

**(Re)constructing the Sense of Belonging: Deported Mexican Migrants  
on the United States-Mexico' Border****(Re)construyendo el sentido de pertenencia: personas mexicanas  
deportadas en la frontera con Estados Unidos**Israel Ibarra-González<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The study investigates how Mexican adults deported from the United States (re)construct their sense of belonging in their country of birth, through a qualitative analysis based on semi-structured interviews in the metropolitan areas of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. The findings were systematized into three categories: 1) forced-resigned, 2) forced-non-resigned, and 3) forced-accepted. It was revealed that having viable future expectations and opportunities for social mobility in Mexico's northern border region fosters a desire to belong, that participation linked to social capital and attachment to the United States contributes to a reluctance to belong, and that the threat of returning to jail if one re-enters the U.S. undocumented leads to resigned acceptance of belonging in Mexico. These findings offer a deeper understanding of the challenges and dynamics faced by deportees in reconstructing their sense of belonging in their country of origin.

*Keywords:* 1. involuntary return (expulsion), 2. cultural identity, 3. social capital, 4. social mobility, 5. border.

## RESUMEN

Se investiga cómo las personas adultas mexicanas deportadas de Estados Unidos (re)construyen su sentido de pertenencia en su país de nacimiento, mediante un análisis cualitativo basado en entrevistas semiestructuradas en el área metropolitana de Tijuana y Ciudad Juárez. Los hallazgos se sistematizaron en tres categorías: 1) forzado resignado, 2) forzado no resignado y 3) forzado aceptado. Se identificó que tener expectativas de futuro viables y oportunidades de movilidad social en la frontera norte de México fomenta el deseo de pertenecer, que la participación vinculada al capital social y el arraigo a Estados Unidos contribuyen a rechazar dicha pertenencia, y que la amenaza de regresar a la cárcel si se reingresa a EE. UU. de manera indocumentada genera una resignación a pertenecer. Estos hallazgos ofrecen una comprensión de los desafíos y dinámicas que enfrentan los deportados al reconstruir su sentido de pertenencia en su país de origen.

*Palabras clave:* 1. regreso involuntario (expulsión), 2. identidad cultural, 3. capital social, 4. movilidad social, 5. frontera.

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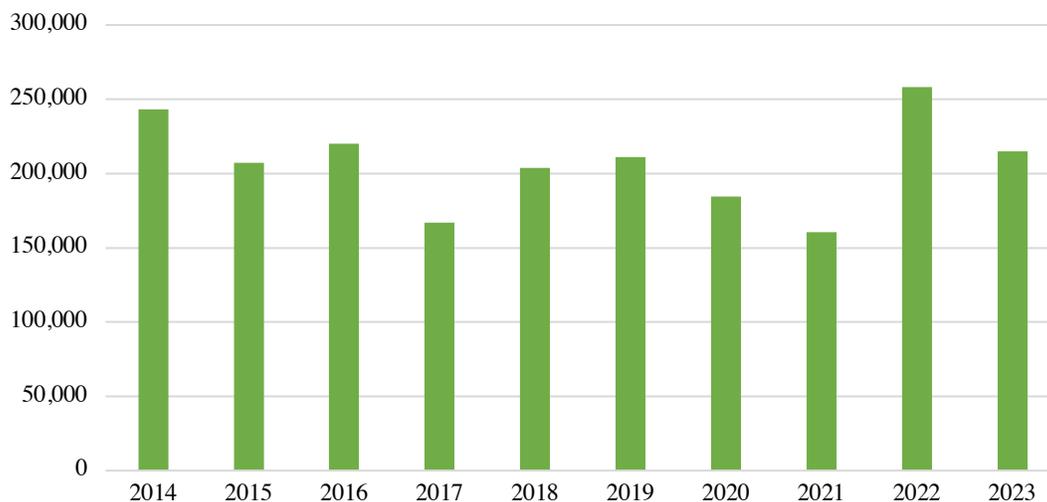
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## INTRODUCTION

This article reports the findings of a study examining how Mexican adults deported from the United States (re)construct their sense of belonging in their country of birth. This issue is particularly significant within the field of forced migration studies, given the complexity of mass deportations and their significant effects on both individuals and communities.<sup>2</sup> According to statistics from the Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de las Personas<sup>3</sup> (UPMRIP, 2024), more than 2 million Mexican individuals were returned (deported) from the United States to Mexico between 2014 and 2023 (Graph 1), with an annual average exceeding 200 000.

*Graph 1.* Instances of Mexican individuals returned from the United States to Mexico, 2014–2023



*Source:* Author’s elaboration based on UPMRIP statistics (2024).

Prior to deportation, some of these Mexican individuals had spent extended periods in the United States as immigrants, undergoing processes of adaptation and establishing roots. Between 2016 and 2021, an average of 16.3% of deported men had resided in the United States for more than five years, while 6.5% had lived there between one and five years. Among women, 7.8% had lived in the United States for over five years, and 2.1% had resided there for one to five years

<sup>2</sup> This article is derived from the author’s doctoral dissertation (Ibarra-González, 2019), supervised by Eunice D. Vargas-Valle, and was conducted within the framework of the project she led, “Reinserción e integración escolar de los niños inmigrantes recientes de EUA a México en un contexto fronterizo” (School reintegration and integration of recent immigrant children from the U.S. to Mexico in a border context) (CB2015-253859), funded by the then Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT) (National Council of Science and Technology, unofficial translation) and the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) of Mexico (Ministry of Public Education, unofficial translation). The author gratefully acknowledges the valuable comments of Rafael Alarcón Acosta and Robert McKee Irwin.

