Migraciones INTERNACIONALES

El Colegio de la Frontera Norte

MIGRACIONES INTERNACIONALES, VOL. 16, ART. 08, 2025
e-ISSN 2594-0279 https://doi.org/10.33679/rmi.v1i1.3008

Effects of Pandemic Containment and Migration Deterrence Policies: Migrant's Perspectives

Efectos de las políticas de contención de la pandemia y disuasión migratoria: perspectivas de migrantes

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ABSTRACT
During the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts warned of asylum seekers' and migrants' increased vulnerability to contagion, particularly those detained in the United States, traveling north toward the U.S.-Mexico border, or waiting at the border to cross. Despite United States deterrence policies aimed at reducing border crossings during the pandemic, migrants continued their attempts to reach the U.S., facing heightened obstacles. Analyzing digital stories recorded by migrants for the Humanizando la Deportación archive reveals that while pandemic containment actions caused substantial harm, neither these measures nor the disease itself—which appears as a background factor in many narratives—significantly reduced migratory flows in the region.

Keywords: 1. migration, 2. COVID-19, 3. digital storytelling, 4. Title 42, 5. U.S.-Mexico border.

RESUMEN
Durante los primeros meses de la pandemia de COVID-19, expertos advirtieron sobre la mayor vulnerabilidad al contagio de los solicitantes de asilo y otros migrantes, especialmente aquellos detenidos en Estados Unidos en tránsito hacia la frontera entre EE. UU. y México o que esperaban en la línea divisoria para cruzar. A pesar de las políticas de disuasión implementadas por Estados Unidos durante la pandemia para reducir los cruces fronterizos, los migrantes continuaron intentando llegar a EE.UU., enfrentando obstáculos cada vez mayores. El análisis de historias digitales grabadas por migrantes para el archivo Humanizando la Deportación revela que, aunque las medidas de contención de la pandemia causaron un daño considerable, ni estas acciones ni la propia enfermedad –que aparece como un factor de fondo en muchas narrativas– lograron reducir significativamente los flujos migratorios en la región.

Palabras clave: 1. migración, 2. COVID-19, 3. narrativas digitales, 4. Título 42, 5. frontera México-Estados Unidos.

Date received: December 05, 2023
Date accepted: September 09, 2024
Published online: April 30, 2025
Translation (Spanish) published online: April 30, 2025

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INTRODUCTION

During the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts expressed concern regarding the heightened vulnerability to contagion of asylum seekers and other migrants—including those detained in the United States, those traveling northward toward the U.S.-Mexico border, and those waiting at the border for an opportunity to cross (Bojórquez et al., 2020; Brito, 2020). Globally, mandates to stay at home or shelter in place, along with border closures, national quarantines and a generalized fear of contagion, brought human mobility, particularly transnational travel, to a near standstill.

At the same time, pandemic-era migration and border policies, including the suspension of pending U.S. asylum cases under the Migrant Protection Protocols—also known as Remain in Mexico—program and the Title 42 U.S. border closure (Del Monte Madrigal, 2023), aimed to control the spread of illness by deterring migration itself (see, for example, Slack & Heyman, 2020; Torre Cantalapiedra, 2021). These conditions produced temporary immobilizations, which included a short-term drop-off in migrant flows along the Central America-Mexico-United States corridor, but also an entrapment of migrants who at the advent of the pandemic had already embarked on journeys northward or were waiting at the border for an opportunity to cross. Meanwhile, despite the downturn at the beginning of the pandemic, within a few months it appears that migration flows had not only resumed but intensified (Gramlich & Scheller, 2021; Isacson, 2021).

During the first year and a half of the pandemic, until vaccines became widely available in the United States and Mexico, universities implemented travel restrictions aimed at both protecting their researchers and preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus under the auspices of institutionally sponsored research. It seemed evident from policy debates, data on border apprehensions and returns, and the formation of migrant camps along the U.S.-Mexico border that the effects of both the pandemic and the border and migration policies implemented to contain it were having significant effects on the experiences of vulnerable migrants (Masferrer, 2020; Vilches Hinojosa et al., 2021; González Arias & Aikin Araluce, 2021; Blue et al., 2021). However, very little information was being gathered from the perspectives of migrants themselves.

The Humanizando la Deportación digital storytelling project, which had been documenting the experiences of vulnerable migrants in Mexico since 2017, had effectively been shut down for 17 months, from March 2020 through July 2021. When the project was able to resume fieldwork in August 2021, with a grant from the Programa de Investigación en Migración y Salud (PIMSA) (Research Program on Migration and Health) of the Health Initiative of the Americas, based at the University of California, Berkeley, it was sought to document these experiences and learn from the perspectives of migrants themselves how the pandemic had affected their experiences. The repercussions of both the pandemic itself and also the impacts of border closures and other deterrence policies on the lives of migrants were examined. By recording and listening carefully to these migrant stories, it was sought to help better understand both what motivated people to undertake perilous and uncertain journeys northward even when much of the world remained immobilized, and what obstacles, threats and dangers migrants faced in navigating complex terrains in contexts of hostility and insecurity.

CONTEXT

Migration During a Public Health Crisis

Since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, many researchers working with migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border have been concerned about the ways in which both the spread of the virus itself and the many policies put in place to control it might affect already vulnerable migrants.

