

***Back on your Own: Return Migration and the Federal Government
Response in Mexico***

***Back on your own: migración de retorno y la respuesta del gobierno federal
en México***

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ABSTRACT

U.S.-Mexico migration has been completely transformed. Currently, more Mexicans return from the United States to Mexico than those who migrate to that country. Millions of Mexican migrants have left the United States due to the economic recession, a harsher immigration policy, and a stronger deportation system. Mexican returnees, voluntary and involuntary, present a diverse profile and wide-ranging reintegration needs, which constitutes a challenge for the government in Mexico. Here we analyze specific initiatives and programs created by the Mexican federal government to serve returnees, also we identify various challenges and areas of improvement. Finally, we offer recommendations for a better reintegration of the returnee population.

Keywords: 1. return migration, 2. reintegration, 3. migration policy, 4. Mexico, 5. United States.

RESUMEN

La situación migratoria México-Estados Unidos se ha transformado por completo. Más mexicanos retornan de Estados Unidos a México que aquellos que migran a ese país. Millones de mexicanos han salido de Estados Unidos debido a la recesión económica, el endurecimiento de la política migratoria y el fortalecimiento del sistema de deportaciones estadounidense. Los retornados, voluntarios e involuntarios, presentan un perfil diverso y necesidades de reintegración variadas, lo que constituye un desafío para México. Aquí analizamos las iniciativas y programas creados por el gobierno federal mexicano para atender a esta población. Identificamos varios desafíos y áreas de oportunidad y concluimos con recomendaciones para mejorar el proceso de reintegración.

Palabras clave: 1. migración de retorno, 2. reintegración, 3. política migratoria, 4. México, 5. Estados Unidos.

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INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen great transformations in migration patterns at a global level. Given the economic crisis of 2008 and the restrictive immigration policies in the receiving States, forced and involuntary return has grown into a noticeable trend in international migration flows. That is the case for what used to be the main migration corridor in the world, the U.S.-Mexico border (Durand & Arias, 2014), now characterized by large numbers of Mexicans returning to their country of origin. Although this is not a new phenomenon in Mexico, as a considerable number of Mexicans were deported from the United States in the 1930s (Alanís, 2015), return migration has grown in importance due to its volume, the diversity of experiences, and the immediacy of having reintegration programs for this population.

Even if important progress has been made in identifying and classifying the returning population (Fundación Bancomer BBVA, 2016; Gandini, Lozano, & Gaspar, 2015; Masferrer & Roberts, 2016), research on the reintegration needs of the returnees is scarce (UNICEF, 2015; Guzmán, 2014), and the analyses of the government programs to address such needs are almost non-existent (García & Gaspar, 2017) despite the 2.8 million removals to Mexico carried out under the Obama administration.

Designing programs that serve the returning population is a complex task nowadays as, contrasting with previous flows of return, the migratory profiles of the returnees in the last two decades are very diverse. The first category, that of forced return, is comprised of those Mexican nationals who leave the United States through removal processes or under a voluntary return order. Generally, these migrants adhere to repatriation processes upon arrival in Mexico, which allows for them to be recorded. Outside the forced return flow but linked to it, the children and spouses following after deported relatives can be counted. These individuals are generally not included in repatriation and removal statistics, as their returning is considered voluntary.

Voluntary return statistics also include approximately 500,000 minors born in the United States, children to Mexican immigrants; for them, moving to Mexico is usually not returning but rather a first migratory movement. And so, the needs of the returning population are multiple and diverse, particularly when it comes to those individuals who return forcefully and hence unable to prepare their return. Often, the deported population lacks valid or current identity documents, such as birth certificates or voting IDs, this last one is considered as the official identity document required to access almost every service in Mexico (Mexicans and Americans Thinking Together, 2013; Medina & Menjívar, 2015).

This article aims at expanding our understanding of the phenomenon of return migration in Mexico by analyzing how the federal government is responding to the needs of its citizens returning from the United States. The discussion is organized around three questions: What are the main federal initiatives on return migration? What is the scope and limitations of such initiatives so far? What actions can contribute to a better reintegration of the returning

population from the starting point of existing governmental initiatives? We specifically address the programs and policies on migration and return created by the federal government in the last decade. By analyzing the way these initiatives work and what their scope is, we aim at identifying their challenges and areas of improvement.

Mexico is highly relevant as a case study for the American continent, as it is the country with the largest net number of migrants deported from the U.S, the latter being to this day the main migratory destination in the world (World Economic Forum, 2019). The hostile discourse towards migrants, particularly those of Mexican origin, by the current president of the United States, Donald Trump, puts additional pressure on the Mexican government to analyze its response to the returning population.

The following section will focus on the existing literature addressing the profile of return migrants, both voluntary and involuntary, throughout the last two decades in order to identify their main reintegration needs. Subsequently, we will assess the government initiatives to serve the returnees during the administrations of presidents Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (2006-2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018). We will then wrap this article by analyzing these government initiatives and identifying their main shortcomings and windows of opportunity within the current Mexico-U.S. binational context.

