

# FROM STREET LIFE TO MAINSTREAM SOCIETY: UNDERSTANDING POST-DEPORTATION JOURNEY OF FORMER CHICANO GANG MEMBERS

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## ABSTRACT

According to estimates from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), out of the approximately four million individuals deported from the U.S. in the past decade, a significant proportion — at least 20% — were former gang members. After serving their sentences, these individuals were expelled to Mexico. Due to their distinctive physical characteristics and hybrid cultural identities, these deportees are likely to confront myriad hurdles in their efforts to assimilate into Mexican society. This study endeavors to explore the social pathways and opportunities available to these individuals for societal reintegration, with the aim of comprehending the essence of their assimilation processes. Additionally, this research seeks to identify the key actors and contexts that enable these deportees' reintegration into their new lives in Mexico. To fulfill these objectives, we carried out a series of comprehensive interviews with former gang members, now deportees, residing in Guadalajara. The findings underscore the severity of the challenges these individuals face in terms of social integration: significant issues include family reintegration and the acquisition of employment; the development of mental health disorders; a predilection towards alcohol and drug use, leading to potential addiction; and an increased susceptibility to violence and entanglement in organized crime.

**Keywords:** Deportation; Social Integration; Chicano Gang Members; Post-deportation Challenges; Reintegration Strategies

*De la vida callejera a la sociedad establecida: comprendiendo la trayectoria post-deportación de ex pandilleros chicanos*

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## RESUMEN

Según estimaciones del Servicio de Inmigración y Control de Aduanas de Estados Unidos (ICE), de los aproximadamente cuatro millones de personas deportadas de Estados Unidos en la última década, una proporción significativa —al menos el 20%— eran exmiembros de pandillas. Tras cumplir sus condenas, estas personas fueron expulsadas a México. Debido a sus características físicas distintivas e identidades culturales híbridas, es probable que estos deportados enfrenten numerosos obstáculos en su integración a la sociedad mexicana. Este estudio busca explorar las vías sociales y las oportunidades disponibles para la reintegración social de estas personas, con el fin de comprender la esencia de sus procesos de asimilación. Además, esta investigación busca identificar los actores y contextos clave que facilitan la reintegración de estos deportados a sus nuevas vidas en México. Para lograr estos objetivos, realizamos una serie de entrevistas exhaustivas con exmiembros de pandillas, ahora deportados, residentes en Guadalajara. Los hallazgos subrayan la gravedad de los desafíos que enfrentan estas personas en términos de integración social: entre los problemas más importantes se incluyen la reintegración familiar y la obtención de empleo; El desarrollo de trastornos de salud mental; una predilección por el consumo de alcohol y drogas, lo que puede llevar a una posible adicción; y una mayor susceptibilidad a la violencia y a la participación en el crimen organizado.

**Palabras clave:** Deportación; Integración social; Pandilleros chicanos; Desafíos posteriores a la deportación; Estrategias de reintegración

## Introduction

Barack Obama's presidency marked a shift in U.S. migration policy, emphasizing deportations. ICE data (2008–2020) shows an average of 395,000 annual removals during his first term, declining to 240,000 by 2016. Over two million were deported, 60% of Mexican origin. In 2016, 83.7% were "priority removals" (threats to security, convicted criminals, or border crossers), with 58% (138,669) being convicted criminals. Mexico accounted for 62.4% (149,821) of removals that year (ICE, 2017). From 2018–2020, deportations averaged 236,409 annually, with 60% being "criminals" and 50% Mexican (ICE, 2021).

Mexican gangs in the U.S., tied to organized crime, engage in extortion and territorial violence (Bartnik, 2003; Vigil, 2008; Howell & Moore, 2010). Many of their former members, now deported ex-gang members, face severe reentry barriers: unemployment, identity validation, family separation, and trauma (Albicker & Velasco, 2016). Struggling with addiction, discrimination, and even recruitment by cartels, they receive little government support, relying instead on civil society—shelters, churches, and families—for reintegration. In Guadalajara, deported ex-gang members rely on peer networks for housing and jobs but face mental health and addiction issues. Limited institutional support forces self-organization (Ángel, 2022; Fabián et al., 2024).

Deportation disrupts social ties, compounding stigma (Alarcón & Becerra, 2012). Some leverage skills (tattooing, call-center work) for reintegration (Olvera & Muela, 2016; Enríquez & Monge, 2022). Family and community support are critical, yet many face exclusion and violence. This study examines post-deportation challenges for ex-gang members in Guadalajara, highlighting systemic gaps and resilience strategies through interviews

## Methodology

This article is part of a broader research project, conducted over last two years of it, in collaboration with the GDL-SUR group (Grupo Destino y Libertad-Servicio de Unidad y Recuperación), initiated in 2018 and extended until 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the larger study employed a mixed-methods approach (Fabián et al., 2024), this report focuses primarily on the qualitative dimension of the research, exploring in depth the lived experiences of deported gang members.

During the research period, a variety of methodological tools were utilized, with questionnaires serving as the primary quantitative instrument, complemented by ethnographic work, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation for the qualitative component. The first phase of the research began with the active participation of 10 members, though the number fluctuated over time, reaching up to 15 participants in collective workshops and between 6 and 10 in focus groups. The group dynamics were influenced by the constant incorporation of new members, many of whom were recently deported, making it challenging to maintain a stable group (Fabián et al., 2024).

The second phase focused on 18 months of fieldwork, conducted between January 2019 and July 2020. During this period, semi-structured interviews were carried out, four workshops on access to legal services and medical advice were organized, and focus groups were held, culminating in a seminar titled Return and Reintegration of Former Gang Members from the United States to Mexico, hosted at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in November 2019.