As collaborators in the Humanizando la Deportación project, Robert McKee Irwin and Juan Antonio Del Monte[3] were often on the ground at the Tijuana border, keeping up to date on migration dynamics there through contacts with a wide variety of migrant rights defenders—individuals and organizations—, as well as with migrants themselves.

It was alarming to observe that even as elite research institutions prevented fieldwork due to shelter-in-place policies and COVID-related travel restrictions, aside from a brief lapse in 2020, migration did not in any way abate during that period (Gramlich & Scheller, 2021; Isacson, 2021).

It has also been troubling to witness the ways in which the U.S. government has used the pandemic as an excuse to extend impediments to prevent migrants from seeking asylum in the country—most notably the use of Title 42 expulsions—well beyond the period in which they may have played a meaningful role in protecting public health.

From late 2020 through December of 2022, with support from a PIMSA grant, the Humanizando la Deportación digital storytelling project published 100 digital stories of community storytellers who recounted their experiences migrating during the pandemic. These stories document migrants' own perspectives on the repercussions of these policies as well as the pandemic itself on their lives.

The following sections describe the fieldwork methodology and key characteristics of the analyzed corpus, followed by findings regarding the challenges faced by migrants attempting to enter the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODS

Digital Storytelling

The Humanizando la Deportación project has been documenting stories of vulnerable migrants since its launch in Tijuana in early 2017 using a tailored adaptation of the participatory audiovisual production method known as digital storytelling. While the project's initial focus was on understanding the human consequences of mass deportation, beginning with the arrival of large migrant caravans in Tijuana in late 2018, it has focused significant attention on the challenges faced by migrants in transit northward, as well.

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[3] Robert McKee Irwin has been the principal investigator of the project since its launch in 2017. Juan Antonio Del Monte has been actively collaborating on the Project since 2019 as the Tijuana site coordinator.

Even as research teams have been active in multiple cities across Mexico and beyond through various individual and institutional collaborations, the project's center has been the Tijuana border, which has experienced a relentless abundance, albeit with sometimes radically shifting dynamics, of vulnerable migrants over these seven years, and roughly 57% of the digital stories published in the archive were recorded in Tijuana. The sample of 100 stories reviewed here represent a little under 20% of the 527 stories housed in the archive as of mid-2024. More detailed information on the demographics of the migrant storytellers who participated in this segment of the project is presented below.

The research method derives from digital storytelling, a community-based participatory audiovisual production genre developed by an organization presently known as The Story Center (Lambert, 2012). Digital stories are first-person audio narratives recounting lived experiences that are accompanied by a visual track that complements and often adds to the story. This genre was conceived with the aim of giving voice to marginalized communities that might not otherwise have a way to share their experiences publicly. While originally designed for applications with organized communities, out of respect for the precarious conditions that characterize the lives of many migrants, Humanizando la Deportación adapted its techniques to work with individuals (Irwin et al., 2022).

While the project's overarching aim is to document and disseminate the human consequences of contemporary migration and border control regimes in the Central America Mexico-United States corridor, its resolve to record stories from migrants' own perspectives that are constructed based upon migrants' own priorities, implies that Humanizando la Deportación is an archive of migrant feelings, and also an important source of migrant knowledge (Irwin, 2022).

This proposal, therefore, is in tune with the epistemological position of horizontal knowledge production (Corona Berkin, 2020), where it is recognized that the knowledge of academic specialists is not the only one nor the most pertinent. On the contrary, the original bearers of migrant knowledge are those who develop it and draw creatively from it through different territories in facing diverse situations of mobility and immobility.

Although limited, efforts have been made to account for migrants' perspectives on their migratory processes in Mexico, not by interrogating and speaking for them, but by inviting them to tell their own stories. Migrants have worked with academics to provide texts that enable self-representation. Landa and Varela (2021) worked together to write the former's history of migration and activism, a journey through her migratory displacements and her protagonism in the movement that defends and assists people deported to Mexico. Oviedo, a Honduran migrant who was an active part of one of the first migrant caravans that arrived in the city of Tijuana in 2018, was given the opportunity to write and publish a play dramatizing his own caravan experience (Oviedo, 2020). The book's introduction refers to it as a "testimonial drama" as it draws from his own lived experience and those of others participating in this unprecedented phenomenon of large-scale collective mobility between Central America and the United States (Irwin & Silva, 2020, p. 15). It is believed that Humanizando la Deportación (Irwin, 2022) is one of those efforts that, by focusing

on the self-representation of migrants, highlights the need to learn from their expressions of the sentiments they experience and the embodied knowledge they acquire through migration, often in precarious conditions.

In accordance with this perspective, the central element in this commitment is the dialogical nature of the production of meaning. To be clear, fieldwork teams are trained to avoid imposing any topic or theoretical perspective on the narratives of migrants. The digital storytelling method prioritizes ensuring that migrant storytellers maintain control of the content of their stories. The project strives to guarantee that community storytellers, who retain intellectual property rights to their videos, feel a sense of ownership of their stories. Thus, interviews are not carried out, prodding migrants with specific questions or requiring them to address subjects of interest to researchers. Instead, migrants are encouraged to share whatever information they believe to be important about their experiences based on their own criteria. As it is believed that the real experts on the current conditions affecting migrants are those who have the embodied experience of mobility, Humanizando la Deportación strives to bring migrants' knowledge to the fore.

