family Structures: How integration differs for families, mothers traveling with children, and single men

Classification can be useful: The process of assigning labels allows us to analyze and compare groups and devise approaches to action. Improper classification, however, can have negative consequences. Too narrow a classification might frustrate efforts to process people efficiently, while too broad a classification misses the details that might allow for equitable treatment.

When it comes to migration, broad classifications are abundant. Refugees and migrants are often seen as a monolithic mass, which encourages policy makers to essentialize migration as they search for *the* single solution to this complex phenomenon. Nowhere is this truer than in Tijuana, Mexico, the location of our study. There and elsewhere, immigrants are thought to be driven by the same motivations, threatened by the same risks, and in need of the same remedies. In this essay, I aim to highlight some key differences in the experiences of Central American migrants in Tijuana, focusing on the impact family structure has on migrants' experiences living in that city.

We observed three family structures in the study: families traveling together, women traveling with their children, and men traveling alone. This essay explores various aspects of the integration experience, including remittance behavior, access to employment, housing, safety, support networks, social integration, and access to financial services.

Unless otherwise stated, the source for these findings is the author's own research, carried out during June and July of 2019 in Tijuana, Mexico, as part of a larger body of research from the Fletcher School at Tufts University entitled *Finance in Displacement*.

Families Traveling Together

The families interviewed in Tijuana ranged from three to five members. They were all composed of young parents between the ages of 21 and 35, and young children between ten months old and seven years old. These families rely on family members and friends in the United States, as well as local organizations and good Samaritans to supplement their household income - often patched together from menial jobs - and satisfy their needs. One Salvadoran family was forced to beg for money and food for a month in Tapachula while they waited to receive a cash transfer from UNHCR. Upon arrival in Tijuana, the same family was taken in by two local prostitutes after their contact and friend, who had offered to receive them, changed his mind. A few months after their arrival in the city, the Salvadoran family's luck turned, and they inspired a Mexican actress with the story of their journey. The actress gave them a furnished home as a way to alleviate some of their financial stress. Sandra, the female head of household, recounts her good fortune:

After I shared my story, Roselyn Sanchez was moved. She spoke to the organization [Families Belong Together] and told them she wanted to help us. She wanted to get us a house. We were contacted 8 days later and told we had 15 days to find a house that would be paid for by the organization and Roselyn would buy all the furniture for the house. I was in shock! I couldn't believe it. She is a busy woman, a Hollywood star. How was it possible that she remembered me? [...] We are so thankful to her for everything she did for us. [...] I was so happy. So thankful. We sent them a video of the house and everything.

Gendered roles figure deeply into how employment is managed within a household. In most cases, the male of the household is the one charged with finding a job. The female has her own work cut out for her caring for the children. That said, women did search for employment; some even secured it, but childcare was difficult to come by, forcing women's work outside the home to come to a halt. When found, childcare presented additional costs both in terms of money and safety, as families did not know who they could trust with their children.

In cases where multiple families traveled together, certain efficiencies could evolve: only one of the women needed to stay home with the children while the other(s) could work and supplement household income. This was the case of two sisters, both of whom traveled with their husbands and three children each. One of the sisters opted to stay home with her children and her nephews while the other worked in the same factory as her husband. The income generated by the sister working outside the household served to supplement both families. In another instance, a couple living near a church and shelter paid a migrant woman who had a child of her own to stay in their house and care for their daughter. This allowed both women to earn an income.

Securing housing was often a difficult task, one affected by a household's ability to generate income as well as locals' willingness to rent out to migrants. In many instances, landlords would discriminate in favor of locals, charging migrants exorbitant rents well beyond their reach. Families willing to live on the outskirts of Tijuana were more likely to find more affordable housing. Nevertheless, the costs can still prove burdensome for some, as was Paola's case:

We were able to find a place to live next to where my sister lives. It costs us MEX 800 [US\$ 39.91] a month, plus water and electricity. On top of that, we all need to chip in about MEX 3,000 [US\$ 149.68] to connect the electric, since we currently don't have a meter and need to get one installed.

Family members also affected how migrants experienced safety, or lack thereof, in their journey. Paola relayed her experience with a Mexican cartel who was attempting to kidnap her and her family prior to arriving in Tijuana:

When we finally got down from the bus, we noticed the trucks parked all around us with their doors open. The young men were shoving everyone onto these trucks, forcefully, even the children. As soon as my husband saw this, he said, "Get back on the bus!" The young men saw us getting back on and started screaming, "Where are you going?" The young men were pulling me over to the trucks, but I kept resisting. My husband conjured up a quick lie and said we had one more kid up on the bus and needed to get him down. With that lie, they allowed us back on, but they quickly called our bluff. They started screaming once more, pulling

us to get on the trucks. Then, as a miracle from God, they heard a “three-four” on their radios. [...] They rounded up the people they had managed to get down from the bus, slammed the doors of their trucks, and drove away.

Back on the bus, we went on our way and were surprised by two more trucks up ahead. I looked at my husband and said, “If they didn’t get us the first time, they’re going to get us now.” My husband told me to lock myself up in the bathroom with the kids, but the chauffeur’s assistant got down and spoke to the men in the trucks. I don’t know what he told them, but the trucks started up again and drove away.