<sup>3</sup> Unit of Migration Policy, Registration, and Personal Identity (unofficial translation).

during the same period (Martínez de la Peña & Zamora Alarcón, 2023). This study focuses on a group of forcibly returned migrants in the northern border region (NBR), who had lived in the United States for an average of more than 23 years.

Upon being expelled to Mexico, these individuals once again faced processes of adaptation in their country of origin. The fieldwork was conducted in Baja California and Chihuahua, which, according to INEGI, are the states with the highest number of deported individuals residing in Mexico's northern border region (INEGI, n.d.). In both states, the study explored how Mexican individuals deported from the United States (re)construct a sense of belonging in their country of origin, though not necessarily in their place of birth.

Research on the sense of belonging among deported populations remains limited within the field of forced migration. While Hirai and Sandoval (2016) address this topic in the context of return migration, their focus on the "subjective itinerary" of young people from the so-called *1.5 generation* does not fully align with the perspective of the present study, involves legal expulsion. Following Rumbaut (Hirai & Sandoval, 2016, p. 281), their research examines dimensions such as language, the formation of relationships during childhood and adolescence, parental and youth legal status, and experiences of discrimination. Although valuable, this approach does not directly address the objective of investigating the sense of belonging in the specific context of forced deportation.

For instance, Landa Hernández (2014) examined the reintegration of young adult dreamers (ages 18–40) who returned, voluntarily or involuntarily, to Mexico after being brought to the United States as children by their families. The study explored how the question "Where are you from?" evokes tensions as these individuals navigate their identity as citizens of the United States while simultaneously attempting to reconstruct their roots in their country of birth. Similarly, Golash-Boza (2016) interviewed 30 individuals from Jamaica who had been deported from the United States despite holding permanent residency status. The study found that these individuals identified more strongly with the deporting nation than with their country of origin due to familial and community ties, concluding that their sense of belonging was largely rooted in their social relationships.

Acosta García (2019) examines the case of veterans deported from the United States to Mexico despite holding permanent residency status and having served in the U.S. armed forces. Drawing on Hall's (1992, cited in Acosta García, 2019) identity theory, the study explains how these veterans maintain self-representations as members of American society even while residing in Tijuana. Although this group constitutes the majority of participants in the present study, including other profiles broadens the scope and perspective of the findings.

Similarly, Radziwinowiczówna (2021), in a longitudinal ethnographic study of post-deportation experiences in Oaxaca, demonstrated that aspirations to re-migrate to the United States often reflect a desire to be where one's social anchors exist. In the cases examined, she found that when deported individuals are unable to migrate again, these aspirations manifest in one of two ways:

as despair and difficulties with reintegration, or as a reorientation of goals accompanied by the search for new anchors to navigate their immobility.

To contribute to the understanding of this topic, the present article hypothesizes that the sense of belonging is reconstructed in diverse ways and across multiple levels when migrants are deported to Mexico. The paper is organized as follows: first, the study is situated within the field of forced migration, and the concept of sense of belonging and its dimensions are examined; next, the methodology is presented, followed by the results and a discussion of the findings; finally, the article concludes with a summary of key insights.

### *Forced Migration and Sense of Belonging*

Several authors have classified deportation as a form of return migration (Durand, 2006; Cassarino, 2013; Escobedo Rivera, 2016; García Zamora & Gaspar Olvera, 2017). However, the present study adopts a different perspective, frames deportation as forced migration (Chernobay & Sviatoslav, 2022). In this framework, the deporting state actively removes immigrants against their will, returning them to their country of origin or birth and compelling them to reconstruct their sense of belonging.

Deportation is defined by Peutz and De Genova (2010, p. 1) as the “expulsion of foreigners from the physical, legal, and social space of the state.” Walters (2002) expands this definition to encompass a broader range of practices involving the forced or compulsory removal of individuals and groups by political authorities. The distinction lies not only in the abrupt process of leaving a state but also in the subsequent phase, during which adjustment processes can become increasingly complex. It is in this phase that the sense of belonging assumes a critical role, serving as the first psychosocial process a migrant navigates when transforming their rootedness into detachment in order to integrate into a new environment (García Lirios et al., 2014).

From a sociological perspective, the sense of belonging refers to “people’s linkage and identification with society at large [...] and the institutions and groups that form it, at the macro, meso, and micro levels” (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2007, p. 75). It is crucial for individuals’ well-being, social integration, and for resisting social fragmentation while fostering cohesion. This study examines how deported individuals (re)construct their sense of belonging in Mexico’s northern border region, considering the following dimensions: *a*) experiences of tolerance and non-discrimination; *b*) social capital and participation; *c*) future expectations and social mobility (ECLAC, 2007); and *d*) spaces of belonging (Fernández Kelly, 1995).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1995, p. 2), tolerance is defined as “respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of our world’s cultures.” Non-discrimination, in turn, is understood as “the key to equitable access for all individuals to all rights,” representing a form of the “right to have rights” (Rodríguez Zepeda, 2005, p. 27). Social capital is defined as “the sum of actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual

recognition” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 2). This encompasses the structuring of socialization processes and support mechanisms based on family, kinship, and friendships (ECLAC, 2007), as well as community relationships that foster an ethic of mutual assistance (Martine et al., 2000).

Participation refers to forms of belonging from a political perspective, encompassing group associations, adherence to values that motivate collective action, and other ways of linking the individual to the collective as strategies for visibility. It reflects a local-global rather than a local-national logic, “given the transnational yet territorially grounded nature of the values for which one is willing to mobilize” (Hopenhayn, 2011, p. 302). This perspective allows for interpreting the participation and practices of deported individuals aimed at maintaining visibility in U.S. territory from Mexico.