The production of digital stories from the migrants' own point of view provides alternative representations of migration, which may coincide with or diverge from the accounts of academic experts, often adding layers of unexpected complexity. The representation of migrant populations in the public sphere is typically expressed from an external point of view that may give only superficial consideration to their voices, or indeed may not engage with them at all. Both news media and political discourse, whether biased against or in favor of migrants, often reproduce stereotypes and stigmas based on xenophobic, classist and sexist imaginaries that may conform to ideological positions but poorly reflect migrants' lived reality (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2017). Furthermore, although academic works of a qualitative nature may highlight perspectives of migrants, they often do so through theoretical lenses that reach predetermined conclusions that fail to capture the nuances and contradictions of lived experience. Thus, the effort is to give primacy to migrants' decisions, offering them an audiovisual platform to tell the stories they wish to tell.

Audiovisual methodologies are an appropriate device to catalyze participatory research processes that recognize the autonomy of the participants' gaze. These methodological innovations have the potential to fill the gaps in traditional research methods by de-centering the voice, gaze and interpretation of the researcher, allowing the participants to control over their stories in terms of both their narration and their visual representation. As Baumann et al. (2020) state in their study on youth menstrual traditions in Nepal "adopting a participatory approach to filmmaking allows for collaboration in generating knowledge that can be empowering for participants and enables marginalized groups to speak for themselves" (p. 2).

Nikielska and Desille's (2021) book on visual methodologies applied in migration studies reports on a series of works that address how the visual and audiovisual potentiate a series of aspects in research with migrants: site specificity; a focus on the embodied experience of people who migrate; complexities that visual expression add to oral narrative; deepened collaboration between migrant narrators and academic facilitators in the audiovisual production process; and

formative possibilities of this process for migrant participants. Even though participatory audiovisual methods offer no guarantees, we agree that "Visual methods are often portrayed as ways to democratize research. Participants to the research regain power on issues that concern them, and the way they are portrayed" (p. 9).

Accordingly, audiovisual collaborative strategies have proven to be a powerful tool for research and social advocacy in forced mobility processes that enable migrants to take control of the narratives about their own mobility journey. In addition, digital stories, designed for sharing over the internet, are meant to be concise. The aim is for most recorded stories to be of a duration of four to seven minutes, although some migrants may have more to say, in which case their stories may be divided into two or more parts. These stories do not recount everything migrants feel, do, or think; instead, community storytellers focus on communicating a single message, or in exposing a handful of the issues that they feel are of greatest consequence. While teams frequently discussed the complications of migration during the COVID-19 pandemic with community storytellers, migrants always chose whether or not to include anecdotes related directly to the pandemic in their digital stories. It should be noted that many vulnerable migrants prefer not to reveal their names, faces or other identifying characteristics even as they are eager to share many details about their experiences.

Research Corpus

The vast majority of the 100 digital stories that recounted experiences of pandemic era migration were produced between September of 2021 and December of 2022. From the March 2020 lockdown until the latter part of the summer of 2021, shelter in place recommendations, and university travel restrictions made on site fieldwork impossible; during that period, although the authors did manage to publish stories of 10 migrants using remote methods, the project saw little activity, save for the completion of stories whose audio had been recorded earlier. However, beginning in late summer 2021, the production gained rapid momentum as the authors met many migrants who were eager to share their stories.

The qualitative data drawn from the stories analyzed here are therefore skewed to reflect migrant concerns during latter stages of the pandemic, months after initial lockdowns. However, it should also be pointed out that a large proportion of migrants who shared their stories with the authors during this latter period were either in the midst of a migration process when the pandemic hit, or left their homelands during that first year and a half; the vast majority of stories, therefore, recounted experiences of migrants during the height of the pandemic.

During the newly active period, beginning in the late summer of 2021, research teams were deployed consisting of faculty, postdoctoral and visiting scholars, and graduate students from the University of California and El Colegio de la Frontera Norte numbering 20 people in total, mainly in Tijuana. While a handful of the stories were created by deported migrants whom the authors met through activist organizations or personal connections, most collaborations were cultivated in migrant shelters, each specializing in specific migrant profiles: *1*) Juventud 2000, Espacio Migrante

and Border Line Crisis Center: families with children; *2*) Ejército de Salvación, Casa de Oración del Migrante, and Volviendo a la Patria: men traveling alone; *3*) Jesucristo Vive: Haitian families; *4*) El Jardín de las Mariposas: LGBT+ migrants; and *5*) Casa del Deportado Sagrado Corazón: diverse profiles. In addition, one team member carried out fieldwork in Ecuador in the summer of 2021, a trip that yielded stories by 10 community storytellers.

The profiles represented in the archive cover a broad range of identities, although it cannot be claimed that they fully capture the diversity of contemporary migrants at the U.S. border. For example, the authors do not work with minors. Nor did they record many stories by Venezuelans (1) or Cubans (0), whose migration routes differ from those of some other nationalities, and usually take them to ports of entry farther east than the main fieldwork site of Tijuana. On the other hand, for the first time since the initial launch in 2017, protocols to work with migrants whose first language is neither Spanish nor English were developed, recording the project's first stories by Haitian (8) and Russian (3) migrants. The largest portions of migrants in the sample were from Mexico (35) and Central America (40 total)—mainly from Honduras (24), El Salvador (6), Guatemala (5) and Nicaragua (3); with Ecuador (11) and Haiti (8) as the third and fourth most represented nations. Aside from the Ecuadorian stories, most of which were recorded in Ecuador, the others roughly reflect the mix of nationalities of migrants arriving at the border in Tijuana during the pandemic.