MEXICAN MIGRANTS' RETURN IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Mexican migration to the United States is a unique case in the history of international migration, as the neighborhood and shared history of these countries have resulted in outstanding migration flows from Mexico towards the north (Durand, 2000). As a matter of fact, and up until 2014, Mexico was the greatest source of immigrants to the United States (Hazán, 2014). However, the flow of Mexican people migrating into the United States has been of a different magnitude in the 20th and the 21st centuries. Also, to every migration flow into the United States has corresponded a flow of Mexicans returning to their country of origin.

The first massive flow of Mexicans returning to their country from the United States took place during the Great Depression: hundreds of thousands of Mexican immigrants were deported from 1930 to 1933. The reaction of the Mexican government was critical towards the deportations and announced a series of programs aimed at the reintegration of the nationals. However, most of the initiatives failed due to a lack of funds and poor implementation (Alanís, 2015). After that, Mexico received back a large number of nationals during Operation Wetback (1954), under which over a million undocumented Mexicans were apprehended and deported (Durand, 2016).

The 21st century is an era in Mexico-U.S. migration characterized by a greater number of Mexicans returning from the United States than those migrating to that country. Among

the hundreds of thousands who have returned, both voluntary return and forced removal can be seen. This last category is constituted by those Mexican nationals who leave the United States through a removal process or under a voluntary return order. A removed migrant is a foreign person who cannot be allowed in or is deported to Mexico from the United States. Their leaving is mandatory and confirmed by means of an order of removal under the categories of criminal or non-criminal. In the United States, any immigrant who is removed (deported) will experience consequences of an administrative or criminal nature if and upon re-entering the territory.

The U.S. government defines returning as the confirmed movement of an inadmissible or deportable alien out of the United States, without an order of removal (not forced). Generally, these migrants adhere to the repatriation process upon entering Mexico, which allows for them to be considered in the statistics by the Mexican government. Outside of this forced return flow but linked to it, the children and spouses following after deported relatives can be counted. These Mexicans are generally not included in repatriation and removal statistics, as their returning is considered voluntary.

There are at least two factors that seem to explain the return of approximately 2.8 million nationals to Mexican territory. On the one hand, the economic and social crisis in the United States constrained the work opportunities for migrants, particularly those undocumented. On the other hand, the implementation of restrictive migration policies (both at the local and federal levels) drastically widened the range of population that is deportable and strengthened the enforcement of the deportation system.

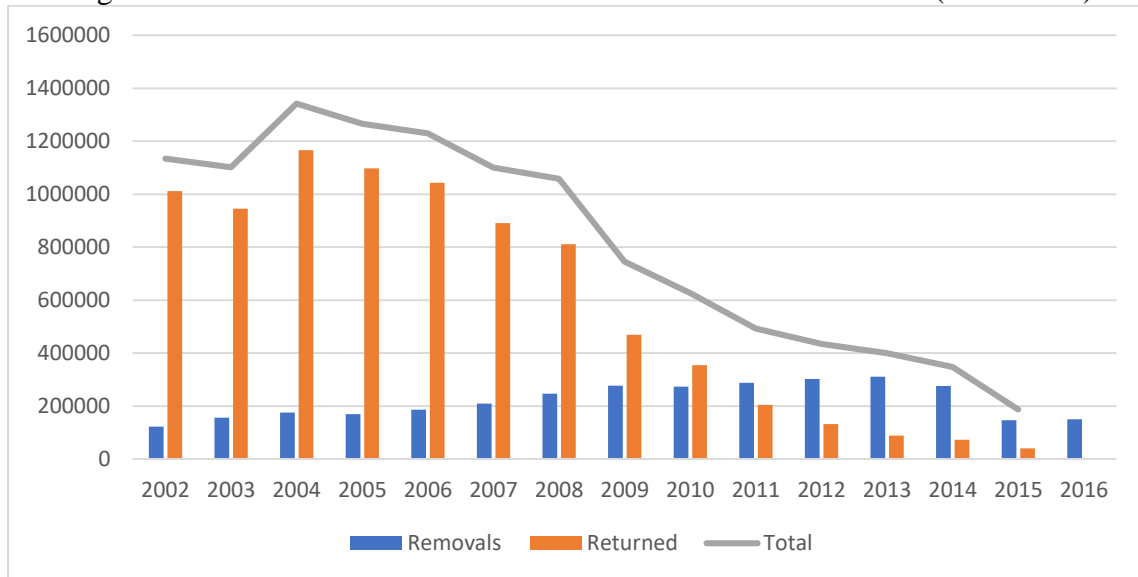
The application of laws passed in the 1990s —Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA or IIRAIRA) and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA)— as well as the changes in the legislation and the administrative control of migration (through the creation of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security) after the September 2001 attacks strengthened the deportation system at the federal level. An example of this: the list of crimes leading to deportation was extended. The aforementioned acts also came to limit the reasons for which a person can appeal a process of deportation, and allowed for larger funds to be allocated to the enforcement of the Immigration Law (Hagan, Eschbach, & Rodríguez, 2008).

Also, partnerships between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies prioritized internal compliance by means of the 287(g) Agreements and the Secure Communities program. The application of the law to the interior of the country aimed at pushing undocumented immigrants to the shadows, imposing hardships on their everyday life for them to rather choose deportation (Hazán, 2014). Secure Communities, implemented between 2008 and 2014 to prioritize the removal of criminal aliens, was quite effective in deporting millions of Latin American men, most of the Mexican.