In the first quarter of 2020, a questionnaire was administered to 24 members who had participated at various stages of the research. Due to the continuous arrival of new members to GDL-SUR, the questionnaire remained active, allowing for the collection of a total of 35 questionnaires by April 2022. These questionnaires addressed topics such as post-deportation displacement trajectories, adaptation challenges, employment, family relationships, mental health, and substance use (Fabián et al., 2024).

The research was characterized by a collaborative approach, where members of GDL-SUR, under the recognized leadership of their director, took on active roles as moderators of interviews and focus groups, fostering authentic dialogue dynamics while researchers participated as observers. Additionally, creative activities such as graffiti sessions and the production of participatory videos were promoted, in which members documented aspects of their daily lives (Fabián et al., 2024). This approach not only strengthened trust within the group but also enriched data collection, providing a deep and contextualized understanding of the deported gang members' experiences which is the central focus of this article.

Undertaking participant observation within GDL-SUR facilitated firsthand immersion into the homies' daily routines, interactions, and social dynamics. This approach provided rich insights into the cultural context of the community and helped us gain a deeper understanding of their post-deportation experiences. The survey results illuminated patterns and trends within the GDL-SUR community, thereby validating the qualitative data and offering a broader context to the findings. It also explored aspects of psychosocial problems, challenges in social integration, family dynamics, and the unique cultural milieu of the participants (Fabián et al., 2024).

In addition to the surveys, between 2021 and 2022, we held 20 in-depth interviews with deported ex-gang members, each lasting between one to two hours. These discussions allowed

us to delve into their personal narratives, experiences with their original gang groups, deportation ordeals, and struggles with reintegration into Mexican society. The subjects of our study were selected exclusively based on their membership at GDL-SUR. By focusing on this criterion, we ensured a homogeneous sample that shared a common background as deported ex-gang members, offering specific insights about this particular population.

Each interview was recorded with the participants' permission and later transcribed verbatim, offering an accurate record of the participants' accounts. Furthermore, to uphold ethical research standards, each interviewee signed a written consent form prior to the interview, assuring their voluntary participation and understanding of their rights in the study. To protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, all names were replaced with pseudonyms in the transcriptions and throughout the study.

This combination of methodologies provided a robust foundation for a comprehensive understanding of the deported gang members' experiences, residing at GDL-SUR. Following the data collection, we performed a thorough thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes relevant to the struggles and experiences of the homies at GDL-SUR. The findings of this analysis form the basis of the subsequent sections of this academic paper. The first step entailed a theoretical framework to analyze prior findings on depression, anxiety, and stress—key factors interviewees tied to their addictions and rehabilitation efforts<sup>1</sup>.

## The Post-deportation perspective

The study of deportation has gained relevance in recent decades due to the tightening of immigration policies in Global North countries. However, research on what happens after deportation—the so-called post-deportation—has been less explored (Boehm 2016; Collyer 2012; Coutin 2016; Galvin 2015; Golash-Boza 2015; Hiemstra, 2012; Schuster and Majidi 2013). Post-deportation emerges as a field of study that examines the social, economic, and psychological consequences of deportation on individuals and their communities. Khosravi (2018) introduces the concept of *destinilessness* to describe the uncertainty and uprootedness that deportees experience. This idea is linked to the notion of deportability by Nicholas De Genova (2002), which describes the constant threat of expulsion that hangs over undocumented migrants.

Khosravi (2018) and other authors, such as Peutz (2006), argue that deportation is not an isolated event, but rather a prolonged process that generates a double abandonment: deportees are expelled from the host country and marginalized in their country of origin. Authors like Drotbohm (2011) and Golash-Boza (2013) emphasize the importance of studying the transnational networks of deportees, as many maintain economic and emotional ties with the country from which they were expelled. Golash-Boza (2015) highlights how deportation reflects the inequalities of neoliberalism, turning migrants into disposable labor.

From this perspective, it has been possible to delve deeper into the stigma associated with deportation. In communities such as Jamaica (Gerlach, 2018) or Nigeria (Plambech, 2018), returnees are perceived as *failures* or *criminals*, making their reintegration more difficult. Schuster

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<sup>1</sup> At the editor's request, we mention that this work is published until 2025, as it was under review for over a year at another journal before ultimately being rejected for not being a relevant topic for that journal.

and Majidi (2013) further argue that this stigma can result in labor and social exclusion, reinforcing cycles of marginalization.

### **Deportation as a Temporal and Spatial process**

Deportation as a *temporal* and *spatial* process can be understood as occurring in three phases involving *deportability* (De Genova, 2002), *deportation* itself, and finally, the *post-deportation* experience. The first phase refers to the mechanisms employed by the state apparatus to keep undocumented migrants under the threat of deportation. The second, pertains to the administrative process that begins with the apprehension of deportable individuals and concludes with their expulsion from the host country (Schuster & Majidi, 2013). Finally, post-deportation refers to the range of individual experiences faced by deportees once they are forcibly returned to their place of origin.

In this sense, post-deportation does not merely entail the physical relocation of individuals from one country to another; rather, it is a prolonged process involving extended periods of time and multiple geographic relocations (Peutz, 2006; Schuster & Majidi, 2013). It also encompasses the institutions, organizations, societies, families, and communities that either facilitate or hinder reintegration. Consequently, this experience often makes adjustment, integration, or reintegration into the place of origin difficult, if not impossible (Schuster & Majidi, 2013).

Three main factors reduce the likelihood of successful reintegration and, in some cases, fuel the desire to re-migrate among the deported population: levels of debt, the shame of failure, and the stigma of contamination (Schuster & Majidi, 2013). The first factor relates to difficulties in labor market insertion, re-citizenization or regularization of citizenship documents, and even educational barriers. The second factor primarily concerns family dynamics, including both the disintegration of family ties in the host country and transformations in the place of origin. The third is a social and community-level factor that impacts the deportee's social and individual life; typically, stigma prevents deportees from finding employment or confines them to jobs that align solely with the skills acquired in the host country.