An anomaly in the archive was that a large number of stories by transgender women were collected, 15 in total—along with one story by a transgender man—, due to a snowball effect of enthusiasm in one of the shelters. Counting the trans population, only a few more stories of men (59) than women (41) were recorded; of the stories shared by presumably cisgender migrants, the proportion leaned much more heavily male: 58 vs. 26, respectively. Migrants are not typically asked to reveal details about their age, but generally speaking, with the exception of a few migrants recounting stories of deportation after having lived for years in the U.S., the migrants who shared their pandemic era stories with the authors skewed young, with many appearing to be in their 20s, 30s and 40s, and few indicating that they were much older than that.

The archive includes stories of both migrants who have been deported or otherwise forcibly repatriated, as well as those heading northward in hopes of either seeking asylum or otherwise entering the United States. Nowadays these are not entirely two distinct groups. Many of the newly arriving migrants in Tijuana, who on the surface seem indistinguishable from others that present themselves as asylum seekers, have previously been deported as it will be indicated below. Their stories may therefore focus on their motives for migration, their migration processes, their lives in the United States, their repatriation, or any combination of the above. In a few cases, storytellers were followed over time, and some migrants chose to tell multipart stories, mapping out routes that are far from linear. Some migration stories that begin with an initial flight northward and end up either at the U.S.-Mexico border, or in some cases with arrival in the United States, may span several years. The stories in the sample may take place entirely or only partially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Humanizando la Deportación archive, which contains over 500 digital stories, is quite large as a qualitative data set. However, despite the attempts to curate its contents, for example by seeking out participation of migrants whose nationalities or other characteristics seem to be underrepresented in the archive, the authors are well aware that it is not representative of migrant demographics. And since demographic data on migrant storytellers are not collected beyond what they elect to share in their stories, it is not believed that quantitative data can be extracted from the archive with confidence. The stories may signal important issues and flesh out significant trends, but it is not believed that for most questions they can be studied as big data, and it is not attempted to extract any quantitative data from the sample of 100 stories reviewed for this study.

FINDINGS

Migration and COVID-19

The most remarkable finding of this study was how little concern migrants expressed about the COVID-19 pandemic. Only a handful of migrants spoke directly about COVID-19 in their digital stories, though a number of issues they raised reflected ancillary difficulties for migrants that emerged or intensified during the pandemic. For the migrant collaborators in this study, the pandemic was really just another troublesome backdrop that added new difficulties to the many other risks accumulated along their migratory journeys.

There are several reasons why migrants did not focus much attention on the pandemic. The primary explanation is that the pandemic itself did not represent a great danger to many migrants when compared to other threats, including violence faced whether in their places of origin, along the migrant trail, or while waiting at the border. Many asylum seekers were fleeing death threats by violent criminal gangs, the kind of dangers that exceed any fears of catching a disease, even a potentially deadly one. The migrant trail itself represented dangers that were traumatizing for many migrants, whether the Darien Gap jungle, the freight trains known as La Bestia, or the Sonora desert. Threats of detention and deportation loomed constantly, especially in countries like Mexico that invest heavily in migration deterrence (Campos, 2021), as did the need to pay bribes to government agents particularly at border crossing points, or to hire coyotes to avoid border officials.

Despite concerns regarding the vulnerability of migrants to the disease (Brito, 2020), as far as could be ascertained, large numbers of migrants were not dying of COVID-19. The vast majority of the migrants arriving at the U.S. border from the south, for example, many of whom are forced to flee with little time to prepare or plan, must be physically strong and agile. Few seem to belong to high-risk groups such as the elderly or obese; the risks posed by this disease to many migrants was

much less than that of many other hazards and perils in their lives. And as early as September of 2021, many migrants were able to obtain vaccinations (Moreno & Casarín, 2021).[4]

While many in the global north cancelled travel plans, and elite institutions like the University of California prohibited nonessential travel, the early showdown in migrant flows was short-lived, soon accelerating back to meet or exceed pre-pandemic levels. Indeed, some migrants made the decision to leave their homelands because of the pandemic. A young couple of gay Hondurans who struggled to avoid the attention of homophobic neighbors felt subject to heightened visibility and scrutiny during early lockdowns, when people ventured out only for groceries or other essentials, leading them to flee in the night out of fear (Two male migrants from Honduras, 2021). Another migrant, Fernando (2022), made the momentous decision to leave Ecuador for the United States when already sparse work opportunities dried up due to pandemic shutdowns.

Even though it is true that for a brief period at the beginning of the pandemic, asylum applications in Mexico were reduced and border crossing attempts declined (REDODEM, 2022), and while it is certainly possible that some potential migrants opted not to leave, instead seeking safety and security through other strategies, none of those who did migrate mentioned delaying their journeys due to pandemic-related concerns. If it cannot be asserted with confidence that the pandemic triggered higher levels of migration, according to testimonies collected, there is no evidence at all indicating that it deterred migration. It certainly led to inconveniences. Several migrants describe quarantines in shelters where they were housed, but none mention going hungry or feeling at heightened risk of illness in these often-cramped shared spaces. One recalls suffering a brief bout himself, but the only one he knew that died of COVID-19 was not a migrant, but rather a former director of the shelter where he was staying, a man much older than the migrants staying there (Male migrant from Guatemala, 2022). Another describes a shelter being under quarantine for more than a month, but adds that:

> here we had everything: food, medical attention. Every week they'd come and check us to see if anyone was sick […] They gave us medicine and thank God everything came out OK. We reopened and we all went back to work again. (Jaime, 2021, 4:00).

