

Urgent Returns: The Link Between Family and the Remigration Intentions of Deported Central Americans in an Era of Border Externalization



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Research on post-deportation experiences has shown that family separation, especially separation from children and partners, shapes deported migrants' intentions to return to the US. Yet little is known about how these intentions intersect with other aspects of the remigration experience. In this article, we examine deported Central American adults' intentions to reenter the US undetected and the transit experiences of those attempting to return while traversing Mexico. Drawing on survey data from the Encuesta Sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México (EMIF Sur), combined with ethnographic and interview data from recently deported Central Americans traveling through Mexico, we find that deported migrants who have left behind minor children in the US are more likely to intend to return to the US—particularly those who are separated from a partner or are a single parent. In turn, the eagerness and urgency to return to their families in the US shape the way deported migrants approach their journeys through Mexico. These results underscore the central role of family in shaping remigration and highlight the broader consequences of US border externalization policies operating within Mexico.

Keywords: Central America, family, deportation, remigration, border externalization

Luis, a thirty-four-year-old man from El Salvador, was transiting through Mexico in 2019, hoping to reenter the US undetected after having been deported months earlier. He explained his motivations for returning, despite the risks:

“I have three little girls and a wife waiting for me in South Carolina. I had a good life there, but I was stopped for speeding and was deported back to El Salvador. That was a year and a half ago, and since then, I have been deported

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[back to El Salvador] four times: three times from Mexico, and once while crossing the border wall in California.”

When asked if he was afraid of the heightened immigration enforcement at the US-Mexico border, Luis explained: “I am not afraid of crossing. My life is there. . . . My family is there [in the US].” Luis’s experience reflects the broader reality faced by all Central American migrants aiming to enter the US: They must evade both US and Mexican authorities. However, Luis’s case also points to the unique migratory experience of migrants who are en route to the US with a core motivation: to reunite with their families or loved ones following forcible separation through deportation.

While international migration is often viewed as movement toward new destinations, the inverse—migrants returning, voluntarily or involuntarily, to their home countries—has received comparatively less attention (Masferrer and Roberts 2012). Scholars have explored the consequences of return migration, including challenges of resettlement, cultural and economic reintegration, and family and governmental responses (Hagan et al. 2008; Medina and Menjívar 2015). Others have examined deported migrants’ efforts to return to countries from which they were removed (Roberts et al. 2017; Schuster and Majidi 2013, 2015), highlighting how, for many migrants, deportation and return intersect with family disruption, often separating loved ones across borders or prompting entire household relocations. But, beyond linking the desire to return with factors such as family separation, to our knowledge, no research has focused on how the experience of returning to the country of removal is shaped by deportation.

Deportation is the most common form of involuntary return from the US. Fueled by the increasing criminalization of unauthorized migration over the last few decades, deportations surged from less than 50,000 in 1996 to 348,000 by 2019 (Golash-Boza 2015; Weber and Massey

2023). Even in 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictive policies such as Title 42, which permitted US authorities to more easily expel migrants at the US-Mexico border, over 237,000 people were removed (DHS 2023; ICE 2020; Cerón and Kao 2025).¹ While Mexican immigrants historically made up the majority of these deportations, their numbers have declined over the years due to enforcement and demographic shifts (Flores 2020; Massey et al. 2015). This has coincided with a significant increase in the apprehension and deportation of migrants from Northern Central America (NCA), which is comprised of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (Torre Cantalapiedra 2023).² For instance, in 2014, for the first time, Border Patrol apprehended more Central Americans than Mexicans, a trend that has persisted since then (Goodman 2020; Ward and Batalova 2023). Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) data also shows a decrease in Mexican removals from 241,493 to 176,968 between 2013 and 2014, while NCA removals rose from 106,400 to 122,298 (DHS 2014).

Deported NCA migrants often return to the same or worse precarious conditions—marked by violence, inequality, and instability—that they originally left behind, and which are often rooted in the lasting impact of US-backed civil conflicts and coups in the region (Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Dingeman 2018). At the same time, deportation separates migrants from their homes, jobs, and families in the US, who often include members with mixed legal status. These losses, combined with hardship in their countries of origin, prompt many to attempt reentry without authorization (Menjívar et al. 2018). But to return to the US, NCA migrants must traverse more than 2,000 miles across Mexico, a country that has intensified its immigration enforcement since 2014, becoming a key actor in US border externalization. In Mexico, migrants face violence, xenophobia, and the risk of detention and deportation (Crocker et al. 2021; Escamilla García 2022). These dy-

1. The COVID-19 pandemic mitigation efforts also halted some ICE operations within the interior of the country. For more details, see: <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/news/library/reports/annual-report/eroReportFY2020.pdf>.