Thus, the implementation of such migration policies in the United States was an important driver of the returning flow to Mexico. Not only did it pushed many people to leave the United States through the deportation processes, but it also put pressure on the remaining family members (spouses and children for the most part) for them to reunite with the repatriated in Mexico (Hazán, 2014). As a result of this, the migration patterns between the United States and Mexico have changed dramatically. First, the United States net immigration from Mexico reached “zero” from 2005 to 2010, a phenomenon not seen ever since 1930 (Passel, D’Vera, & González-Barrera, 2012). Then, the historical migration trend turned 180 degrees, and since 2015 more Mexicans return voluntarily and involuntarily from the United States than those entering this country (González-Barrera, 2015). Between 2005 and 2010, 985,000 Mexicans returned to Mexico from the United States, four times the figure recorded in 2000 (Escobar, Lowell, & Martin, 2013).

Different sources enable measuring the number of returnees (Gandini et al., 2015). Here we make use of the records by the U.S. and Mexico governments, which only account for the number of those returning by force.

Figure 1. Mexicans Returned and Removed from the United States (2002-2016)



* There is no disaggregated data for Mexican returnees in 2016.

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2015).

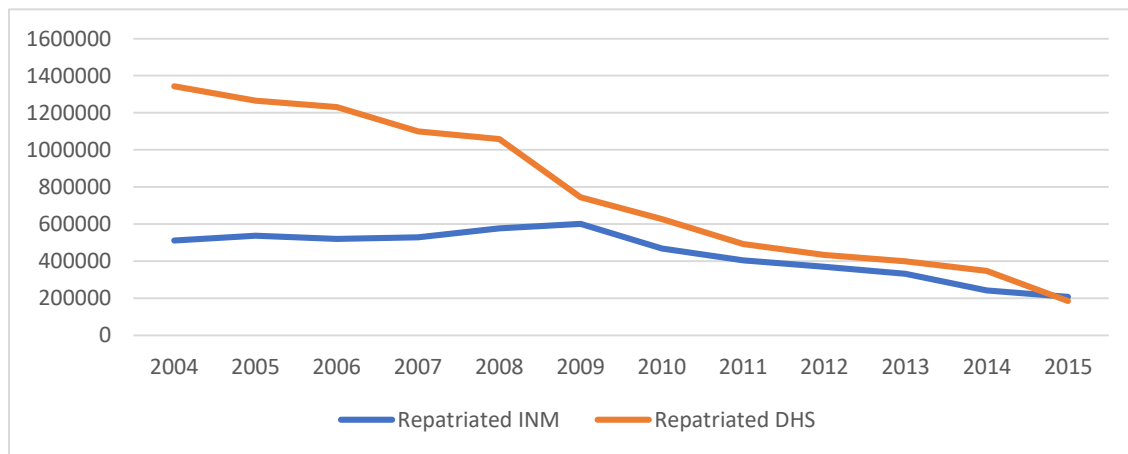
There are important trends to address. First, the general return flow was greater during the administration of George W. Bush (2001-2009) than that of President Barak Obama (2009-2017). We should be cautious with these figures, however, as returns, being the category that makes up the greater part of the flow in those years, include a minority of nationals from countries other than Mexico, as that is the way that the figures for those years were reported. Nonetheless, most of the returnees between 2002 and 2008 were Mexican

citizens apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Second, when accounting returns by type of administrative process, we find a growing relevance of removals and deportations from 2008 up until 2014, the point at which this category began to decrease. These years are precisely those of the creation of Secure Communities (2008) and its expansion all over the United States (2013) under the second period of Obama’s administration. As a deportation program, Secure Communities aimed at identifying and eliminating (from the inside) highly dangerous criminals from among the unauthorized population.

However, several reports have negatively criticized this program, as only a minority of the immigrants detained and deported under Secure Communities were guilty of serious crimes. Most of the immigrants subject to deportation or removal between 2008 and 2013 did not have any criminal record or had only incurred minor offenses (Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, 2013; The New York Times, 2014; Jacobo Suárez, 2014). Third, the greater number of Mexicans removed from inside the country were heads of families who did not have the chance to prepare their return to Mexico and thus were abruptly taken away. The high probability that those migrants who left their previous lives in the United States will be followed by their families (spouses and children) to Mexico implies greater reintegration needs.

Figure 2. Mexican Migrants Repatriated According to Administrative Records (2004-2016)



Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Secretariat for Home Affairs/Migration Policy Unit (Mexico, 2004-2016) and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2015).

Lastly, it should be noted that the administrative records of returnees reported by the U.S. government and those accounted for by the Mexican government do not match (Figure 2). There is a sub-registry of returnees by latter, only considering repatriates, that is, those who return through the entry points controlled by the National Institute of Migration (Mexico).