### **The Psychosocial Well-being of Deportees**

In some cases, additional challenges include a lack of resources in the country of origin, feelings of insecurity, exposure to or witnessing violence, and limited access to healthcare and information. However, the issue extends beyond these factors. Combined with the three aforementioned elements, the stress induced by the entire process of deportability and deportation, as well as the post-deportation experience, plays a decisive role in the deterioration of mental health among those who have undergone this process. This is a key pathway leading to addiction and alcoholism among the deported population.

In this regard, Majidi (2018) suggests that to better understand the psychosocial distress of deported populations, analysis can be conducted through the prism of psychosocial wellbeing, understood as a state of mental, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing that allows individuals to fulfill their desires, potential, and capabilities while fully enjoying their rights. In this sense, Majidi (2018) notes that the requirements for psychosocial wellbeing, as presented by DeBono, Rönqvist, and Magnusson (2015, p. 158), include (1) agency, autonomy, and control, (2) participation and involvement, (3) social relationships and networks, and (4) safety.

This framework, centered on the well-being of deportees, has allowed for a deeper examination of the causes leading to high levels of stress, depression, and anxiety among deported former gang members residing in Guadalajara (Fabián et al., 2024). These conditions have driven them toward alcoholism and drug addiction, as well as their subsequent pursuit of rehabilitation.

### **The post-deportation experience among homies**

The surge in deportations following the 9/11 attacks was not directly related to an immediate threat of terrorists infiltrating the United States through ports and borders. Rather, it resulted in heightened penalties for undocumented individuals endeavoring to cross borders, as well as those residing within the United States. Alarcón and Becerra (2012) highlight that the enforcement of Section 287(g) of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) in 2002, marked the inauguration of a legal and bureaucratic mechanism for systematically deporting considerable numbers of non-terrorist undocumented individuals.

This legislative shift led to the inception of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in the same year, alongside the establishment of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in 2003. These agencies formulated programs aimed at identifying potential threats to national security, both at ports and borders and within the U.S. itself.

The Department of Homeland Security categorizes individuals deported into two groups: those who are *removed* and those who *returned*. The former group comprises individuals who have violated U.S. immigration laws and have experienced a legal process culminating in their deportation. This group primarily encompasses migrants with criminal records and gang affiliations warranting deportation. The latter group, referred to as returned, includes those who voluntarily return to their countries of origin with governmental assistance. The individuals interviewed for this study, whose experiences we aim to detail below, fall within the first of these classifications.

### **Return and Adaptation to Mexico**

The criminals and gang members interviewed, self-identified as *homies*, who are deported through the border ports between Mexico and the United States, mainly heading for the metropolitan area of Guadalajara, predominantly comprise individuals who spent their childhood in California and have been incarcerated two to three times in both state and federal U.S. prisons. Their migratory journeys often began in their early years, departing from their birthplaces in Mexico, sometimes accompanied by one or both parents, with a U.S. destination in view. Consequently, considering returning to Mexico is challenging for them, as they often lack the necessary financial resources and family or social networks to facilitate their return.

These individuals are not only socialized as Chicano gang members (*homies*), but also as people who have spent significant portions of their lives in prison, which further complicates their adaptation to a new environment with dynamics vastly different from what they are accustomed to. One individual's reflection encapsulates this difficulty.

Beyond patience, recognizing that the monopoly of violence in Mexico does not exclusively belong to the state but extends to organized crime, constitutes a crucial learning for these individuals. They also understand that living in the fast lane does not inevitably lead to

imprisonment and that it is prudent to mind their own business and behave honorably. This comprehension forms part of their adaptation process and is accentuated by the persistent desire to re-migrate, mainly due to the stigma and lack of opportunities tied to their appearance and behavior. They feel the only place they might find acceptance is back in the Chicano neighborhood or U.S. prisons.

For homies the adaptation period can span up to 10 years, and they might still believe their place is in California. Meanwhile, in Mexico, they fail to regularize their legal status. Many of them remain completely anonymous due to the lack of any documentation validating their identity. Finally, the interviewees acknowledge that they had to learn to manage this and other desires related to their life in the U.S., which often led to initiating or exacerbating addiction to alcohol or other drugs during their adaptation period.

As Schuster and Majidi (2013) argue, the findings from our study—derived from interviews with deported individuals—are categorized according to the three key factors that substantially impede—or altogether block—successful adaptation and community integration to their place of origin: levels of debt, the shame of failure, and the stigma of contamination (Schuster and Majidi, 2013). As theorized in the deportation studies framework, Guadalajara interviewees face three intersecting barriers to socio-cultural adaptation (Peutz, 2006) and forced reintegration (Schuster & Majidi, 2015).

These factors acquire acute severity given participants' condition as functional strangers - Mexican-born but US-socialized individuals experiencing what Coutin (2015) terms deportation as ontological displacement, where 'return' constitutes entry into an alien society. The following results section examines this triple exclusion dynamic

### **Structural precarity (labor market exclusion/documentary limbo)**

Experiences of deportation entail numerous challenges related to legal status and identity. Many homies report having lived in Mexico for 3 to 10 years without an electoral card, birth certificate, or educational documents. These circumstances, along with a lack of familial and institutional support, lead them to find work in informal trades and develop alternative strategies for survival.

In the early days, I used to sleep on the beach. I got a job as a host inviting people to consume, and I got clothes from churches to look presentable. I didn't know there were places to sleep that were cheap and lived on the street for a while. (Homie 4, Personal interview, November 5, 2021).

As depicted in Homie 4 account from 2021, early experiences can be difficult. He slept on the beach and worked as a host at an establishment, dressed in clothes from churches. After learning about affordable housing, he found a second job and began integrating into the local community, although his circumstances led to involvement in some questionable activities, including attempted theft.