On the other hand, future expectations serve as “anchors for social existence” (Araujo, 2018, pp. 341–342), shaping individual lives while being collectively shared within society. They can be understood as responses to the demands imposed by the environment in a specific historical moment, which vary across communities. Social mobility, in turn, is associated with the belief that the social structure is open and egalitarian, thereby enabling “upward intergenerational mobility” (Baquero Beltrán & Martínez Taráche, 2012, p. 55). However, “expectations of social mobility may also create conflicts that are contrary to social cohesion in the situations of widespread optimism that raise expectations that are higher than the systemic capacities to meet them” (ECLAC, 2007, p. 92).

The most adverse extreme of social mobility is what Del Monte Madrigal (2021) terms the “vortex of precarization,” a model used to analyze the trajectories of deported individuals who ultimately became homeless in Tijuana. It is important to note that, in the present study, participants reached only the periphery or edge of this vortex in the period following their expulsion but succeeded in rebuilding their trajectories and, in some cases, returning to the United States. Consequently, the sample does not include individuals currently experiencing homelessness.

Regarding the spatial dimension, Fernández Kelly (1995, p. 217) observes that “social capital increases and decreases in relation to social and physical locations, which include: *a*) the shifting center that defines group membership; *b*) the effect of social distance; and *c*) the tangible space in which networks carry out their exchanges.” Similarly, Bruhn and Gonzales (2023) discuss spaces of belonging at the national, community, and relational levels, conceptualizing belonging as the phenomenological experience of feeling recognized, valued, and cared for—a notion that encompasses both freedom and security, individual agency, and meaningful relationships with others. In this sense, space functions as a site imbued with meanings shared among different social groups, from which identity-related aspects emerge that connect to permanence, security, and satisfaction—elements rooted in the human need to remain close to, or within, that place (Reyes-Guarnizo, 2014).

The context of this study is Mexico’s northern border, defined by Albicker and Velasco (2016) as a liminal territory, a contested space between Mexican and U.S. cultures, where deported individuals do not fully belong, just as they did not entirely belong to the place from which they

were expelled. According to these authors, media narratives often construct a discourse that “heroicizes” deported individuals, portraying them as capable of enduring any hardship as long as they “do not remain in Tijuana, because their life is elsewhere,” whether in the United States or in their places of birth (p. 114). This perspective reinforces the idea that, from the standpoint of the receiving society, deported individuals are not perceived as belonging to the liminal territory where they now reside. In contrast, the present study seeks to understand how these individuals construct their spatial sense of belonging from their own subjectivity.

Based on these dimensions, the concept of sense of belonging was operationalized (Table 1) to examine how deported individuals interpret their lived experiences across the various stages of the deportation and post-deportation process. This analysis enabled the identification of three distinct forms of constructing a sense of belonging, each exhibiting different levels of intensity and stability, as presented in the results.

*Table 1. Operationalization of the Dimensions of Sense of Belonging*

Concept	Dimensions	Categories	Indicators	
Sense of belonging of deported Mexican individuals in the northern border of Mexico	Experiences of tolerance and non-discrimination		- Spanish proficiency - English proficiency - Knowledge of borderland culture	
		Family network	- Transborder - Mexican	
	Social capital and participation	Friendship network	- Transborder - Mexican	
		Institutional network	- Transborder civil association - Mexican civil association - Transborder religious association - Mexican religious association	
			Stability in Mexico	- Resignation - Acceptance
			Return to the United States	- Non-acceptance
Future expectations and social mobility	Northern border of Mexico	- Originally from Baja California - Originally from Chihuahua		
Space of belonging				

*Source:* Author’s elaboration based on ECLAC (2007) and Fernández Kelly (1995).

## METHODOLOGY

The methodological design of this study was qualitative. Semi-structured interviews (Fylan, 2005) were used to explore the life trajectories of 31 deported Mexican individuals who had lived for at least one year in the metropolitan areas of Tijuana, Baja California, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. According to the 2014 National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (Encuesta Nacional de la

Dinámica Demográfica, ENADID), both states had the highest numbers of deported Mexican individuals in the northern border region, with 13,522 in Tijuana and 8,673 in Ciudad Juárez (INEGI, n.d.).

Another criterion for selecting these locations is that deported individuals' decisions to settle in Mexico's northern border region are influenced by several factors, notably the opportunity to remain closer to family networks in the United States, although such networks may not remain active over time (Ibarra-González & Vargas-Valle, 2021; Santiago Vargas et al., 2021). Overall, the sample comprises nine individuals who were reunified post-deportation, three with a new American partner in Mexico, three with a new Mexican partner, seven living alone, three maintaining a transnational life with family visiting from the United States, and six living with family or alone while having relatives in the city (Ibarra-González & Vargas-Valle, 2021).

In Tijuana, 18 deported individuals were interviewed (15 men and 3 women), while in Ciudad Juárez, 13 participants were interviewed (11 men and 2 women).<sup>4</sup> None of the participants in Tijuana were born in Baja California, and in Ciudad Juárez, only two were not native to Chihuahua. Fieldwork was conducted between late 2017 and early 2018. Participants in the Tijuana metropolitan area were recruited through journalists, shelter administrators, activists, and other local contacts, as well as via the Humanizando la Deportación project database (n.d.) and visits to spaces commonly frequented by deported individuals, including call centers, the historic center, and local markets. In Ciudad Juárez, recruitment was facilitated by a colleague from the Universidad Autónoma de Chihuahua and supported by institutional networks from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, shelter administrators, pro-migrant associations, a lawyer, and visits to bars, restaurants, and tattoo studios in the city center. Interviews in both cities lasted between 45 minutes and two hours.