As it will be explained further ahead, what has been just described is in itself a limiting factor both for a broader understanding of the return migration phenomenon and for elaborating policies for the returnees, as only those who returned through the repatriation entry points and were duly documented as such can benefit from the programs offered by the Mexican federal government. Spouses and children following their deported family members and voluntarily entering Mexico cannot be documented as repatriates and so are not eligible for the support programs offered by the Mexican federal government.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RETURNING POPULATION: RECENT STUDIES

Now, who are these Mexicans returning to their country? Returnee diaspora is comprised of different sociodemographic profiles, and so the integration needs can widely vary. However, it is still possible to identify the generalists of the returnees. First, a large number of them are of prime age for work and education in the population they return to, which makes it even more important to develop mechanisms that facilitate their reintegration into the education system and labor market (Jacobo Suárez, 2017). Seven out of ten Mexicans that returned from the United States between 2009 and 2014 ranged from the age of 18 to 45 years. The average age of males was 37 years, and 35.5 for females. In both instances, most of the returnees were married or lived in a couple (Fundación Bancomer BBVA, 2016).

In second place, the recent return flow (that of the 21st century) is characterized by migrants who have lived for long periods in the United States, the place most of them consider home (Paris, 2010). Unlike circular migrants, who keep priority aspects of their lives in the community of origin, those migrants of recent return rather chose to establish their family, work, and education life on U.S. territory. And so, deportees and their families following after them in exile are dramatically uprooted from their own lives and experience trauma, discrimination, and as we are about to see, several obstacles in their reintegration to the social and economic life of their country of origin (Hagan & Rodríguez, 2001).

According to various studies (MATT, 2013; González-Barrera, 2015; Fundación Bancomer BBVA, 2016), the main reason why Mexican migrants return from the United States is family reunification (51% of females and 41% of males). In contrast, forced return is stated as the leading cause of return by 15% of males and 4% of females. Still, the surveys are likely to underestimate deported migrants. Some qualitative studies have found that more than one meeting between the researcher and the migrant is needed for the latter to bring up deportation if there was such (Medina & Menjívar, 2015).

Due to the stigma associated with deportation, many people choose not to bring it up as it is perceived as a “migratory fail” in their communities. In reality, there is a link between deportation and family reunification as a cause of return, as those who come back to meet with their family often do so following after a relative who has been forced to leave the

United States. This is consistent with the figures reported earlier here, where most of the deportees are men, and most of the people returning for the sake of family reunification are women.

For this population, job search and the possibility of having an or continuing their higher education are top priorities. Some studies show that returnees insert themselves into the labor market relatively fast (García & Gaspar, 2017; MATT, 2013). About 70% of them find a job during the first three months after returning (Ordaz & Li, 2013; Fundación Bancomer BBVA, 2016). Nonetheless, labor reintegration goes beyond having a job. It would have to also provide social security and the possibility of social mobility, a state of things that does not appear to be achieved among the returnee population. About a third of the returnee males are self-employed and 60% of them works as a subordinate, indicating a low profile in labor reintegration. Besides that, an important part of the returnee population enters the labor market through the informal sector, wherein 30% of them find their first job after returning, lacking social security (Fundación Bancomer BBVA, 2016).

Yet another challenge in terms of labor is making use of the experience acquired in the United States and continuing to develop their professional skills in Mexico (MATT, 2013; García Zamora, 2014; García & Gaspar, 2017). Generally speaking, return migrants do not insert themselves into the labor market in which they have the most experience. Whereas in the United States, most of the migrants work in the construction industry or the services sector (education, health, hospitality, and restaurants), in Mexico, returnee males focus on agriculture and fishing (62%), and females find jobs in the sales and services sector (60%, Gandini et al., 2015). Thus, the studies suggest that the major challenge in the process of labor reintegration is for returnees to insert themselves into the market under non-precarious work conditions.

Documentation is another basic need of returnees and their families, regardless of age and place of birth. Ironically, returnees find different difficulties when proving they are Mexican, which becomes a barrier for obtaining all sorts of services, and consequently, their reintegration. Deported migrants do not have the chance of preparing for their return and, often they lack basic Mexican documentation, for example, IDs and certificates of education acquired in the United States. Many migrants who return are then unable to travel back to the United States and acquire such, at least in the short term. According to the organization Mexicans and Americans Thinking Together (MATT, 2013), 40% of Mexicans who returned in 2015 lacked any document to prove their nationality. Besides adult returnees, also children should be taken into account; this last group is comprised of about half a million Mexican-American boys and girls (enrolled in elementary school) who have full rights in Mexico and the United States, being citizens of both countries.

Insertion and/or continuation of their basic, secondary, and middle-high education, as the case would be, is an immediate need for those younger than 18 years. Access to education

is directly related to documentation. Children and youngsters who return face different challenges when enrolling in Mexican schools, ranging from transferring credits for their education in the United States in order to continue their education in Mexico to communicating in Spanish and not in English in the classrooms, among others. Documentation problems are the hardest for children of Mexican immigrants born in the United States, as Mexican authorities usually require certified apostilles and translations of their birth certificates for them to access health services, enroll in schools or transfer education credits (Jacobo Suárez & Landa, 2015).

THE MEXICAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE (2006-2017)

Once the recent flow of return to Mexico has been sized and having defined the needs of this population, the question arises of how the reintegration process of migrants to Mexico has developed, either in their communities of origin or at new destinations. We are particularly interested in analyzing the efforts of the federal government in terms of the reintegration of Mexican migrants and how have they worked out so far. The administrations of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) took into account the migratory return at two levels. On the one hand, the rights of returnees and their families were included in specific laws and regulations during their administrations; on the other, both administrations set in motion programs and action plans, some within the framework of the laws they created, that aimed at regulating not only the arrival but also the reintegration of the repatriates. The creation of these instruments has followed no specific order, and so at times, a given program preceded the creation of certain laws.