The deportees' experiences highlight a process of adaptation where they learn to meet their basic needs without previous knowledge or support. Initial years are often characterized by a lack of awareness about public health services for physical and mental health issues. Consequently, they often seek help from pharmacy doctors instead of public health systems. Workforce

reintegration is another significant challenge, not due to incompetence or lack of experience, but bureaucratic procedures and ageism.

Post-deportation adaptation without assistance also means resorting to work in high-risk environments. As a deportee shared, the lack of proper documentation and references makes it difficult to secure formal jobs. This situation sometimes leads to illegal activities, further complicated by addiction problems.

Despite the challenges and often unfavorable working conditions, the deportees' language skills have created a unique niche for them. Their command over English allows them to start various businesses, from market stalls to partnerships with entrepreneurs worldwide:

I switched to a Google marketing company, where we call businesses to promote themselves on the main Google page. We work 40 hours and rest on the weekend. We are operators who only dedicate ourselves to transferring people. It's a new company and a Texas buddy who has here, invited me (Homie 4, Personal interview, November 5, 2021).

This symbiotic relationship has not only provided the homies with employment opportunities but also allowed companies to tap into the international market.

### **Familial dislocation (disrupted transnational kinship systems)**

Deportation significantly transforms the family ties of the homies. The experiences are not only of familial disintegration or reconstitution but also of emotional exhaustion that often prevents relatives from supporting the deportees with their behavioral problems and addictions. A majority of the study participants reported that they had no family to receive them in Mexico upon their deportation.

Homie 7's account from 2022 shares a story of addiction and disconnection. After his last deportation in 2010, his family suggested him to take a break in Mexico instead of attempting to return to the US. However, he found himself dealing with the struggle of survival without familial support, cultural familiarity, and addiction issues.

Another critical issue is the risk to the families in the US if they support the deportee in illegally re-entering the country, as it implies breaking immigration laws and risking punishment. This complicates the deportee's return to their families.

The complexities increase when the deportee leaves children in the US or has elderly parents to care for. Homie 18, in 2021, shared his worries about his mother getting deported and his drug-addicted siblings' children ending up in foster care:

I was deported but my mother stayed in LA (Los Angeles), and more than fixing my return in the courts I want my mother's papers to be fixed. She has American children. I'm worried they will deport her because when they deported me, I was in charge of her and my three nephews. (Homie 18, Personal interview, November 22, 2021).

Stigma and economic issues also strain the homies' relationships with their families in Mexico. The family often disapproves the deportee's lifestyle associated with *cholo* behavior, which is linked with crime, poverty, and social marginalization in Mexico. Economic disputes further sour relationships, leading to an overall negative perception of Mexicans.



The cultural differences between the deportees and their Mexican families sometimes result in disagreements over household roles and rules. Homie 4's account from 2021 shows how he clashed with his in-laws over their marijuana use and his drinking habits, which eventually led him to the streets before recovering and reuniting with his family.

Despite these challenges, family socialization often plays a vital role in their integration into Mexican society. This is especially true when they form new families in Mexico, as Homie 4's experience shows. Family acceptance also gives the deportees a sense of belonging and understanding about their past and nuclear family.

However, the journey to familial integration is not always smooth. There are instances of emotional disconnection and unmet expectations that lead to confusion and feelings of defeat, as Homie 13 shared in 2021. He felt disconnected from his mother, who he had been separated from for 15 years, highlighting the emotional toll deportation takes on familial bonds:

I felt defeated. My self-esteem went down more. I arrive here without knowing anything, without knowing anyone. I remember being there with my mother; I knew she was my mother but I didn't feel it. I mean, it's a very frustrating feeling to know, OK, this woman gave me life; I was away from her for 15 years of my life but when I get here, I feel her warmth, I feel her joy and her wanting to give that love, and me like, who are you? I didn't feel that love that is supposed to be given to a mother (Homie 13, Personal interview, November 12, 2021).

These cases show that family reintegration is not a cure for loneliness and may often complicate the emotional distress the homies already experienced. Thus, initial specialized attention is crucial to address the mental health concerns of deportees.

### **Stigmatization as *homies*/*cholos***

The homies have attempted to mitigate stigma by reinforcing their homie identity and cholo culture while living in the United States. In their efforts to evade racial, ethnic, and social discrimination, they've had to learn how to navigate these waters adeptly. However, upon deportation, they face discriminatory hurdles from family, societal structures, and both governmental and civil organizations.

The shelters established for them, however, have policies aimed at channeling those with addiction issues to regional addiction integration centers. When questioned about their knowledge of these procedures within the shelters, all confirmed their ignorance of emotional containment, psychological first aid, or their rights as migrants and Mexicans.

Interestingly, while these shelters initially offer assistance, challenges arise when the homies' families can no longer afford to maintain them in these centers and they are unable to secure employment due to lack of documentation. They also mentioned differential treatment based on their identity, as shared by Homie 4, who experienced discrimination from his peers. In the face of these issues, some homies have found support in religious organizations:

In the annexes when I wanted to intern myself, I started to have problems of discrimination from my peers: '*¿ing pocho, ¿ing cholo, what are you doing here?*' and I would leave. I would go out on the street because that was destructive therapy. I felt they hated me for being pocho, for speaking English. When I relapsed, for a while I

preferred to live on the street; in parks. Risking getting robbed because I didn't know anyone (Homie 4, Personal interview, November 5, 2021).

Yet, this support often falls short when it comes to resolving economic issues, addiction struggles, and documentation difficulties. Fewer than half of the interviewees stated that they had not received family support during their deportation, making their circumstances even more difficult as they battled addictions, sought food, and shelter. For instance, Homie 19 recounts his fears and difficulties upon arriving in Mexico.

Their decision to isolate themselves often further delays their adaptation to the new environment and the resolution of pressing issues such as reestablishing family communication or solving their legal status:

I had just been deported; the sweating, the desperation to see my children, to start using drugs again. In October, I heard music from the patron saint's party that was happening back there in the village and then for the December parties and I didn't dare to go see what was happening because of what people would say about me (Homie 19, Personal interview, November 22, 2021).