2. Throughout this paper, we use NCA and Central America interchangeably due to the predominance of NCA migrants in US-bound Central American migration flows.

namics make understanding the remigration attempts of deported NCA migrants both timely and necessary.

In this article, we examine the aftermath of deportation among deported NCA migrants, focusing on their intentions to return to the US and their experiences while transiting through Mexico on their return journeys. We approach our analysis from two complementary and methodologically diverse perspectives—the macro and the micro. First, we use 2014–2018 data from the Survey on Migration on the Southern Border of Mexico (*Encuesta Sobre Migración en la Frontera Sur de México*, hereafter EMIF Sur) to examine how involuntary transnational family structures are associated with reporting intentions to remigrate to the US in the future and the short-term, focusing on separation from minor children and partners in the US. Our quantitative analysis shows that NCA migrants separated from minor children under the age of fifteen in the US are more likely to report intentions to return to the US, especially when they also have a partner in the US or are single parents, relative to deported migrants without children and a partner. Then, to further investigate how family and parenthood affect mobility decisions, we draw on ethnographic data gathered in 2018 and 2019 from recently deported NCA adult migrants who had been separated from their families in the US and were transiting through Mexico in an attempt to reenter the US. The qualitative analysis reveals that deported parents make difficult decisions and face significant adversity while urgently moving through Mexico in order to reunite with their partners and children.

DEPORTATION, FAMILY, AND BORDER EXTERNALIZATION AMONG DEPORTED CENTRAL AMERICANS REMIGRATING TO THE US

A growing body of literature highlights the collateral consequences of deportation, the remigration intentions of deported Central Americans, the impacts on families left behind, and Mexico's expanding role as a gatekeeper for US reentry. These studies consistently show that familial ties in the US are strong motivators for

remigration. However, for Central Americans, returning to the US is increasingly complicated by Mexico's role in externalizing the US-Mexico border and the violence and risk that accompany that role. Thus, deported migrants from Central America who seek to reunite with their families must inevitably navigate these additional factors while traversing Mexico.

Central American migration to the US began in the early twentieth century, with a significant surge in the 1980s as people fled US-backed wars and coups (Abrego 2014). Since then, Central Americans have become a growing and sizable immigrant group in the US.³ As of 2019, approximately 3.8 million Central Americans were living in the country, of whom the majority (2.1 million) were undocumented (Ward and Batalova 2023). For the latter group, their precarious legal status and limited avenues for legalization have placed them at a heightened risk of deportation (Menjívar 2000). For example, deportations of Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans rose from 80,000 in 2010 to 122,000 by 2014 (Dominguez Villegas and Rietig 2015).

One major consequence of intensified US enforcement is family separation. Between 2009 and 2013, more than half a million US-born children experienced the deportation of a parent, usually a father (Capps et al. 2015). These separations significantly harm families' emotional and financial well-being. Children often suffer from depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal (Allen et al. 2015; Dreby and Macias 2023), while mothers face increased economic pressure and housing insecurity (Dreby 2012, 2015). Meanwhile, deported fathers face stigma, social isolation, and depression upon returning to countries with limited economic prospects, which makes it difficult for them to earn enough money to support their families in the US (Andrews 2023; Dingeman 2018). These new family dynamics can strain and sever familial ties, with some fathers relinquishing their role as providers and experiencing a form of gendered stigma that negatively impacts their psychological and social well-being (Golash-Boza 2014, 2019; Andrews and Khayar-Cámara 2022).

3. For a historical context of Central America migration, see Patler and Jones (2025, this issue).

Deportation is often not the end, but rather the beginning of a series of challenging decisions for families. Families must choose whether to remain separated, attempt unauthorized reentry, or relocate to the deported parent's location—all of which involve significant trade-offs (Boehm 2017; Cardoso et al. 2016; Hamilton et al. 2023). De facto deportation—when family members emigrate from the US to reunite with a deported person—can carry unintended consequences, particularly for children, especially when relocation exposes them to violence, socioeconomic hardships, and mental health problems (Hamilton et al. 2025, this issue). Thus, deported parents may see unauthorized reentry to the US as one of the only viable options for preserving family unity.

Still, unauthorized reentry after deportation is classified as a felony under US law, punishable by up to two years in prison for a first offense and up to twenty years for repeat offenders with prior criminal records (8 U.S.C. § 1326; Cardoso et al. 2016). Despite these harsh consequences, migrants with existing deportation records are estimated to have accounted for more than half of ICE removals between 2003 and 2016 (Valdivia 2025, this issue). For deported parents in particular, the decision to risk unauthorized reentry is often driven by the desire to reunite with their loved ones and fulfill family obligations (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2015, Hagan et al. 2008; Martínez et al. 2018). Indeed, evidence shows that separation from children and spouses in the US is a major predictor of reporting remigration intentions among Salvadoran men, regardless of the reason for their removal (Cardoso et al. 2016). Gender and legal vulnerability also play significant roles in shaping remigration decisions. For instance, deported Mexican women are more likely than men to express an intent to return if they have left children in someone else's care (Vargas Valle et al. 2022). In contrast, Mexican fathers with previous failed crossing attempts or incarceration histories may be more reluctant to return, fearing prolonged detention or prosecution (Andrews and Khayar-Cámara 2022). These studies emphasize how family separation complicates the decision to return to the US.