Likewise, a young Honduran remembers the fear he felt as a migrant when Tijuana went into extreme lockdown and he lost his job. He complains of the ineffectuality of migrant services agencies: "I sought help with United Nations migration and refugee agencies, who just put me into quarantine, nothing else. I was hoping they'd give me advice, but unfortunately nothing happened" (Male migrant from Honduras, 2022a, 3:51). However, his story includes an image of provisions distributed throughout Tijuana to the needy, including migrants like him who were living in rental units rather than shelters. He makes no mention of the disease posing any significant risk, whether to himself or to other migrants he knew.

[4] Although initially the application of vaccines in Mexico required an official identification to receive them, the state health authority eventually promoted a program for the application of vaccines to the migrant population.

A young mother tells of her husband falling ill with COVID-19 while housed at the time with him and her young son in a tent, one of about 50 in a large hangar converted into a migrant shelter. She complains of the lack of privacy in the shelter, and infers that her husband was exposed "because there are so many people here." She adds: "Being at home it's easier to take care of him, make him some tea or whatever else he may need. Here in the shelter, you've got to adapt, because you take what they can give you" (Valeria, 2021, 2:12). She speculates that some "might not survive" COVID-19 or other illnesses that may spread through migrant shelters, but her husband recovered without incident, and the bulk of her story focuses with much greater intensity on the alarming violence in her home state of Michoacán that forced her family to flee.

One sector of the migrant population that may have felt the negative effects of the pandemic more harshly was that of LGBT+ people with immunosuppressive diseases. While governmental health care efforts were focused on the containment and management of the pandemic, other specific situations were left unattended. Shelter in place protocols or reduced shelter capacities to allow for greater distancing may have been helpful in reducing risk within these spaces. However, these actions were not accompanied by other types of assistance for migrants at high risk for infection. Although none of the several HIV-positive migrants who shared their stories for this project speaks of becoming seriously ill with COVID-19, their greater worries revolved around persistent discrimination and day-to-day survival. As one trans migrant commented:

> if I went to look for a job, even if I was vaccinated and all that, they denied it to me because I had HIV. The government never cared if Alexia ate, if Alexia dressed, if Alexia paid water, paid electricity, paid rent. The government was never interested because they said 'people with HIV must be sheltered,' but all they did was shelter you, and meanwhile what were you going to do, what were you going to eat, or what were you going to do to avoid starving to death? (Alexia, 2022, 3:18)

EFFECTS OF MITIGATION POLICIES

Many of the ancillary consequences of COVID-19 affected migrants in ways that they may not have realized. For example, a female Guatemalan migrant recalls getting across the Mexican border at El Ceibo, and making it to La 72, a migrant shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco, where she and her five-year-old daughter were turned away due to lack of space:

> They only offered us food, because they had too many people. They told us we could not stay there because of the pandemic, there were too many people for them to take us in. So then, our other option: to stay in the park. (Vásquez, 2022, 2:29)

Of course, migrants have no way of knowing whether a shelter is at limited capacity due to social distancing orders, or whether they simply have no more beds. Migrants with no previous experience heading northward may have no idea what awaits them anywhere they go—i.e., whether they can expect to find shelter or not in any given town. It is therefore not possible to quantify from migrant stories the positive or negative effects of healthy distancing policies on

migrants, except to note that while such policies may have protected some migrants by reducing crowding, they essentially denied shelter to others.

Protection is a word whose meaning has become murky in recent years in the context of the Central America-Mexico-U.S. migration corridor. The controversial 2019 policy known as Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) requires many asylum seekers to remain in Mexico during the course of their asylum application process, allowing them to cross into the United States only for designated court dates (MPP, 2019). In Mexico, migrants live precariously, often in crowded shelters or encampments, where they are vulnerable to a range of dangers.

A Honduran migrant and her young son, who entered the U.S. to seek asylum in late 2019 —a few months prior to the pandemic— at the Reynosa border, were soon returned to Mexico under the MPP program at Nuevo Laredo and ended up kidnapped by a cartel (Female migrant from Honduras, 2022). According to her and her husband, different organized criminal groups controlled the border at these two ports of entry. Migrants were required to pay to cross the border and to provide a password as proof of payment upon their return; in this case when they were repatriated at a different border crossing, her husband explains, "it was a different cartel, so when they asked her for the password it was different, so they kidnapped her" (Male migrant from Honduras, 2022b, 1:41).

She recalls her fear: "It's common knowledge that when you get kidnapped if you can't pay, you lose your life. And thank God my family was on my side. My mother had to sell her house to gather part of the money" (Female migrant from Honduras, 2022, 1:36). When her husband found an opportunity to cross undocumented into the U.S., fearing the cartels of the north, she fled to southern Mexico, abandoning her MPP asylum case. Luckily, the new presidential administration allowed those with uncompleted MPP cases, including those who may have missed court dates, to return to the United States and see through their asylum processes from the U.S. She was then able to cross legally into the country and reunite with her husband (Female migrant from Honduras, 2022).