Migrants experiencing homelessness and minors were not interviewed, nor were individuals who had not yet overcome the "American hangover",<sup>5</sup> a period of approximately one year characterized by difficulty adjusting to their new reality, which can eventually lead to living on the streets. This sampling criterion was intentional to ensure participant stability and to treat the lack of a home as an indicator of sense of belonging. The study also faced time and resource constraints. Minors were excluded due to methodological and ethical complexities, and the research was deliberately limited to a specific context, the northern border of Mexico, focusing on comparable characteristics in both Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez.

A heteronormative bias was also observed, as none of the migrants reported belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community. Despite efforts to maintain case heterogeneity, there was an overrepresentation of former convicts and permanent residents, likely resulting from the snowball sampling technique, which relied on contacts among deported U.S. military veterans. Of the 31

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<sup>4</sup> In Ciudad Juárez, a married couple who had both been deported was interviewed. Although their narratives overlap and could be analysed as a single case, the woman's perspective provides a distinct analytic angle.

<sup>5</sup> Term used by interviewed deportees to describe the process of post-deportation mourning ('duelo').

deported individuals interviewed in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, 17 had been imprisoned for non-migration-related offenses, six for migration-related offenses, six were deported without serving time in prison, and two were penalized for attempting to apply for permanent residency at the U.S. Consulate in Ciudad Juárez (Ibarra-González & Vargas-Valle, 2021). Among them, 12 had held permanent residency in the United States, one had parole (humanitarian permission), and 18 had always been undocumented, while six were former U.S. military veterans who served between three and seven years in Vietnam, South Korea, and Jordan. All interviewee names were changed to ensure anonymity.

## RESULTS

Based on the systematization of the collected narratives and the analysis of the dimensions, the findings were classified into three categories describing the construction of a sense of belonging: 1) forced-resigned, 2) forced-non-resigned, and 3) forced-accepted. To understand the rationale behind these labels, it is important to note that this reconfiguration of the sense of belonging arises from deportation and, therefore, from forced migration (Chernobay & Sviatoslav, 2022). This characteristic is reflected in the first part of the typology, indicated by the adjective “forced.”

Regarding the second part of the designation, it is important to clarify categories 1 and 3. According to the Royal Spanish Academy (2024, n.p.), resignation is a “voluntary surrender in which someone places themselves in the hands and will of another person.” Maero (2015) suggests that resignation may appear similar to acceptance; however, the two are distinct processes. Acceptance involves a transformation in how an internal experience operates, whereas in resignation, the functions remain unchanged. Acceptance, in contrast, “is not passive tolerance or resignation but an intentional behavior that alters the function of internal experiences, turning events from objects to be avoided into points of interest, curiosity, and observation as part of living a meaningful life” (Hayes et al., 2013, cited in Maero, 2015, p. 13).

In category 2, Galimberti’s Dictionary of Psychology (2002, p. 1085) defines non-resignation as part of the concept of utopia: “From an existential perspective, when utopia does not decline to the level of a dream or fantasy, it carries the positive value of non-resignation insofar as it embraces the hope, never diminished, of an extreme possibility.” Accordingly, the first and third categories reflect a definitive sense of belonging that varies according to the individual’s internal world, whereas in the second category there is no voluntary attachment to the place, even though hopes of returning to the United States remain largely utopian.

To support this framework for understanding the construction of sense of belonging, a micro-to-macro approach is adopted, examining how individuals experience the conditions that led to their new reality and how, through their agency, they confront these circumstances. The following sections present each category along with the dimensions that exert the greatest influence.

## 1. Forced-Resigned Sense of Belonging

In this category, individuals share experiences of having served time in prison in the United States for various offenses. The threat of returning to prison for illegal reentry compels them to adjust their life expectations, and, in resignation, they choose to remain in Mexico's northern border region. Although they leave family networks in the United States, these connections often diminish or disappear over time and with distance.

*"I'm Not Going to Go Back to the U.S."*

Gonzalo served time in the United States and was deported for illegal reentry. He experienced discrimination due to his accent and limited Spanish; however, his American cultural background facilitated his adaptation to Playas de Rosarito, a tourist municipality adjacent to southern Tijuana. He reflected, "They gave me five years, and I'm not going to enter [the United States] [...] In Mexico, it's freer, calmer, more relaxed [...] There, everything is by the hour, everything by time" (Gonzalo, personal communication, February 9, 2018). Despite losing connections with his family network in the United States, he established stability with his new wife and stepchildren. At the time of the interview, he enjoyed family outings and playing on community sports courts, and he aspired to own his own home.

### *Deported 12 Times*

Benjamín, a former convict for organized crime in the United States, was determined not to return to that country or to prison for *illegal reentry*. Following his latest release through Tijuana, after 12 previous deportations, he faced rejection from the local police but succeeded in establishing employment, partially reunifying his family, and planning to rebuild his life in a middle-to-upper-class neighborhood.

With everything I went through, honestly, I'd rather be in my own country; everything I did over there, screw it! Good, bad, whatever it was, it happened there. Here, as I tell you, I carry Mexico in me, in my blood. (Benjamín, personal communication, October 22, 2017)

He viewed Tijuana as offering better economic opportunities, as well as social and cultural capital. At the time of the interview, he was living with an American partner whose four children he had helped raise before his deportation. She chose to join him in Mexico, and together they planned to purchase a home.