Deportation often brings with it a cultural shock, as these individuals, who were assimilated by North American society and socialized in their neighborhoods, suddenly find themselves as strangers in a strange world. The shock isn't solely cultural; the social contrasts become starkly evident upon crossing the Mexican border. Homie 2's account of his first impressions of Tijuana underscores this reality:

I arrived in Tijuana and saw the poverty; the cardboard houses. And I said - f\*\*\*, you're on this side now. Time to struggle, man (Homie 2, Personal interview, November 5, 2021).

Building on this report's theoretical framework—which examines psychosocial wellbeing as a rights-based construct (DeBono et al., 2015; Majidi, 2018)—the second results section systematically applies this lens to analyze interviewees' accounts of mental health deterioration and substance use. By mapping their experiences onto the prism of psychosocial wellbeing, the analysis reveals how systemic failures in post-deportation contexts manifest as what Boehm (2016) terms *ruptured belonging*, exacerbating vulnerabilities documented in this study.

### **Further impediments to social integration**

The homies illuminate further obstacles that hinder their societal reintegration following deportation. Most expressed concerns related to substance abuse, specifically drugs and alcohol, which often intensify post-deportation. They also underscored the factors that exacerbated these dependencies, such as exposure to violence and organized crime, outcomes of their previous gang affiliations, and their conspicuous appearances.

### **Substance Dependence and Mental Health Issues**

Although substance abuse is a prevalent problem, a small proportion of the interviewed subjects asserted they did not battle addiction per se, but grappled with psychological issues that

necessitated therapeutic intervention. For instance, in 2021, Homie 3, admitted, "I've begun seeing a psychologist. I've never placed faith in psychology, yet the mothers of my children insisted I required help. Consequently, I thought, if two people are suggesting this, why not attempt it?". Homie 3's account hints at his family's acknowledgement of his struggle to achieve his life goals due to the mental health issues developed from street life and prison experience, environments constructed for his protection as well as his children's. He reveals a latent fear of becoming an unfit parent if he fails to confront his mental health issues.

In Homie 3's situation, it's his children who spur his dedication to confronting his mental health. Some cases may not involve substance abuse, yet these individuals seek help primarily in environments frequented by alcoholics and addicts. Addiction combating support centers, despite lacking integration programs specifically tailored for deported individuals battling substance abuse, remain the sole facilities offering the necessary assistance. These individuals are referred or *directed* from other locations.

For individuals like Homie 2, the socialization in prison, among other factors, has molded them into disciplined individuals amidst the chaos of prison life. They maintain a state of constant vigilance due to both external threats and internal threats posed by their psyche.

Homie 2 observes that this prison-inculcated discipline has empowered him to recover from his addictions and devote more attention to his health and nutrition. This focused mindset has facilitated his adaptation to the work environment, distancing himself from negative thoughts and addictive behaviors.

Conversely, there are individuals who begin using substances only after they arrive in Mexico. Some resort to substance use as a method to *obliterate* their problems, while others start using due to social influences:

When I got home, back in Mexico, I noticed my brother was using drugs, and his friends would come over and get high. I thought, if all these guys aren't working, why should I? I began doing drugs. I started with inhalants until I reached crack and continued with it until I was 22. I convinced myself to quit using. I've been clean for seven years now. (Homie 20, Personal interview, February 12, 2022)

However, others learn to hide their *vice* both at home and work:

I've accepted that I can't overcome any addiction; I surrender. I transitioned from speed to meth, but occasionally, I'd crush it into 'little pills' and add them to a Monster energy drink or mix it with OXXO coffee in a thermos and behave normally. I'd carry my stash in a cup or the Monster can, and everyone would assume it was the coffee or Monster energizing me, but no. It was the addiction. (Homie 19, Personal interview, November 22, 2021).

Indeed, some individuals accomplish rehabilitation, but most maintain a consistent pattern of relapse and recovery. This cyclical behavior poses significant challenges for the homies, both in their work and family life, as they often lose their employment and face rejection from their families due to their substance use issues.

## Insecurity and Violence

Deported homies primarily associate the issues of insecurity and violence with their appearance and previous gang affiliations. They quickly learn that in Mexico, the monopoly of violence is divided between state forces and organized crime, and they can't reassemble into gangs to engage in criminal activities or drug trafficking. Once in Mexico, they are ineligible for humanitarian aid meant for migrants. Meanwhile, both authorities and criminals lay out their options in stark terms.

## Violence From Organized Crime

Deported individuals often recount hostile experiences upon arrival in Mexico. For example, Homie 2 (2021) described his initial days after deportation:

We were deported through Matamoros, and the first thing is that the soldiers pick and grab you... On my second day in Matamoros, they beat me up because I didn't want to 'work' for them, and I didn't understand how things worked... but they were hitmen. (Homie 2, Personal interview, November 5, 2021)

The options available to the homies can be a matter of life and death. Some end up in prison or dead after getting involved in organized crime. There have been accounts of homies being offered monetary compensation, a weapon, narcotics, and a woman as inducements to join the underworld. For example, one interviewee recounted surviving a gunshot to his abdomen and then hiding for three months in a garbage dump, an attack carried out not by rival gangs but by fellow hitmen who discriminated against him for being a *pocho* (a derogatory term for a U.S.-born person of Mexican descent). Others have met tragic ends because they wrongly assumed they could exert the same level of fear and respect in Mexico as they did in the United States. Homie 19 (2021) explains:

They found several of them in car trunks, man, because they started trying to sell drugs... one comes wanting to make money and what's the best way to make money? Well, selling poison to people. But after a while, they lift you up and you know that you're from over there but it's forbidden. (Homie 19, Personal interview, November 22, 2021).