Important steps were indeed taken during the administration of Felipe Calderón, which favored the regulation of migration, including the creation of the first national-level Migration Law and its corresponding regulation. Even several laws were passed at the federal and local level, to regulate other aspects of migration. The Migration Law of 2011 (DOF, 2011) was the first effort towards building a regulatory framework for migration in Mexico. This section will analyze this law and some of the federal support programs for returnees. First, we will address the Migration Law and then the programs, as it is this law that establishes the framework, the programs rather focusing on the undertaking of specific actions.

Before the creation of the Migration Law, migratory matters were ruled under the General Population Law. Contrastingly, the new law is rather a law on immigration (Calderón, 2012), as it excludes important aspects of emigration and returns. When it comes to returning, the law barely addresses it, stating that “the return to national territory and the social reinsertion of Mexican migrants and their families should be facilitated by means of interinstitutional programs, and by reinforcing the links between Mexican migration origin and destination

communities, for the welfare of the family and national and regional development” (DOF, 2011, s/n).

Returnees are addressed more thoroughly in the modifications to the Population Law from 2012, specifically in the Regulations to the Law, wherein the conditions of repatriation and reception of Mexicans are regulated for the first time, as well as the institutions in charge of said processes (Chapter 10). Articles 216 and 218 state that the Secretariat for Home Affairs, through the National Institute of Migration, will take the necessary measures and actions for receiving and addressing the needs of repatriated Mexicans.

Likewise, it states that the Secretariat will provide different services at the places designated for the reception of repatriated Mexicans, in coordination with other federal, state, and municipal government agencies, as well as with organizations, institutions, and companies from the public, private and social sectors. The services include basic information and orientations on the support services provided, food to cover immediate basic needs, communication with the Mexican consulate in case the repatriate wishes to make a complaint against the foreign migration authorities derived from the process of returning to Mexico, and also medical and psychological assistance, phone calls, channeling to temporary shelters and transportation from repatriation points to the community of origin of the migrant. It also sets forth that migration authorities should issue proof of entrance to the country to every Mexican.

The modifications from 2012 also established that the Secretariat for Home Affairs, jointly with the Secretariat for Foreign Affairs, could sign interinstitutional agreements with other countries and international organizations for safe, dignified and orderly repatriations that respect the rights of Mexican repatriates in the places that receive them.³

The law and its regulation did not thoroughly address the reintegration of migrants nor the measures aimed at consolidating this process. Instead, Article 218 bis of the regulation establish that the Secretariat for Home Affairs will sign cooperation agreements with agencies and bodies of the federal, state, and municipal Public Administration, as well as with public and private organizations and institutions for the reintegration of Mexican repatriates. Such agreements can consider medical assistance programs, actions to guide people by providing them information on job and housing opportunities, and the creation of joint investment programs. They should also promote the establishment of shelters for Mexican repatriates and the creation of programs to inform repatriated Mexican indigenous

³The rights referenced in Article 84 of the Population Law are access to telephone communication, water, and food, a dignified space, basic personal care goods, legal, psychological and medical assistance, being informed on the different support programs available, not being discriminated by the authorities based on ethnicity, sex, gender, age, disabilities, social status, among others (DOF, 2018, pp. 8-9).

populations on their rights, ensuring this information is issued in their native tongues (DOF, 2012).

Besides the creation of laws and regulatory frameworks, the administration of Felipe Calderón created the Migrant Support Fund (FAM, acronym in Spanish for *Fondo de Apoyo a Migrantes*) in 2009. This fund was created on an emergency as a subsidy under area 23 of the Expenditure Budget of the Federation (PEF, acronym in Spanish for *Presupuesto de Egresos de la Federación*) to “support migrant returnee workers and families receiving remittances so they can occupy themselves in the formal labor market, have self-employment options, generate income, and improve their human and housing capital” (DOF, 2012, p. 1). Given that the resources of the fund are meant to be a subsidy, these should be destined to projects, actions, and infrastructure that would serve returnee workers to find jobs in the formal labor market or self-employment, helping them generate income, improve their human capital and housing, support shelters that serve them, and help them return to their communities of origin (Osorno, 2014). The resources of the fund are destined to 24 states, particularly to marginalized municipalities with high migration rates and highly dependent on remittances. The management of the resources is carried out by different federal and state agencies such as the Secretariat of Finance and Public Credit, the Secretariat of Finance, the Comptroller’s Office, and local governments.