*"I Owe Nothing to Mexico"*

Evaristo, who was raised in El Paso, Texas, from the age of seven, was involved in drug trafficking in the United States and was deported with a lifetime ban on return. He maintained some family and friendship networks in Ciudad Juárez, and contacts through his mother helped him rent a "humble" house, although he questioned the lack of institutional support. Despite attempts to reunite his family, he remained alone. He hoped to purchase a home and was resigned to settling in Ciudad Juárez, even though he disliked the city's macho culture.

I owe nothing to Mexico [...] it hasn't given me anything [...] the support they provide over there [U.S.] is very different [...] even for school, they helped me as much as they could. (Evaristo, personal communication, January 22, 2018)

His future expectation centered on “getting an Infonavit house, finishing paying it off, that would be my plan” (Evaristo, personal communication, January 22, 2018).

## 2. Forced-Non-Resigned Sense of Belonging

In this category, individuals express a desire to return to the United States. They assert that they have not committed serious offenses in that country or that they served in the armed forces, and therefore maintain hope of obtaining a pardon and returning. They preserve family networks in U.S. territory and actively engage in transborder activism.

### *“Not in Tijuana”*

Patricia, deported from the United States one year before the interview in Tijuana, hoped to return. She had fought for nine years to remain in the U.S. but ultimately lost her case. She reported experiencing rejection directed at both herself and her youngest daughter, the only child residing in Mexico. Although she had a family network, support was limited, as her husband and siblings had also been deported. She considered pursuing new opportunities after her daughter's school year ended, but she did not feel integrated in Tijuana.

The union I belonged to pooled money to reopen my case [in the U.S.] [...] the paperwork was submitted last month, in February, but the lawyer said they would respond in six months [...] When I apply [for a job], I don't say I'm deported; like at school, I say 'I'm from Guerrero,' and I never mention that my daughter is from San Diego, never, nothing. (Patricia, personal communication, March 27, 2018)

She lived with her husband but did not consider him her partner. Both had raised their children together, but when he was deported, she remained alone in the United States and no longer wanted spousal obligations. She participated in activities organized by a deported families' association and attended a Christian church that assisted in enrolling her daughter in school. She expressed dissatisfaction with her situation at home and in the city, which she considered chaotic, and hoped to move to Canada or another part of Mexico. “I'm really angry about everything” (Patricia, personal communication, March 27, 2018).

### *The United States Is His Country*

Konan, a U.S. war veteran and former permanent resident, was deported to Mexico after committing an offense. Although he experienced discrimination due to limited Spanish proficiency, he established stability in Tijuana through a new family network and a civil organization of fellow

former U.S. soldiers. He consistently maintained hope of returning to what he considered his true country:<sup>6</sup>

I spoke [Spanish] since I left for there, because my mom and dad spoke it [...] The problem is translating:

—Drop me there in front of the light.

—Which light? There are thousands of lights.

—The traffic lights. (Konan, personal communication, February 17, 2018)

During the conversation, he noted that he spoke English most of the time, both in his relationship and within the deported veterans' association. He felt discriminated against for being "pocho" (derogatory term for Mexican-Americans perceived as Americanized): "The reverse racism we all receive from our own people is what weighs on us the most" (Konan, personal communication, February 17, 2018). What he did appreciate about Mexico was the "flexibility" of the authorities:

Over there, if they catch you drunk, you go to jail, they take your car for 30 days, you have to pay impound fees, fines, classes, and everything, and by the time you settle, it's 10 000 to 15 000 dollars. Here, we left a club, went dancing, and yes, we were a little tipsy [...] and they stopped us: "You're very drunk," and I said, "So how do we handle this?" "Give me 20 [dollars] and 20 to my partner." (Konan, personal communication, February 17, 2018)

This deportee's life began to improve when his current partner, Karla, decided to move from the United States to Mexico to live with him. Since his separation from his ex-wife, he had struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder and experienced anxiety attacks: "Psychologically, it helped me a lot, because when my [previous] family came and left, they would just leave, and the depression would start" (Konan, personal communication, February 17, 2018).

This interviewee became an activist for deported war veterans and, at the time, served as co-director of an organization advocating for their rights, including the right to return to the United States and access to pensions and medical services in Tijuana. During the interview, neither he nor his partner had stable employment, and they lived in the house left to them by her father in Tijuana. Konan experienced a liminal state, feeling that he belonged neither to Mexico nor to the United States.

### *Conflicted Feelings*

Juliana experienced conflicted emotions: she was raising two children from her first marriage alongside her current husband in Ciudad Juárez, yet her younger children faced rejection at school. She held a temporary job and was financially dependent on her spouse. Despite appreciating her family network in her hometown, she wished to return legally to the United States.

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<sup>6</sup> He ultimately managed to return to the United States in December 2023, after 17 years in Mexico following his deportation (EFE, 2023).

I miss the lifestyle in the United States [...] over there, you don't struggle to get a car [...] to get a cell phone, but you struggle to connect with someone; everyone works, your neighbors don't talk to you [...] In Mexico, when you're with your family, with your own people, you'll never lack things to do; what you might lack is time, but not things to do". (Juliana, personal communication, January 27, 2018)

### *So Close and Yet So Far*

Mariano's fluency in English was a significant advantage, enabling him to secure employment after his deportation to Tijuana. However, he experienced loneliness and depression following his expulsion. His contact with family in San Diego continued by phone, but it was insufficient to alleviate his distress. His religious affiliation helped him cope with part of the depression, allowing him to maintain a connection to the environment in which he had been raised in the United States. Mariano did not seek professional psychological support; he only confided in a friend at the Christian church where he volunteered, with whom he "opened up once or twice" (Mariano, personal communication, February 22, 2018). At the time of the interview, he had achieved economic stability but continued to aspire to return to San Diego.