The homies who tried to replicate their activities in the U.S. in Mexico found themselves in deadly situations. Selling drugs, which seemed relatively straightforward and safe enough in California, turned into a dangerous endeavor on Mexican cartel territory.

## Violence From State Forces

The other aspect of violence that deported homies encounter is from police forces, which not only represent abuse but also state corruption. For many, their first interaction with a government representative is characterized by violence and coercion. Homie 4 (2021) narrates:

One day I started drinking with some friends, and when I fell asleep, some cops came and took us for being drunk and noisy. But already in jail, they told us no, that we were going to prison for burglary. They beat the confession out of me that I had done the job. (Homie 4, Personal interview, November 5, 2021)

In Mexico, homies often find themselves targets of suspicion, both on the streets and at their workplaces. People who know about their criminal past often accuse them of theft, leading to work-related issues.

### **The Mexican Prison System**

The homies interviewed had stark experiences to share about the Mexican prison system. Unlike U.S. prisons, which have school systems and programs for inmates to develop skills, Mexican prisons pose a severe challenge for survival, particularly because they lack family support in the country.

I felt a bit comfortable because here there is no racism, no blacks, no whites... And that caused problems with the Mexicans, but then because of the English, they started to approach me, but in a good way. Here it's different because you wash your clothes, if you have soap with soap. You have to work sweeping, washing clothes for others, or see what you can arrange in the garden. Here, if you don't have anyone to support you, you eat from the bull (a broth of tortillas with vegetables and water). (Homie 4, Personal interview, November 5, 2021)

To survive, homies employ strategies such as aligning with religious groups within the prison, offering to teach English, and learning Mexican prison trades to sell their crafts and generate income. Survival—or the instinctive struggle to remain alive—extends far beyond securing shelter and food. While a minority employ notions of a *supreme being* to sustain psychosocial wellbeing through spirituality, and even fewer engage in psychological therapies for this purpose, the overwhelming majority express profound hopelessness. For them, drug and alcohol consumption emerges as the only perceived means to regulate this dimension of their existence.

As previously noted, the requirements for psychosocial wellbeing (DeBono et al., 2015) include: (1) agency, autonomy and control; (2) participation and involvement; (3) social relationships and networks; and (4) safety. These pillars form the analytical foundation for the third results section, which examines internally-generated mechanisms and strategies within the barrio that actively promote collective psychosocial wellbeing.

### **Guadalajara: the Californian haven in Mexico**

Over the past century, Guadalajara has solidified its status as the third most significant city in Mexico, embodying a rich historical, cultural, and economic canvas while retaining an innovative forefront. Guadalajara's modern cityscape extends beyond its municipal boundaries, enveloping adjacent municipalities through continuous urban expansion. Nevertheless, the metropolitan area exhibits striking income disparities, resulting in pockets of diverse socioeconomic prosperity.

A particular micro-region within Guadalajara has leveraged recent technological advancements to construct a vibrant technology business cluster. This dynamic sector demands specialized labor that outstrips local supply, culminating in an influx of professionals from across Mexico and beyond. The deported population has proven instrumental in developing these enterprises, notably offering telephone customer assistance for numerous virtual and digital businesses.

"Homies" represent a competent labor force capable of providing remote customer service in fluent U.S. English. A notable success story within the GDL-SUR community is that of Homie 4, a rehabilitated alcoholic homie, who now holds a managerial position at a Google marketing company in downtown Guadalajara. Guadalajara signifies the most Californian-esque locale that the homies can find in Mexico. The majority of these individuals originate from other cities and states, necessitating internal migration to Guadalajara upon arriving in Mexico. An interviewee observed:

In Mexico City or Tijuana, I was ready to leave. Here, I feel at home; there's a connection among us homies. I believe that if you're a homie and you discover a place where other homies reside, you stay. It's a unique ambiance that isn't found just anywhere or with anyone. It's like the low rider culture. It's more than just having oldies music and the car; it's about feeling the Chicano blood (Homie 5, Personal interview, November 6, 2021).

The city's job opportunities and cultural characteristics are powerful magnets for the deported population, especially the homies. In this context, the imaginative realm emerges as a critical tool for their adaptation to Guadalajara, recognizing city aspects as inherent to their culture. Simultaneously, the recognition among themselves, and the acceptance by local cholos, and acknowledgment of homies as authentic cholos, have facilitated their integration into local street life and other spheres where cholo culture thrives.

My grandfather was a 'pachuco' here in 'guanatos' (Guadalajara), and he would christen his trucks with names like 'la negra,' 'la paloma'. It's a part of Mexican culture. The car is considered a family member, and we christen each one. Currently, this is my fourth car: the first was named 'Chicano,' then I had 'Negro,' 'Indio,' and this one is the 'Dandy' (Homie 10, Personal interview, November 12, 2021).

The neighborhood, perceived through the Chicano lens as a social network where relatives and friends converge around shared customs and traditions of Mexicanness, promotes familial reintegration among the homies. In this respect, as suggested in the previous narrative, the mode of dressing and the low rider play integrative roles among the deported homies who arrive in Guadalajara. Before exploring the sphere of car clubs, it's crucial to examine their histories.

## Alliances

Parallel to the workings of GDL-SUR, the Firmeza Car Club has grown among the homies who benefit from GDL-SUR's programs. This cultural project has facilitated the construction of a local network with other clubs related to cars, trucks, motorcycles, and so forth, shaping Guadalajara's urban landscape. Furthermore, at a binational level, they form a genuine low lows club of homies, interconnected with a network of Mexican and Mexican-American car clubs on both sides of the U.S. border. Most of the homies who form Firmeza are not mere fans of Chicano low riders or self-taught from car magazines or music videos. They have experiences from their youth linked to this cultural expression of Chicano identity:

Low riders started in East LA, and now they have spread globally, even to Japan. As a member of Chicago's Chingones Car Club and a low rider since the '80s, I remember

we began by modifying the suspension on cars to make them bounce at traffic lights, a thrilling experience for us (Homie 8, Personal interview, November 12, 2021).