While the MPP program was suspended during the early part of the pandemic, by early 2022, this process was being applied again to some migrants. Although this program had been devised specifically for migrants from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras only, those migrants were being routinely expelled during the pandemic without being permitted to apply for asylum under the Title 42 program. In late 2021, the MPP was relaunched for countries whose migrants were not being accepted by Mexico under Title 42, including those from Colombia and Nicaragua (Schacher, 2022).

Among the stories recorded in 2022, several asylum seekers from Nicaragua complained of being assigned to the MPP. One who crossed the border at Otay in early January of 2022 "was detained for 12 days in the famous ice boxes."[5] He continues: "They only called me on the twelfth day to communicate that I was to be returned to the city of Tijuana with the MPP program" (Male

[5] "Ice boxes" is the term many migrants use for detention centers, whose temperatures are routinely maintained at uncomfortably cold levels

migrant from Nicaragua, 2022a, 0:55). He later crossed for court dates in early February and mid-March, but at the time of the recording of his story a few months later, he remained waiting in Mexico, where he was deeply distressed by the insecurity. In his digital story, titled "Dangerous Mexico," he assesses that some shelters treat migrants "inhumanely" and he lives in constant fear "because Mexico is a very dangerous country. Not all Mexicans are bad, but there are lots of kidnappings […], extortions, there are deaths, women are raped," observing that in terms of crime conditions are better back in Nicaragua (Male migrant from Nicaragua, 2022a, 2:34).

Another Nicaraguan, who migrated around the same time to escape political violence, found himself in the same situation. After crossing the border and surrendering to the border patrol, although he vociferously expressed fear about returning to either Nicaragua or Mexico, he was forced to sign documents that authorized his registration into the MPP program. Then soon after returning to Mexico from a court date in February of 2022, he was assaulted by Tijuana police: "They turned me upside down […], they stole my money, and beat my knees and hands. I'm hurting, I was knocked to the ground" (Male migrant from Nicaragua, 2022b, 8:30), he explains, with images showing wounds to his hands, knees and mouth. Indeed, Mexican institutions meant to offer public security often themselves exert violence on migrants.

Applying for asylum during the early months of the pandemic emergency when many migrant support agencies were closed meant adding bureaucratic and political hurdles to finding safe space. One of the biggest obstacles highlighted in migrant testimonial narratives was the hard closure of the border, whose ports of entry began to reopen for asylum seekers at a gradual and unpredictable rhythm through a metering system managed by a handful of nongovernment agencies after a year and a half.

As a transgender migrant explains in her digital story from early 2022—a time when metering was active—: "Migrating there [USA] is hard, because right now the border is closed, the process is very long. I've been fighting for almost a year now" (Alexia, 2022, 3:52). In addition to the border closure, all asylum procedures were suspended for a considerable number of months, which overwhelmed the processing of applications for international protection, and made border cities like Tijuana into bottlenecks where migrants routinely wait months or years to cross. As the pandemic progressed—and dangers of contagion waned with the introduction of vaccines—, it became clear that many of the policies put in place in the name of public health were simply meant to deter migration at any cost.

The most notorious instance of this kind was the activation of Title 42, a policy that reinforced the exclusionary processes that had been progressively strengthened by the U.S. government dating back to at least the launch of the MPP in early 2019, if not earlier (Silva Hernández & Miranda, 2022). Implemented at the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020 by the Centers for Disease Control as a public health measure to contain the spread of COVID-19 across international borders, Title 42 allowed the rapid expulsion of anyone crossing the border without authorization, regardless of their possible qualifications for asylum in the United States.

Over its 38-month duration, U.S. authorities registered nearly 3 million border apprehensions (Chishti et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the account of these encounters implies that one person could have been registered on more than one occasion – because there is no deportation trial involved and people return to attempt the crossing. Migrants from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were returned to Mexico, while those from countries like Haiti and Ecuador were often expelled directly to their countries of origin.

Critics have argued convincingly that Title 42 was never considered by the U.S. government to function to protect public health, but rather to deter the arrival of migrants including asylum seekers (Del Monte Madrigal, 2023). While Title 42 border restrictions were lifted in May of 2023, an executive order in June 2024 authorizes expulsions of many asylum seekers who cross the border without prior authorization, thus appearing to revive the spirit of Title 42.

Title 42 indeed would seem to have generated damaging repercussions on COVID-19 era migrants, many of whom waited months or even years to cross the border to initiate asylum applications (Slack & Heyman, 2020; Chishti et al., 2024). Others' attempts were completely thwarted. A young Ecuadorian migrant named Sebastián traveled all the way to the northern Mexican border at Piedras Negras, where coyotes helped him to cross the river. He then got picked up by a car that was quickly stopped by the police for running a red light. The police immediately turned him over to the border patrol. Even when his sister, a U.S. citizen, hired a lawyer to represent him, "they told me that our case falls under Article 42 of direct deportation and that we cannot do anything." After getting sent back to Ecuador, he set out again immediately, but this time got detained and repatriated from Mexico (Sebastián, 2021, 3:18).

Such deterrence actions are not performed solely by the U.S. government, but rather involve multiple national states. Indeed, Mexico, which agreed to accepting removals of non-Mexican migrants to its territory under both the MPP and Title 42, is deeply complicit. And although the public face of these agreements may be couched in terms of safety, the experience of migrants says otherwise.