The first change in migration matters right after the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto started was landing the subject to a level of actual programs and specific lines of action, although heavily limited in terms of budget and implementation. Return migration was included in the National Development Plan (*Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*, 2013-2018) by means of axis 5: “Globally-responsible Mexico.” This axis establishes goals, strategies, and lines of action to address the needs of migrants and their families in all stages of the migratory process, including return migration. As an example: reviewing and reinforcing the repatriation agreements for Mexicans, as well as the creation and strengthening of skills certification and labor, social and cultural reinsertion programs for migrants returning to their communities of origin, among others. Subsequently, in 2014, important progress was made in migration matters through the creation of the Special Program for Migration (PEM, acronym in Spanish for *Programa Especial de Migración*). The PEM goes hand in hand with the National Development Plan and focuses on strategies and actions meant to regulate migration in a *comprehensive, intersectoral way*, considering the *different dimensions of the migration phenomenon*. The PEM was presented as the axis of the entire policy and actions for migration. According to the Secretariat for Home Affairs:

The PEM is the basis for the implementation of a State policy in matters of migration, focused on comprehensive aid and adequate governance of the different dimensions of migration in Mexico as the country of origin, transit, destination, and return of migrants.

Due to its transversal nature, the PEM contributes to achieving the five national goals set forth in the National Development Plan 2013-2018 and establishes the basis for articulating the efforts of the Federal Public Administration in the matter, the coordination with other branches and levels of the government, and the participation of civil society (Secretariat for Home Affairs, 2015, s/n).

Apart from being a comprehensive response to the phenomenon, the PEM also tried to foster a migration policy of participation. The program itself was developed after a concertation process between the government, academia, and civil society organizations. Eighty organizations took part in the PEM, under the moniker of Collective National Development Plan (*Colectivo Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*), which allowed to include migratory diagnostic, five goals, and 195 lines of action (Ramos, 2015). One of these goals explicitly references return migration for the first time.

Thus, the PEM aims at “favoring the processes of integration and reintegration of migrants and their families” (goal 4). In consonance with this goal, strategy 4.6 proposes to develop specialized attention programs for the reintegration of migrants, repatriates, refugees, and those receiving complementary protection. Specifically, it proposes the creation of integration mechanisms for repatriates in different areas such as economy, society, culture, labor reinsertion, locally coordinated with the repatriation programs. Despite the progress that the creation of the PEM represented in terms of programs, the first great obstacle to achieving its goals has been the lack of budget allocated to it.

Before the creation of migration laws and programs, Mexico and the United States signed their first agreements, such as the Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretariat for Home Affairs, the Secretariat for Foreign Affairs and the United States Department of Homeland Security (2004), and the local arrangement for the repatriation of Mexicans between California and Baja California (2008), aimed at regulating the points of reception, schedules, and guarantees of the deportation process. Based on these early agreements, the Human Repatriation Program (PRH, acronym in Spanish for *Programa de Repatriación Humana*) was created in 2007 and was eventually replaced by the We Are Mexican (*Somos Mexicanos*) program in 2013. From the beginning, the program was implemented by the National Institute of Migration (INM, acronym in Spanish for *Instituto Nacional de Migración*) with to coordinate different initiatives of assistance to receive and reintegrate deportees.

The program We Are Mexican (*Somos Mexicanos*) provides a wide range of reception services (National Institute of Migration, 2015). Rietig and Domínguez (2015) define reception services as those short-term actions aimed at serving returnees once they arrive at Mexican territory (for example, providing them with food, water, phone calls, and transportation), differing from reintegration programs, that is, those that provide long-term services aimed at helping returnees establish in and adapt to their communities. And so,

repatriation centers primarily focus on reception services and, to a lesser extent, provide legal advice and procedure services aimed at reintegration. Other sub secretariats of the Secretariat for Home Affairs take part in this last type of services, as well as the Secretariat for Foreign Affairs (National Institute of Migration, 2015).

Medical assistance services are also provided, as is information on the options available to continue their education, for example, on transferring education credits in cases where migrants have unfinished studies left in the United States and they wish to continue with them in a Mexican higher education institution. It should be noted that the initiatives included in this program are not implemented by the INM but by different federal agencies. The coordination mechanisms between these agencies and the INM are not clearly defined, as is not who is ultimately responsible for the results of the program, as there is not one single agency to manage the financial resources and implement the actions (Balança, 2016).

ANALYSIS: SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE FEDERAL RESPONSE

According to the information presented in the previous sections, the Mexican government has passed several laws and set in motion programs and actions for the protection of return migrants. It appears so that the federal government is preparing to receive Mexicans repatriated from the United States. However, the response before the forced and voluntary returns that took place during President Barack Obama's term (2009-2016) and the first months of Donald Trump's administration has been late, and its budget poorly prioritized in the national agenda. Also, the services provided by means of the existing programs seem to be of little help in addressing the needs of the returnees; and so, the process of guaranteeing the successful reintegration of the returnees faces several challenges.

There was actual progress during the administration of Peña Nieto, by moving from migration laws and regulations (created under the administration of Felipe Calderón) into specific programs and lines of action to foster the social, economic and education reintegration of returnees.

Yet the creation of programs will not suffice. Criteria and lines of action consistent with the problem at hand are needed, an adequate budget, and the correct implementation of the programs at all levels, as well as establish achievable and measurable responsibilities and expectations. There are challenges to overcome in all of these instances. The Special Program for Migration has lacked an allocated budget since its creation, i.e. not a single peso has been allocated to its operation. The program We Are Mexican, and the Migrant Support Fund have indeed received financing, but such has been deemed insufficient (Castaño, 2016; FUNDAR, 2016). Although a larger budget does not guarantee the achievement of goals, the scarcity of resources still restricts the setting in motion of programs and reduces the number of people that can benefit from them.