If Paola had not traveled with her husband and brother-in-law, it may have been more difficult to escape the clutches of the cartel.

As with traveling with family members during a journey, families also fared better on arrival: they exposed themselves to less danger by living all together in a house instead of a shelter. Women and their children felt less vulnerable to the rape and kidnapping widely reported and often witnessed in the streets and even within the confines of a shelter.

Families also served as support networks on arrival in Tijuana. Even if their network was small, it provided a sense of safety and familiarity unavailable to those traveling alone. The support of a household was seen as crucial to achieving some semblance of social integration, since the pressure to find allies and over-rely on strangers was less than for those traveling solo.

Families moving together shared tasks, both large (determining routes and destination, identifying safe shelters) and small (guarding luggage, picking up remittances). Women and men traveling alone or with children did not have the luxury of relying on trusted individuals to point them to safe means of transportation or to help them learn the denominations and value of a new currency.

Nevertheless, families faced difficulties of their own, like coming up with enough money to renew visas. A family of five confided their concern when they realized their visas would expire in the coming months. No visas meant no jobs. Each renewal costs nearly USD 250, totaling USD 1,250 for the entire family.

Considering the family makes less than USD 270 a month, visa renewals seemed impossible.

Women Traveling with Children

In this study, Central American female migrants traveling with their children were generally in their early twenties to mid-thirties, though one of the respondents was in her mid-forties. The young mothers were often scared and seemed less open to speaking with strangers than male migrants who were traveling solo. Their reaction to strangers should come as no surprise, as women face unique, often greater challenges. They are unable to sleep out on the streets like their male counterparts, fearing rape and other violence. They must remain vigilant even in shelters, which offer only illusory safety, as men and women are mixed together, with little monitoring. Caring for children in the circumstances of mixed-gender shelters further heightened their fears.

Remittances play an important role in women’s safety. The money transfers they received from friends and family members allowed them to pay for shelter, clothes, food or medicine. In fact, remittances and aid received from shelters or good Samaritans was often these women’s only source of income. For many, remittances also eased their return home when they grew weary of their unlikely prospects of asylum in the U.S. This differed greatly from the experience of male travelers who were mainly remitters, did not have a need to secure gender segregated shelters, and could generate income through their work.

The need for remittances and aid arises because finding employment is a significant challenge for these women, since they must either find childcare or take their children with them to work. For those seeking childcare, finding someone trustworthy who will not charge them more than they can afford is a daunting task. Trusting strangers was not an option given media and eyewitness accounts of child kidnappings. The goal of these kidnappings was unclear. Respondents named at least three different reasons why children were being abducted: organ trafficking, sex trafficking, and to be claimed as dependents at the U.S. border by child-less migrants, in order to increase their chances of receiving asylum. In this context, a woman would be hard pressed to leave her child in the hands of a stranger.

One respondent, Carmen, fearing her five-year old daughter could be abducted, opted to sell candy at stoplights to earn money. This allowed her to take her daughter to work, so to speak. Even so, Carmen had to abandon this work when her daughter was nearly kidnapped:

I had looked for other jobs, but no one would hire me, and I also had no one to take care of my little girl. The only jobs I was offered were in bars and places like that, and quite frankly I didn't come all this way to prostitute myself. I have a daughter and want to set a good example for her. So, I started selling candy under the bridge. One day, after selling candy for a week, my daughter was sitting on the sidewalk close to me when a man came by pretending like he was going to buy candy. But I noticed that he suddenly grabbed my daughter's arm and tried to take her away. As soon as I saw that he grabbed her, I grabbed her other arm and started screaming. A man in a business close by heard me and ran over, spooking the man that was trying to take my daughter away. After that incident, I was scared to keep selling candy and therefore stopped.

Given childcare challenges, many women are forced to remain unemployed in shelters, hoping they will be granted asylum in the United States. When this opportunity is denied to them, they opt to return to their country of origin. As one respondent put it, "I would rather die in my homeland than here, where nobody knows me."

Interestingly, there does not seem to be a sense of community among fellow female Central American migrants in Tijuana. Lacking organization and networks, they confront their challenges alone. Throughout the study, I never heard a single case of long-term integration of women who had arrived alone with their children. On the contrary, all respondents that belonged to this group made it clear they did not intend on staying in Tijuana, regardless of the outcome of their asylum case in the United States. Women presented a weaker appetite for uncertainty and danger, and in many cases, refused to wait for their next court hearing, preferring instead to return home.

Men Traveling Alone

Similarly to families traveling together and women traveling alone, Central American migrant men traveling solo to Tijuana are typically young, with ages ranging between 22 to 40, and a few outliers between 40 and 50. Men traveling alone face fewer challenges than the other two groups, though they too have unique difficulties. They face more acts of xenophobia, chauvinism, and racism as they interact with locals than do women or families.