Such narratives enable them to gain social capital among local clubs in Guadalajara. Their cars' authenticity and the club's status within the Chicano low lows are acknowledged:

I've been in Firmeza since it was *Gadalowjara*. I think I've had about 50 cars; it's a healthy addiction. Cars for me are like family. I'm originally from California, but as you know, I've been here for 15 years (Homie 9, Personal interview, November 12, 2021).

The inclusion of car clubs like Firmeza among the local clubs has also helped debunk certain myths and prejudices related to car clubs in Chicano culture. Firmeza members stress that their grouping does not form gangs, but rather, the gang structure is utilized to establish clubs. They are considered a feature of the urban landscape of the Chicano barrio, with families and women playing active roles. Conveying the idea to their children that cars can unite different clubs, forge peace alliances, and serve as a healthy hobby that keeps them away from trouble is crucial:

Some of the club members are from California, we bring the school from there. That implies going the right way, going with the tradition of what we're doing (Homie 3, Personal interview, November 5, 2021).

In Guadalajara, Firmeza aims to foster trust among its members and society. They currently gather every Friday night in a parking lot opposite the Glorieta de la Minerva, where they park their cars, prepare a barbecue, and socialize in a family-friendly environment. Under this concept, they have integrated homies from other parts of the U.S., whose narratives include echoes of their *ancestors* journey from Aztlán to the promised land, a reference to their post-deportation experience:

When I come with Firmeza, I feel that I'm there, and when I saw that low riders were getting together in Minerva, I said -these vatos here in Guanatos know what's up. It's not just a gang thing, here you can see all that is the Chicano culture (Homie 11, Personal interview, November 12, 2021).

Hand in hand with the development and legitimization of these Chicano cultural representations in Guadalajara, and with the homies settlement in the area, alliances have been formed with other organizations and institutions linked to this migration phenomenon. The relationship between car clubs and call centers is a dialogue between social organizations, not between individuals and a social organization. In Guadalajara, an association of low low clubs is managed by the leaders of each club. As of 2022, ten clubs were part of this association. One of the activities discussed collectively is each club's anniversary celebration. It is an event where other club members attend to exhibit their vehicles, their bicycles, their attire, listen to hip-hop music, and participate in freestyle on the musical stages set up.

Some call center managers view these celebrations as opportunities to recruit attendees as *new talents* for their telephone campaigns. Additionally, various municipalities have shown increasing interest in offering their drug care and rehabilitation services at these events, as drug-related issues are a leading cause of employee turnover.

## Discussion

Drawing on Schuster and Majidi's (2013) concept of post-deportation, the accounts of our research participants echo the contention that deportation is not merely a geographical displacement, but a process that fundamentally reshapes social, economic, and psychological realities. For instance, Homie 8's recount of the post-deportation experience, echoes the collective struggle of coming to terms with a new societal context that often bears little resemblance to their previous life in the U.S.

The psychosocial challenges highlighted in our data -family separation, stigma, and rejection- mirror Schuster and Majidi's (2015; 2018) findings on the social repercussions of deportation. As Homie 9 (2021) reflected on his 15 years in Mexico after deportation, the sense of alienation and broken familial ties were palpable. This stigmatization extends into their attempts to reintegrate into their home societies, often exacerbating the difficulties of finding stable employment and educational opportunities.

Community centers like GDL-SUR are instrumental in aiding the social reintegration of these individuals. As our participant Homie 3 (2021) shared, the club represents a critical locus of social support and cultural preservation, emphasizing the importance of shared cultural practices in facilitating integration. This highlights the crucial role of social capital in the post-deportation context (Bourdieu, 2018). These cultural frameworks become therapeutic tools during detoxification and addiction recovery phases. Following Majidi (2018), the intentional establishment of such spaces constitutes both social infrastructure and psychological intervention, simultaneously rebuilding community ties and individual wellbeing.

From the migration studies perspective, Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) notion of 'transnational social fields' provides a lens to understand how our participants navigate their post-deportation lives. These individuals, like the members of Firmeza Car Club, embody a transnational existence, maintaining affiliations with the U.S. while adapting to life in Mexico. Their story of fostering connections through the shared love of Chicano car culture captures the formation of a transnational social field that transcends the physical borders of nations (Drotbohm, 2011; Golash-Boza, 2013).

Segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou, 1993) offers another dimension to our understanding of these post-deportation experiences. Our participants, despite their shared history as deported ex-gang members, may encounter varied trajectories of integration. The narrative of Homie 11 (2021), who identifies himself as an *heir of the Mexicas*, is an example of an identity reconstruction pathway, reflecting a strategic adaptation to a segmented society in Mexico. Moreover, the concept of 'prisonization' (Clemmer, 1940) resonates with our participants' experiences, as they often continue to grapple with behavioral patterns learned in U.S. prisons and streets. For instance, Homie 8's account of his early experiences in the low rider culture elucidates the pervasiveness of these learned behaviors.

As the interviewees themselves note, contrasting with patterns observed by other researchers, in Guadalajara their post-deportation experience doesn't become fixed to stigma in the same way as in other parts of the country. For them, segregation is less pronounced, but most significantly, their identity doesn't hinge on being labeled – or self-labeling – as deportees. Rather, they identify as homies or cholos, whose sociocultural frameworks are deeply intertwined with the nature of subaltern Mexico.



Our research findings underscore the importance of understanding the post-deportation experience as an intricate interplay between individual narratives and broader sociological and migration frameworks. This perspective illuminates the structural conditions that shape these experiences, while simultaneously highlighting the resilience, agency, and adaptive strategies of our participants in navigating their post-deportation realities.