One factor in deciding to stay in Tijuana was that there was still a connection with my ex, to see if we could get back together (which didn't happen); the second factor is that, even though I'm not in San Diego, I feel at home [...] from here I can see [...] I miss that, even though I didn't have documents, there were always opportunities to earn income [...] (In Tijuana) I am one of the pastor's leaders; the pastor has 12 leaders, and I am one of them, and right now I am in charge of everything multimedia, sound, and all of that. (Mariano, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

Mariano stated that if he had the opportunity to return legally, he would not hesitate. This situation reflects a lack of sense of belonging, as, despite working as a coach and partner in a binational business, he did not wish to remain in the city. As in his case, post-deportation depression is common among deportees in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, although some cope better than others with the "American hangover" described earlier.

### *Reaching Hope*

Odalia stated, "The first eight years I didn't go out [...] I'll tell you, I didn't even want to go to the Oxxo [convenience store], I was scared, and then there was a period when Tijuana was very violent" (Odalia, personal communication, March 4, 2018). She was referring to conflicts between drug trafficking groups that occurred between 2009 and 2010, particularly in the East Zone where she lived, an area frequently affected by shootings (Garduño, 2009). Although she resided in Tijuana, she never considered it her home, and her support network in Mexico remained limited, confined to an "involuntary" transnational family structure that sustained her (Cardoso et al., 2016, p. 217). She waited more than 12 years for a pardon, which would allow her to reunite with her American husband and children.

“Oh God! I was terrified. Once here at my house, I’m not lying, a police officer started shooting, I ran to the farthest room, threw myself on the floor, absolutely terrified, ‘Two guys have broken into my house!’” (Odalía, personal communication, March 4, 2018)

Violence is another factor that can heighten reluctance to develop a sense of belonging, even when housing and financial resources are available. Odalía explained that her connection to the Christian church allowed her to express her emotions and maintain contact with her mother through the wall, despite being Catholic while her husband is Lutheran: “I couldn’t talk about my situation without crying [...] it was crying, crying, crying; I still cry sometimes, because it’s a wound that doesn’t heal, scars that will remain forever” (Odalía, personal communication, March 4, 2018). She also attended meetings of a deported mothers’ organization, though only occasionally, as she lived far from the session locations.

At the time of the interview, her husband and children visited her every 8 to 15 days in Tijuana, maintaining a transnational relationship between Vista, California, and the Mexican border. “I try to give them the best advice I can, the best quality time possible” (Odalía, personal communication, March 4, 2018). She noted that sharing her story had been helpful, as she was no longer asked to have documents apostilled to enroll her American-citizen children in school (Odalía, personal communication, March 4, 2018). Nevertheless, she expressed that she did not feel part of Tijuana, despite having lived on the border for 12 years:<sup>7</sup>

Tijuana seems like a really great city to me [...] it gives me the opportunity [...] to be with them; I mean, in my mind and in my heart, my idea is to return to them—I feel tied to them, in that country. (Odalía, personal communication, March 4, 2018)

### *Frustrated with Mexicans*

Anastacio was living alone in Ciudad Juárez at the time of the interview. He had overcome alcoholism following his deportation and was performing household tasks previously managed by his ex-wife. He expressed frustration with the lack of solidarity among people in Ciudad Juárez and dissatisfaction with the attitude of Mexicans. He maintained support through a transnational family network and hoped to return to the United States.

The Mexican wants to see another Mexican fall [...] in the United States there is racism [...] and there is also racism in Mexico against those coming from there [...] deportees, they don’t try to help them [...] Making my way here [...] I really like commerce, and I’ve thought about buying my own car for Uber or opening a restaurant here in Ciudad Juárez, and later trying to return to the United States. (Anastacio, personal communication, January 18, 2018)

Anastacio envisioned his life in Mexico, but like other deported Mexicans, his ultimate goal was to return to the United States, where he had left his family.

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<sup>7</sup> Six months after the interview, Odalía won her legal case to return to the United States with her family, where she currently resides, similar restitutions have occurred for other civilians in recent years (Salomón et al., 2022).

### 3. Forced-Accepted Sense of Belonging

In these cases, living with family or having a family network in Mexico clearly plays a central role. It is noteworthy that most of these situations occur in Ciudad Juárez, as the study participants were born in this city or elsewhere in the state of Chihuahua.

#### *Better than in the USA*

Federico did not wish to return to the United States, even though he thought his deportation might eventually be pardoned. He considered himself better off in Ciudad Juárez with his wife, Gala, who joined him after his expulsion. She had completed a university degree and, through her employment, provided medical coverage for both of them and their children. At the time of the interview, they enjoyed a strong family network and economic stability. “We have come to live better” (Federico, personal communication, January 24, 2018).

Gala’s testimony is particularly important within their family context. She did not remain in the United States when her husband was deported, and although she did not identify as a deported Mexican, her experience provides a useful comparison with cases in which wives and children remained in U.S. territory. The first years were challenging, as the house they were given was neglected, lacked heating in a region with extreme weather, and they lacked the financial resources to install it.

I didn’t want to stay there with the children by myself; I was already exhausted, like you feel you have nothing secure [...] the truth is, we were both fed up with it [...] as they say, at any moment he could be detained. (Gala, personal communication, January 27, 2018)

Both attempted to obtain a U.S. visa but were denied. Gala felt disadvantaged by her inability to cross the border to purchase goods like other residents of Ciudad Juárez, although her family occasionally brought items for her.