We Are Mexican was the first program of Peña Nieto’s administration that aimed at serving returnees in terms of work, health, documentation, education, and others, yet it lacks the resources allocated to its operation.⁴ In the words of the INM’s head, We Are Mexican is more of an operative strategy, as the budget comes from the units responsible for executing the different components of the program. For example, the Secretariat of Labor allocates resources for the implementation of Repatriates at Work (*Repatriados Trabajando*), one of the subprograms of We Are Mexican. Thus, the other federal agencies involved in the program allocate resources and execute lines of action. The INM has stated that the budget they allocate to take care of the repatriates is very scarce.

In a report presented to the Legislative Branch by the Institute, to request larger resources, it was shown that the expenditure of the program in 2012 was for 11,994,681.12 MXN, that is, 43.88 MXN per returnee, an amount that in words of the INM is very low to accomplish the goals established. The Institute pointed out that the amount required to accomplish within reason the goals of the program would have to be 584,625,500.00 MXN, a figure estimated to cover 400,000 deportation events per year, that is to say, 1,450.00 MXN for every returnee (National Institute of Migration, 2013).

Similarly, the resources assigned to the FAM have constantly changed since 2009, going down in later years (Table 1).

Table 1. Budget of the Migrant Support Fund 2009-2017 (In Millions of Pesos)

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Amount	300	100	100	300	200	200	300	300	267

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the PEF.

Besides insufficient budgeting, the current programs also show other important design limitations, particularly when it comes to how the returnees are perceived and defined. The services offered under We Are Mexican are available only to those who entered the country through the repatriation points and have repatriation proof, which is only valid for six months. By means of this proof, deported migrants who were not received by the INM at repatriation centers are excluded, as are those who have been in the country for more than six months and who require assistance in finding a job, getting documentation, etcetera. People whose return is considered voluntary are also excluded, even when they also experience severe hardships to reintegrate. This group also includes those who return to Mexico following after a deported family member, usually depending economically on the

⁴In 2016, both the INM and the Chamber of Deputies were requested to report the yearly budget allocated to We Are Mexican, with a breakdown of expenses by category. The response in both cases was that there were no resources dedicated to this program, and so the allocation of resources may vary according to availability.

deportee, those who return abruptly due to health issues, and those migrants who sign a voluntary return order.

One could think that restricting the target population would benefit a larger percentage of it; however, according to the Migration Policy Unit, the reach of We Are Mexican has been modest. The total percentage of repatriates supported by the program went from 57% in 2010 to 82% in 2015. Yet the target population decreased by almost 36% during this period, as the total repatriates of 2010 were 496,268. In 2015, the number dropped to 207,398 (Table 2).

Table 2. Mexican Repatriation Events and Support Granted by the PRH/We Are Mexican (2010-2015)

Year	Repatriation events	Beneficiaries of the program	Percentage of coverage
2010	469,268	267,317	56.9
2011	405,457	269,197	66.3
2012	369,492	273,300	73.9
2013	332,865	239,932	72.1
2014	243,196	198,876	81.7
2015	207,398	171,858	82.8

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the Statistical Bulletins of the Migration Policy Unit (Secretariat for Home Affairs/Migration Policy Unit, 2010-2015).

It should be stated that We Are Mexican includes a wide range of services and that the information provided does not specify the type of aid received. In face of the lack of support from the government, migrants turn to their communities for help. The study by MATT (2013) in Jalisco shows that 95-7% of the returnees did not receive government aid. Conversely, their friends and family were the main sources of aid for them to obtain jobs, getting documents, accessing health and education systems, etcetera.

One of the main components of We Are Mexican is the Repatriates at Work program, implemented by the Secretariat of Labor and Social Welfare, and particularly by the National Employment Service. Its goal is to aid Mexican nationals repatriated from the United States to return to their places of origin and obtain jobs. There are two stages to the program: in the first one, economic support is provided (up to 2,500.00 MXN) to repatriates arriving at border states or the Mexico City airport, so they can buy plane or bus tickets and return to their places of origin; once at their places of origin or homes, the second stage will consist in providing them with advice and the necessary information for them to obtain jobs. If no job positions are available, they will be channeled to other subprograms of the Employment Access Program (PAE, acronym in Spanish for *Programa de Acceso al Empleo*). Likewise, economic support equal to one monthly minimum wage is provided to them in two

installments, according to specific requirements. The first amount (half a monthly minimum wage) is handed out only if the solicitor requests it at the offices of the National Employment Service in their place of origin or residence within twenty days after repatriation, having entered through one of the official entry points. The second half of the amount (half a monthly minimum wage) is handed out once the migrant provides evidence of having attended all the job interviews or a status report of his incorporation to one of the PAE subprograms.

Once at their place of origin, complementary support is granted of 500 to 1,000 MXN to look for a job. The amount depends on the destination state. Information and guidance are also provided for work integration.

It is important to note that those interested in benefitting from this Repatriates at Work subprogram must be registered in the repatriation events listings of the National Institute of Migration (INM) and/or the Mexican Consulates at the northern border, as late as 15 days before the date in which they have to show at the SNE to receive support. This way, in order to be eligible for this aid, the repatriate must apply in a very short period upon returning to Mexico. In terms of coverage and goal achievement, Repatriates at Work has also failed to reach a large number of beneficiaries (Table 3).