An Ecuadorian mother of three children was caught soon after crossing the U.S. southern border by the border patrol. After being detained and held for days in a cold room where one of her sons came down with pneumonia, she recalls: "my daughter also got sick and me too […]. It was awful, really traumatizing. Three months took us to recover once we came back" (Female migrant from Ecuador, 2021, 4:22,). Not only were they not given the opportunity to apply for asylum, but they were subjected to cold and stressful conditions that caused them to become sick. Although a doctor checked to ensure that they did not exhibit COVID-19 symptoms, they were forcibly removed back to Ecuador while still ill.

It is by no means clear how many migrants hoping to apply for asylum in the United States would actually qualify under current U.S. law. Certainly, by some measures the rates of success for asylum applicants from many of the countries that arrived in greatest numbers at the border during the pandemic, including Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti, have long been very low, indeed under 20% (Transaction Records Access Clearinghouse, 2023). However,

Title 42 expulsions left any exceptions to the discretion of border patrol agents, who were not required to ask migrants if they feared returning to their country of origin or to Mexico, and many who might have easily qualified for asylum were immediately returned without any consideration for their safety. A Honduran migrant told of being targeted by maras in his hometown of Choluteca due to his sexuality:

> first, they grabbed me by the arms, and one began to hit me, they cut my forehead, and other parts of my body, too, like my calf, and my long hair. There were five of them. Well, they raped me […] and they shot at me. A bullet grazed my hip. After that, I ran, I fled. (Irias, 2022, 2:45)

After that, he received constant death threats, so he left town. "On my journey here, I could not go by bus. Obviously, I had to hitchhike to be able to get to Mexico. Because they're everywhere, the maras are all over the country." (Irias, 2022, 3:50) Reaching Aguascalientes, Mexico, he was again targeted, this time by police: "They beat me, they raped me, and also they shaved my head, and they tried to strangle me […]. I pretended I was dead. They left me lying there." (Irias, 2022, 5:20) When he got to Tijuana, the LGBT+ shelter he had heard of was full and refused him entry. Then, he went to Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, where he crossed the Río Grande. Once in the U.S., he told border patrol agents about everything that had happened to him, inspiring little sympathy: "They made fun of me. They didn't want to help me. They told me I didn't have a chance, that they weren't granting asylum. They said that even members of the LGBT+ community weren't getting asylum" (Irias, 2022, 6:37) and expelled him back to Ciudad Acuña under Title 42. He then returned to Tijuana, this time managing to claim a bed at the Jardín de Mariposas shelter, where he was awaiting the chance to legally cross to the United States to apply for asylum (Irias, 2022, 3:48).

As can be seen in these narratives, one of the effects of returning migrants to Mexico is that they are often placed directly at risk. Human rights organizations have identified that attacks on migrants on the Mexican side increased with the launch of Title 42, registering up to four times more than during the MPP years (Human Rights First, 2021).

Living in permanent danger can instill fear and paralyze migrants in search of daily subsistence to the point that they eventually may end up confining themselves to shelters. This was the experience of a Guatemalan who was deported and is now in Tijuana seeking to reenter the U.S:

> What happened to me a bit ago here in Tijuana, leaving my own house I saw someone get murdered. I don't know the name of the person who did it, I didn't see the person's face because he had his face well covered. But he saw me. I only saw in his eyes that I better stay quiet, because if not I would end down the same path. (De León, 2022, 3:50)

Even though he was capable of working, he remained terrified to leave the shelter. Beginning in early 2021, a coalition of civil organizations in Tijuana began coordinating with U.S. officials to allow a small number of the most vulnerable migrants to cross to the U.S. and initiate asylum claims every day. Systems of "metering" had been used going back to 2016, with the arrival of

large numbers of Haitians at the border, and were also implemented beginning in late 2018 to process migrants who had arrived in Tijuana in highly publicized caravans (Silva Hernández & Miranda, 2022). This latest incarnation of metering, which continued until early 2023—when it was supplanted by a smartphone app, which similarly limits the number of daily authorized crossings for asylum applicants—, was not based on a first-come, first-served basis; instead, migrants were prioritized mainly based on their degree of vulnerability, with women, children, or families traveling together given precedence over single men.

Several men migrating lamented this scheme as their wives or children may remain in vulnerable conditions elsewhere, with these male migrants unable to help them while left waiting months at the border. This was the situation of a Haitian migrant named Pierre Louis Joseph (2022a, 2022b), whose migration saga had begun in the early 2010s when he and his family migrated to Brazil. By the middle of the decade, they were no longer able to make a living there, so they left for the U.S. in 2016. They made the lengthy journey through Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia, crossing into the notorious Darien Gap, and then on through Central America, arriving in Tijuana late that year. They were allowed to cross into the United States, but soon after arriving, he was separated from his wife and young son, and the new presidential administration ordered the deportation of newly arrived male Haitians (Joseph, 2022a).

Only in 2021 was he able to afford to try to join his family, who were allowed to stay in the U.S., following the same long and circuitous route to Mexico via Brazil and the Darien Gap. This time around it was harder. For one thing, he learned that his wife had taken a fall and appeared to be seriously ill and unable to properly care for their young son. In addition, as he was left waiting for months in Tijuana, he suffered mistreatment by Mexican authorities and discrimination at work. Meanwhile, as a man traveling solo, he was excluded from migrant shelters and denied priority access to metering lists (Joseph, 2022b).