#### *A Veteran Who Does Not Want to Return to the United States*

Marcos, a veteran deported in 2009, did not wish to return to the United States, unlike most former U.S. military personnel who had served as permanent residents. He was born in Casas Grandes, Chihuahua, and as a child was taken to El Paso, Texas, by his mother, who worked as a domestic employee for a professor. When the professor moved to South Carolina, they accompanied her. Marcos continued his schooling there, but his mother struggled to adapt and returned to El Paso, leaving him with the professor. She later had more children, legally adopted him, and he took the surname of his adoptive mother. Despite being white, he experienced racial discrimination at school, being identified as Latino, which made him long to return to El Paso. In Mexico, he reported not encountering such rejection, even though his Spanish was limited.

After being deported via Piedras Negras, his girlfriend and sister helped him take a bus to Ciudad Juárez, close to his biological family. Upon arrival, he spoke little Spanish, had minimal funds, and no place to live. It was 2009, a period marked by significant violence and a heavy

military presence in the streets (Cano, 2009). His veteran's pension of 500 dollars had been reduced to 100 while he was in prison, but with that he rented an empty room and survived with only two boxes serving as furniture. Nearly 18 months later, his full pension was reinstated. He worked in several jobs, became a disc jockey (DJ) at a restaurant-bar, and earned substantial tips as a fitness instructor.

In the meantime, his mother connected him with his father's former family, his third family, alongside his biological and adoptive families, all of whom provided financial and emotional support: "It's the family I always wanted, since the other two were more individualistic: it was always 'good luck!'" (Marcos, personal communication, January 29, 2018). He also belongs to an organization of deported veterans that has assisted him in reclaiming his benefits, and he seeks to help other former U.S. military members. Marcos stated that he is happy in Ciudad Juárez and does not wish to return to the United States.

This case indicates that family and friendship networks, together with economic stability, can enable a deported migrant to shift from the "forced-non-resigned" form of belonging to the "forced-accepted" type. This pattern holds even for war veterans, who may publicly express a desire to return to the United States but reveal different expectations regarding life and social mobility in individual interviews.

## DISCUSSION

From the analysis of the 31 interviews and the resulting categorization, the following distribution emerged: within the "forced-resigned" sense of belonging, three cases were identified in Ciudad Juárez and eight in Tijuana; for the "forced-non-resigned" category, there were three cases in Ciudad Juárez and nine in Tijuana; and regarding the "forced-accept" sense of belonging, seven cases were in Ciudad Juárez and one in Tijuana (Table 2).

*Table 2.* Categorization of the Sense of Belonging among Deported Mexican Individuals in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez

	Forced-resigned	Forced-non-resigned	Forced-accepted
Deported individuals	11	12	8
Men	11	9	6
Women	0	3	2
Tijuana and Playas de Rosarito	8	9	1
Men	8	6	1
Women	0	3	0
Ciudad Juárez	3	3	7
Men	3	3	5
Women	0	0	2

*(continues)*

	Forced-resigned	Forced-non-resigned	Forced-accepted
<i>(continuation)</i>			
Resides in state of birth			
Baja California	0	0	0
Chihuahua	3	2	6
Average years in the United States	26	27	13
Undocumented	8	6	4
Permanent resident	3	6	3
<i>Parole</i>	0	0	1

*Source:* Author's elaboration based on fieldwork data.

The category with the highest number of testimonies is forced-non-resigned, with twelve cases, followed by forced-resigned with eleven, and forced-accepted with eight. Although these results are not statistically generalizable and not intended to be generalized statistically, they provide insight into a certain reluctance to feel part of border society. Across all three forms of constructing a sense of belonging, participants expressed fear of returning to the United States without documentation, yet their hopes of either returning there or settling in Mexico varied.

Committing crimes in the United States or co-building closed communities of U.S. veterans (Acosta García, 2019) are key variables for understanding the (re)construction of a sense of belonging along Mexico's northern border. In the construction of forced but resigned belonging, it is notable that most of these individuals are either alone or with new families, enabling them to appropriate the territory and perceive the border cities of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez as spaces where they can share their lives and establish family ties with non-migrants. After serving time in prison for serious offenses, the prospect of returning undocumented is extremely hazardous, risking charges of *illegal reentry*, with potential sentences of up to 20 years due to their criminal record (Immigration and Nationality Act, 1952). With little hope of returning, many deportees focus on creating or reclaiming social capital in Mexico and base their future expectations on that foundation.

In the forced but non-resigned sense of belonging, which represents the majority of cases, deported migrants often still have their family, or part of it, in the United States. They perceive the offenses that led to their deportation as minor and believe there is a possibility of returning legally, fully aware that crossing without documentation would risk committing illegal reentry, a situation most seek to avoid. An exception is Patricia, who considered crossing undocumented during the first months after her deportation, perhaps due to unfamiliarity with the law or simple hopefulness.

It is important to note that the possibility of returning to the United States fuels hope among individuals in this category. Acosta García (2019) examined the advocacy efforts of deported veterans from Tijuana aimed at achieving legal changes in the U.S. to facilitate their return. Beyond their military identity, family reunification emerged as a crucial aspect of this process. At the time

of the interviews for the present study, these veterans sustained their expectations due to a successful case in which the director of the first organization of deported ex-servicemen returned to United States territory. By December 2023, 96 deported veterans had been able to return through a U.S. government program offering pardons and humanitarian permits (EFE, 2023). Generally, individuals in this category possess incipient social capital in Mexico and strong social capital in the United States. In terms of participation, those who engage in activism from Mexico through civil and religious organizations in the U.S. demonstrate a forced but non-resigned sense of belonging and remain oriented toward returning.