Table 3. Support Provided and Placement Events. Repatriates at Work (2005-2017)

Year	Support Programs	Placement events
2005	144	26
2006	1,463	694
2007	6,701	1,355
2008	21,171	4,890
2009	19,093	7,377
2010	27,621	776
2011	26,649	396
2012	26,488	293
2013	10,143	N/D
2014	12,669	N/D
2015	3,820	N/D
2016	6,769	N/D
2017	60	N/D

Source: Secretariat of Labor and Social Welfare/Employment Support Sub Program (*Subprograma de Apoyo al Empleo*) (2005-2017).

The small number of returnees that benefit from the programs by the federal government is due to several reasons. It is common for returnees not to be aware of the existing programs, and this takes us to question the communication strategies of the government. A study

undertaken at the repatriation point in Tijuana shows that 92% of the people surveyed were not at all aware of the We Are Mexican program and the services it provides, even as they were interviewed right after having been received by the staff of the National Institute of Migration. According to this research, this could be explained by the psychological state under which the nationals return, preventing them from retaining the information that Mexican migration authorities provide them with upon receiving them at the repatriation modules. If this is true, an alternative would be to repeat this information several times once the migrant returns to Mexico. Another hypothesis is that the information on the program and its benefits are not conveyed clearly and succinctly (López, 2012). These two situations do not exclude each other they can coexist and reinforce the little and poor information that the migrants receive on the aid programs available.

Another aspect we wish to point out is that the projects supported and developed with FAM resources have been destined to works of infrastructure, such as paving and the installation of hydraulic systems. That much is established in the very operative regulations of the program. However, it is worth asking if carrying out infrastructure programs will help the returnees finding jobs, generate income, and accomplishing the goals of the Fund itself, as already described.

Besides de already mentioned difficulties, yet another challenge in serving the returnees is implementing actions that correspond to their most pressing needs. Going some years back, one constant request of returnees is to be granted a document issued by the Mexican government that proves their identity, as it is a fundamental requisite to access any service in Mexico. Without an official ID, even the most basic procedure, such as obtaining telephone service, renting a house, or opening a bank account, becomes impossible. Quite naturally, accessing the education or health system is practically impossible if the individual cannot legally identify himself as Mexican. Those who return forcibly tend to lack ID documents, such as the voting card issued by the National Electoral Institute (INE) or the Mexican birth certificate.

The response of the Mexican federal government to this problem has been partial and late, by signing an agreement with some states in the United States that enables to issue the Mexican birth certificate to children of Mexican migrants born there. This agreement was signed in September of 2016, even when studies had identified approximately 600,000 Mexican American children living in Mexico already in 2010, many of them experiencing documentation issues (Escobar et al., 2013). There is no public information on the number of Mexican nationality records from September of 2016 onwards.

Repatriated migrants can receive proof of repatriation that makes them beneficiaries of the We Are Mexican services. Still, that is not a valid ID useful to solve some of the basic needs of the returnees upon arriving at Mexican soil, such as exchanging USD for MXN or opening a bank account (Rendón & Wertman, 2017). The voting card issued by the National

Electoral Institute (INE) probably is the most widely accepted and required official ID for people of legal age; it is thus hard to believe that even in 2017 (years after the largest return flow to the country), there are no INE modules at the reception points for repatriates.

CONCLUSIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

From the analysis hereby presented, we conclude that the programs and supports provided by the federal government to the migrant population should be based on a wider definition of what a return population is. Limiting the reach of return aid programs to those who underwent a legal repatriation process is both inadequate and restrictive. Such support should be available to all migrants returning from the United States, regardless of them being deported or returning voluntarily.

Secondly, we recommend also extending in great measure the period for which support is granted. Under the program, We Are Mexican, support was only granted for the first six months after returning to Mexico. However, returning is not a single point in time, but an individual process that can last months or years depending on the experience and characteristics of each migrant, and so long-term programs are required that provide support for more extended periods.

Particularly, we suggest that reintegration programs should be prioritized, that guarantee migrants can obtain official identity documents. The voting card should be promptly offered and processed. It is just as important to provide psychological assistance, particularly to those migrants who lived in the United States for long spans, including those who were deported, incarcerated, or separated from their families. Mental health services have been absent from the federal government strategy, setting aside how relevant emotions such as trauma, sadness, anger, helplessness, and pain are in the process of reintegration.

Thirdly, we recommend allocating proper budget to the programs meant to serve returnees, as well as defining the goals to achieve. The policy of the federal government meant to serve the return population has to go hand in hand with sufficient and constant budgeting, enough to keep the programs operational at the very least. It should be stressed that during the current administration under Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024), the programs and support for migrants, in general, were significantly reduced, especially those support programs for returnees, due to the cost-cutting plan for government spending. In this sense, it becomes important to recover ground in social and economic support from the federal government for this population. In closing, we would like to emphasize the relevance of publicly assessing the already implemented programs to identify those successful elements that can be replicated and those strategies that can be improved. It is important to learn from the actions of the previous administrations so that we develop better programs and strategies today.

Translation: Fernando Llanas

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