## Conclusions

In this study, we endeavored to furnish a comprehensive perspective on the post-deportation process experienced by migrants deported from the United States to Mexico. We specifically examined the experiences of Chicano ex-gang members or *homies*, who faced American judicial systems for their crimes, were found guilty, and whose sentences encapsulated deportation. The homies who consented to participate in our interviews currently inhabit Guadalajara and were located through GDL-SUR, an innovative social integration center that provides support for addiction issues to deported homies. This center finds its home in the eastern part of Guadalajara.

While the literature on post-deportation is relatively sparse, Schuster and Majidi's seminal work (2013) has enabled a deeper understanding of the multifaceted issues embedded in the deportation process. The narratives from our interviewees strongly echoed Schuster and Majidi's findings, demonstrating that family, employment, and societal stigma are critical factors complicating their reintegration into their home country. This often serves as an additional incentive for considering re-migration. In an expansion of their study, we identified extra factors such as addiction and the cycle of violence exacerbated by organized crime, both of which pose significant barriers to societal integration for the homies.

Numerous homies have navigated their adaptation process in isolation, underscoring that civil society and family are distinct entities that often do not intersect within the deportee's integration process (Khosravi, 2018; Peutz, 2006). Regrettably, Public institutions, along with governmental bodies, have frequently overlooked the needs of the deportees and disregarded their own responsibilities. This disregard primarily results in delays in their journey towards citizenship and a dearth of employment opportunities dependent on them having their legal documentation in order.

In regards to familial issues, a myriad of problems has emerged surrounding the transformation of their family structure. Many interviewees are facing a heartbreaking process of separation from their children, spouses, parents, and siblings. Having spent their formative years in the United States, upon their return, they often find their family in Mexico as alien to them as they are to their relatives. Relationships have been fractured on both sides, intensifying the feelings of disconnection (Khosravi, 2018; Majidi, 2018). However, there were also instances where families served as the primary social institution bolstering their adaptation. Furthermore, the establishment of new familial relationships through marriage and parenthood in Mexico has also facilitated the homies' integration into their novel reality.

The stigmatization is largely tied to the Mexican cultural representation of the 'cholo' and their association with fringe gangs. Their Spanish, often flawed grammatically, invites further discrimination and stigma, marking them with the derogatory label of *pocho*. The conspicuous elements of their past lives, like tattoos, shaven heads, and a criminal record, paradoxically engender trust among organized crime gangs for recruitment. Collectively, these factors

exacerbate their struggles in securing formal employment and the social assistance and security they desperately need.

Most of our interviewees have benefited from GDL-SUR programs, which has allowed them to undergo a process of social integration and rehabilitation concerning their substance use. However, their post-deportation journey is marked by a period when substance use escalated for some, whereas for others, the trials associated with their deportation led to a descent into alcohol and drug abuse.

Reflecting on the Ulysses syndrome (Achotegui, 2008), the narratives shared by the homies facilitated a poignant illumination of the consequences stemming from stressors tied to migration. Their stories were imbued with feelings of sadness, bouts of crying, and guilt to the point of feeling completely socially ostracized. Some also identified instances of irritability, nervousness, or somatic symptoms, adding to the complexity of their post-deportation experience. These findings underline the urgent need for tailored support and interventions to address the unique challenges faced by this population.

The conclusions reached within the scope of this study present a compelling indication that a substantial amount of work remains to be accomplished. One of the most crucial areas of focus should be the mental health of deportees, which has long been marginalized and treated as a series of isolated incidents rather than a critical public health concern. In light of our findings, it is clear that there is a pressing need for this perspective to be revised, and for the mental health implications of deportation to be recognized for their true impact on public health.

The narratives shared by the homies illuminate a pervasive sense of isolation, desolation, and societal exclusion that has profound implications for their psychological well-being. Symptoms indicative of the Ulysses syndrome, such as bouts of sadness, crying, guilt, irritability, nervousness, and somatic manifestations, were prevalent in their accounts. These are clear signals of the significant stressors and trauma associated with migration and deportation. Treating these distressing experiences as isolated phenomena is not only a failure to acknowledge the depth and breadth of the issue but also a gross oversimplification of a complex, systemic problem that demands a comprehensive response.

The need to address the mental health of deportees as a public health issue is an imperative that can no longer be deferred. Just as Schuster and Majidi (2013) underscored the importance of family, employment, and stigma in the post-deportation process, this study augments their argument by shedding light on additional factors like addiction and violence that obstruct societal integration. These factors, entwined with the stigma associated with being a deportee and a former gang member, form a complex web of challenges that contribute to deteriorating mental health (Majidi, 2018).

Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Mexican government, as well as international entities and NGOs involved in migrant rights and welfare, to integrate these findings into the design and implementation of their policies. Public policies should aim to provide holistic support that encompasses not only practical issues like documentation and employment but also mental health care and psychosocial support. A paradigm shift is required: from viewing deportees as individuals who need to 'adapt' or 'integrate' to the societal norm, to recognizing them as a population affected by systemic issues that warrant a comprehensive, empathetic, and solution-oriented approach.

Additionally, integration centers like GDL-SUR can play a vital role in this endeavor by tailoring their programs to better address the mental health needs of deportees. They can serve as valuable intermediaries between the deportees and the governmental and non-governmental bodies, advocating for their rights and facilitating their access to much-needed services.

Finally, the mental health implications of deportation are a matter of public health that urgently require concerted action, adequate resources, and sustained commitment. The individual narratives shared in this study are representative of a broader pattern that affects an entire community of deportees. They underscore the complexity of the deportation experience and its reverberating impact on individual and community health. Recognizing this, it is imperative for researchers, policymakers, and service providers to take up the mantle and work collaboratively towards policies and interventions that truly address the needs of deportees, in order to foster a healthier, more inclusive society.

### Declaration of Conflicts of Interest

They do not declare conflicts of interest.

### Authors contribution

Author	Concept	Curation	Analysis/ Software	Research/ Methodology	Resources	Supervision/ validation	Initial writing	Final Writing
1	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
2	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

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