In the forced-accepted sense of belonging, most testimonies involve family reunification or reconfiguration in Mexico, or the presence of a strong informal support network within Mexican territory. Residents of Ciudad Juárez stand out, as many were born there or elsewhere in the state of Chihuahua and can reactivate family and friendship ties. In contrast, those who remain in Tijuana tend to do so primarily to maintain easier access to visits from relatives in California, but they lack the informal support networks that facilitate a stronger sense of belonging.

Although they consider the possibility of legally reentering the United States, the interviewees report that conditions for well-being in Mexico are adequate and sometimes better than during their time abroad. Their future expectations and social mobility are anchored in the border region and play a decisive role; even those with longer residence histories report improvements in their situation. While family reconfiguration is not the primary factor defining this type of sense of belonging, it partially explains their social capital. Another notable factor is that they spent fewer years in the United States, an average of 13, compared to the earlier categories, which averaged 26 and 27 years.

Future expectations and social mobility are closely linked to the dimension of spaces of belonging. In Ciudad Juárez, more individuals display a forced-accepted sense of belonging, as many are originally from this municipality or state and generally maintain supportive family and friendship networks within Mexico. In contrast, in Tijuana, a greater number of cases involve individuals who do not wish to cross into the United States due to fear of punishment, while some still consider the possibility of returning as part of their future expectations. Table 3 summarizes the characteristics of the categories across these dimensions.

*Table 3. Relationship Between the Dimensions of Sense of Belonging of Deported Mexican Individuals in the Northern Border and the Proposed Category*

Dimensions	Categories		
	Forced-resigned	Forced-non-resigned	Forced-accepted
Experience of tolerance and non-discrimination	Experience high discrimination, which fosters a resigned attitude.	They face moderate to high discrimination, but the hope of returning to the U.S. alleviates this.	They experience less discrimination, greater acceptance, and cultural adaptation in the northern border.
Social capital and participation	Have limited social capital in the northern border. They are alone or with a new family in Mexico. Social participation is low.	They have transnational social capital, including family networks. They participate in support organizations in Mexico from which they influence the U.S.	They maintain strong social capital in the northern border region and have high participation in family and community activities in Mexico.
Future expectations and social mobility	Have low expectations for social mobility, resigning themselves to life in the northern border.	They maintain high expectations of returning to the U.S., and their sense of belonging is primarily there.	They hold future expectations in the northern border, with a stable vision and socio-economic improvement.
Spaces of belonging	Limited belonging to the northern border, with forced and resigned adaptation.	They show divided belonging, with high hopes of returning to U.S. soil, which affects their spatial stability.	They express strong belonging to the northern border, particularly in Ciudad Juárez, which allows for consolidated spatial stability, unlike in Tijuana.

*Source:* Author's elaboration based on testimonial analysis.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the sense of belonging was examined through the dimensions of experiences of tolerance and non-discrimination, social capital and participation, future expectations and social mobility, and spaces of belonging. The qualitative data enabled the identification of three forms of sense of belonging among deported migrants: 1) forced-resigned, 2) forced-non-resigned, and 3) forced-accepted. While these categories are mutually exclusive, they should be interpreted contextually, as individuals may transition from one to another as their circumstances and social conditions evolve.

The category of forced-resigned belonging is considered the most stable. Even when socioeconomic conditions improve or family reconfiguration becomes viable, the threat of returning to prison if one reenters the United States without documentation often makes staying in Mexico the only feasible option. In contrast, individuals in the forced-non-resigned category may

gradually transition toward the forced-accepted category as their family and well-being situation in Mexico improves, particularly when family-based transnational ties in the United States weaken. Those who maintain networks in the U.S. resist losing that sense of belonging, bolstered by successful legal return cases (EFE, 2023; Salomón et al., 2022). However, as ties to family in the U.S. diminish, individuals begin forming new social networks in Mexico, facilitating this transition. Finally, the forced-accepted category represents the most integrated form of sense of belonging, fostering resilience among deported Mexican migrants. Unlike the other forms, these individuals achieve stronger social adaptation through family support in the northern border region and socioeconomic integration, contributing to a voluntary and stable sense of belonging.

Initially, it was assumed that intolerance and discrimination would be the primary factors limiting a sense of belonging, given deported migrants' limited cultural adaptation, including low language proficiency. However, social capital and participation, along with future expectations and social mobility, emerged as more influential factors. In Ciudad Juárez, family support is particularly crucial for fostering a sense of belonging, whereas in Tijuana, belonging depends more on friendships or institutional networks, such as civil associations.

Participation is closely linked to social capital and anchoring to the United States. In some cases, individuals politically socialized in the U.S. advocate from the northern Mexican border to U.S. authorities, supported locally and visited by American citizen activists—a dynamic unlikely in other regions of Mexico. Moreover, belonging to the border space, where U.S. and Mexican cultures coexist, is significant for individuals with a Mexican-American cultural background, as it increases their willingness to live in Tijuana or Ciudad Juárez and reduces experiences of rejection compared to other parts of Mexico. Interviewees in Tijuana also noted that the area offers better economic opportunities and a greater sense of security than their places of origin.

Despite these differing contexts, Mexican deportees commonly share the experience of being expelled from the United States, an event that disrupts their future expectations and prospects for social mobility. Nevertheless, through resilience and the coping strategies developed during their migratory trajectories, many are able to reintegrate into Mexican society and reconstruct their lives.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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