Another Haitian, Richard, who had first attempted to emigrate to Chile, where he lived for three years without being able to obtain legal residency, likewise travelled country by country through western South America and into the Darien Gap (Richard, 2022a). There he witnessed all kinds of suffering and remains traumatized after having saved nine people from drowning. He then waited months in Tijuana. There he saw Haitians getting mugged, or even shot at, as he tried to earn some money to send back to Haiti, where family, including not only his young daughter but also his grandmother and his sister, were counting on his help. He laments:

> When organizations started getting people across the border, I felt hopeful. I thought they would help us unaccompanied migrants, too, but they only prioritize families and they ignore us. But I have my daughter, I have to work to send something to her in Haiti. (Richard, 2022b, 2:11)

He further explains: “I understand why they prioritize helping families, but they could be more equitable with everyone. So, if they’re admitting 50 or, say, 20 people, 10 could be families and another 10 people migrating alone” (Richard, 2022b, 1:14). His hopefulness eventually waned: “Migrants traveling alone feel they are alone; there aren’t any organizations that try to help them.

That's why I just couldn't take it anymore." Richard confesses that he made the unfortunate decision to cross illegally into the United States on his own. Once there he was promptly picked up by border patrol agents, who immediately processed him for repatriation back to Haiti under Title 42—i.e., without giving him the chance to make a case for political asylum (Richard, 2022b, 1:31).

For some migrants, Title 42 expulsions may have represented only an inconvenience or a delay: Mexicans or Central Americans who were returned at the border without a formal deportation on their record could take their return as a minor setback and simply try again on another occasion. For example, the gay Honduran migrant who was expelled from Ciudad Acuña after crossing illegally was in line to get across the border legally in Tijuana a few months later (Irias, 2022). However, for migrants like Richard or Sebastián, getting back to the U.S. border from far-off countries such as Haiti or Ecuador may take years of saving—or may ultimately be impossible. Regardless of whether either would have qualified for asylum, their forced removal without any opportunity to make an initial plea may mean a possible violation of human rights—as well as a loss of thousands of dollars, and an accumulation of psychological traumas and often physical injuries, all for naught.

As a way of placing these findings on the effects of mitigation policies in a broad framework, it is important to mention that migration control policies do not operate in a vacuum; deterrence relations and practices are implemented based on pejorative representations of migrants, whether as a threat, a health risk or simply as a hindrance to the country's economy. On the one hand, nativist ideologies and eugenic discourses were very influential in early 20th century U.S. health policy and popularized the idea that racial differences in national groups were innate (Shah, 2001). Throughout the 20th century, migrants of various nationalities—Chinese, Mexicans, Africans, among many others—have been linked as possessors of health threats, stigmatizing migrants as carriers of contagious diseases (Kraut, 1994).

On the other hand, negative and stigmatizing representations of migrants have led to punitive migration control and expulsion policies. The link between migration and criminality is related to the establishment of a conservative rhetoric that has in recent decades gained ground in U.S. politics, which has led to a shift away from perceiving migration as a right and turned it into an offense to be punished. The consequences of these criminalization policies have been documented by multiple scholars (Abrego et al., 2017; Martínez & Slack, 2018). These representations then are not exclusive to the pandemic; on the contrary, their precedents are anchored throughout a history of increasingly tough immigration policies. But what is important to highlight is not so much the antiquity of this relationship, but the moral and social foundations that support it. When this relationship is revisited from the 19th century, through the 20th, to the 21st, what underlies anti-immigration policies are nativist and racist ideas (Goodman, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

Pandemic times clearly had severe effects on migrant populations, especially those seeking international protection. However, according to what has been documented in the collected digital stories, the major impacts have not necessarily been due to the virus that paralyzed the world, but rather can be attributed to policies implemented in the name of mitigating the pandemic that functioned as de facto migration control and deterrence policies.

The pandemic did not appear to slow down, delay or cancel migration projects for those who participated in the project. It seems rather to have been a factor in motivating some to leave their countries of origin. More generally, the pandemic generated obstacles that made already perilous and onerous migration journeys and processes—characterized by restrictive migration laws and policies, exposure to organized crime, corruption among government officials, hazardous topography, dependence on human smugglers, social exclusion and discrimination, lack of support and assistance, and so on—even more difficult and hazardous. The pandemic was the backdrop against which these contemporary mobilities took place, unfortunately appearing to set the tone for new restrictions that at this point appear likely to extend in one form or another into the coming years.

In general, for the migrants who shared their stories during the pandemic, shelters in Tijuana continued to be a relatively safe and protective space. Although these institutions had to adjust capacities and limit services, migrants refer to them with gratitude, as spaces of welcome and assistance where they have been able to feel safe and take refuge from violence and exposure.

If the disease itself did not make a strong impact on the experiences of migrants, its harshest repercussions were instead migration deterrence policies like Title 42. The expeditious return of asylum seekers into contexts with a high incidence of crime and criminality placed them in precisely the type of high-risk situation from which many fled and from which they were seeking protection.

New policies currently under consideration—and already being rolled out—unfortunately seem aimed at introducing additional obstacles to asylum seekers and deterring potential new migrants.

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