Men, especially young men, have been depicted by the media as violent, lazy, and uneducated gang members who present a threat to Tijuana and its locals. Unfortunately, many Tijuaneños have adopted this depiction as reality and are opposed to Central American men remaining in Mexico. As a result, these men are often denied job opportunities, apartments, and even a chance to build relationships with the local community. The reality faced by Central American men is summarized through Alexander's account:

There are many racist people and there are many people who, as soon as they find out you're from Honduras they mistreat you, look down on you, or judge you. They think we're all the same. [...] It even stops you from getting certain jobs because people will say, "Oh he's Honduran? We won't hire him." They say we are criminals and thieves, things like that. They want to pay us less because we are Hondurans. That happens in jobs like construction or in the market. In company jobs it happens less if you have your documents in order, but sometimes they'll ask for your birth certificate and we don't have our birth certificates. They use that excuse to deny us jobs. All we can do is bear it, keep our head down, and bite our tongues. [...] Sometimes the friends of my Mexican friends don't want to hang out because I'm around. The police stop us randomly to say they're doing checkups, and even when they don't find anything, they pretend like they're detaining us so people will see they're doing their job. They'll get us in the police car and two streets later, they'll let us off. All we can do is stay quiet.

Men who traveled alone were active senders of remittances, with a dependent in their home countries relying on them for money. Dependents included

children, significant others, and elderly parents. Having valid documentation, such as a humanitarian visa or residency card, allowed these men to send their remittances directly. Those who lacked the necessary documentation had to rely on locals to send the money on their behalf, and in most cases these locals expected remuneration for the favor.

This group faced fewer challenges finding work than the others. They were able and willing to relocate, engage in more dangerous activities, and could afford to go without pay for short periods of time. However, men were still vulnerable to exploitation, with some respondents reporting working 12 hours a day, six days a week, for a meager weekly salary of USD 50.

Housing for this group differed depending on whether they were able to find other migrants to live with and split costs. One respondent managed to save money over the course of three months and was able to afford an apartment on his own. Still, he needed a Mexican citizen to serve as a guarantor and he had to lie about his own nationality. Alex recounts:

I started to save up and once I had enough money, I rented my own room. It was very hard to find a room around here because most rooms are rented out in dollars. Where are we going to earn in dollars here in Tijuana? Whenever I would go looking for a room, they would tell me, "It costs USD 500 a month," or, "It costs USD 800 a month." Wow! Where am I supposed to find that kind of money? Where? I started crying and became so sad. Nevertheless, there are always Mexican comrades that come through. [...] [My Mexican comrades] told me to say that I was their family member, their cousin. And, well, I could pass off as Mexican. [...] Thanks to this Mexican comrade I was able to get the room in which I currently live for MEX 1,700 [USD 89.37].

Safety was not an apparent or high-priority concern for most of the men interviewed, though one respondent did report feeling very frightened by the possibility of being kidnapped. Men traveling alone built their support networks with other men they had met during their travels. This was especially the case for those who arrived with the migrant caravan. Conversely, men who arrived on their own were more apt

to describe themselves as loners, particularly if they were older than 40.

Social integration also seemed more likely for men who arrived in Tijuana alone than for women. Men were more risk tolerant and could see themselves building a life in Mexico if the United States denied them asylum. Some of the participants, in fact, found Mexico to be a better option for them than the United States, believing the likelihood of leading successful lives was higher in Mexico than in the U.S. John, a young Salvadoran migrant, went so far as to advise others pursuing the "American Dream" to look no further than Mexico:

If people are looking for safety, they can find it here. If they are looking for a better life, they can find it here. And if people have the opportunity to regularize their status in Mexico, there is no need to pursue the American Dream. The American Dream is a lie that was conjured up in the 70's. It never really existed. The real dream is to be somewhere you feel well.

Commonalities

With respect to access to financial services, respondents did not appear to have greater or lesser access to financial services, particularly banking, regardless of their family structure. The challenges faced in opening a bank account were the same for all family structures, namely, having the required documentation to prove identity, permanence, and intention. All non-Mexican migrants must present a Mexican phone number, email address, a valid passport, their CURP (Clave Única de Registro de Población / Unique Population Registry Code),¹ and preferably their permanent residency card. Some banks allow the use of temporary residency cards and certain visas, such as the humanitarian visa. However, they prefer permanent residency documents because there is a higher likelihood their holders will stay in the country. These requirements limit Central Americans' access to banking, as most migrants lacked passports, and even fewer were permanent residents.

¹ The CURP is a personal identification number similar to a person's social security number in the U.S.

Conclusion

By classifying a subset of migrants, namely Central American migrants in Tijuana, into three distinct categories based on their family structure, it becomes clear that they are far from one uniform group. In fact, the obstacles faced by each group and the resources available to them to overcome such obstacles are widely different, suggesting the need for different approaches and solutions to their problems.

Understanding the different challenges faced by migrants is of the utmost importance for policy makers, non-profit organizations, and others looking to work with this population. As illustrated in this essay, challenges may vary even when studying a group from the same region settled in the same city. It is therefore crucial to classify groups with caution, taking into account the nuances that may allow for good policy to emerge.



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