However, more research is needed—particu-

larly on NCA migrants—who face longer and more perilous journeys than their Mexican counterparts due to the necessity of transiting through Mexico. The necessity of crossing through Mexico is a distinguishing feature of NCA migration to the US, including unauthorized reentry post-deportation. For instance, the migrant route from NCA to the US is rife with violence and precarity, and it is a route that deported migrants must inevitably confront again if they wish to return to the US (Brigden 2015, 2018; Díaz de León 2023; Vogt 2013). Since 2014, Mexico has intensified efforts to deter undocumented migrants from reaching the US-Mexico border, resulting in increased detentions and deportations at the US Southwest border (Escamilla García 2022; Leyva-Flores et al. 2019; Massey 2020). These enforcement measures have pushed migrants toward increasingly dangerous routes to avoid detention, putting them at the mercy of criminal groups and, in extreme cases, corrupt immigration officials (Menjívar 2000). This exposes migrants not only to criminal violence and extortion but also to a scarcity of basic needs like shelter and water (Escamilla García 2022; Linares 2023). Although Mexico lacks official data on most forms of violence faced by migrants, limited surveys of migrants in transit collected by the National Human Rights Commission of Mexico show that 47 percent of migrants transiting through Mexico to reach the US experienced some form of crime, with robbery being the most common (16 percent), along with extortion (4 percent) and sexual violence (2 percent), and these numbers likely undercount the actual magnitude of the violence faced by these migrants (CNDH 2021). Meanwhile, the cost of smuggling has increased, putting smugglers out of reach for many NCA migrants, and the number of deaths along the journey has also risen (Gathmann 2008; De León 2015; Vogt 2013).

Ultimately, the literature shows that deported Central Americans separated from their families face a unique experience of remigration driven by two opposing forces: the urgent desire to reunite with loved ones and the harsh realities of enforcement and violence along the journey. Yet, little is known about how these two forces intersect, and whether deported mi-

grants' motivations shape their experiences on the migrant journey, as in the case of Central Americans. This study is among the first to explore how these dual pressures shape the remigration intentions and experiences of deported Central Americans attempting to return to the US without authorization. We examine this through two guiding questions: The first asks about the association between deported migrants' involuntary transnational family structure and their intentions to remigrate to the US in both the future and the short term; the second considers how the urgency to reunite with families shape the journey experience of deported migrants. Through this framework, the article contributes to the emerging scholarship on what Caitlin Patler and Bradford Jones (2025, this issue) define as the post-deportation phase—an often-overlooked and understudied dimension of the broader deportation system, which also includes pre- and in-deportation processes.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

To answer these questions, this article uses quantitative and qualitative data on NCA migrants deported from the US to Central America. These data sources were collected independently from different projects and were not originally intended to complement each other.⁴ Thus, through the process of “triangulation,” we have leveraged the different methodologies and findings from both sources as a strength, providing a more robust answer to our research question (Olsen 2004). The triangulation of methods and data in social science is widely used to bring together “diverse viewpoints or standpoints” to cast light on a topic, including in studies of international migration, where it has led to substantial and robust findings (Small 2011; Asad and Garip 2019; Hamilton et al. 2021). In this case, an additional benefit of triangulating these data sources is that there is generally limited available data on this topic, and less that covers the same population from different methodological angles.

Our method of triangulation consisted of a two-step process of independent analysis of the

sources. First, we used EMIF Sur data to examine the association between deported migrants' transnational family structures and their intentions to remigrate to the US in the future and the short term. Once this relation was examined and patterns were observed, we analyzed the ethnographic data to understand how deported NCA migrants transiting through Mexico in an attempt to reenter the US described these factors as they related to their return journeys to the US.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

The quantitative data analyzed in our study come from the 2014–2018 EMIF Sur survey. The EMIF Sur is conducted by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (El Colef) in conjunction with other organizations. Today, the EMIF Sur is one of the most comprehensive and robust surveys to focus on migration flows from the NCA region to Mexico and the US. Our quantitative analysis draws specifically on a subset of EMIF Sur data on a highly representative sample of Guatemalan, Honduran, and Salvadoran migrants who were deported from the US and repatriated by air to their countries of birth. Following a probabilistic sampling design, deported migrants are surveyed by trained interviewers shortly after their repatriation flights land, typically at locations where they are processed by local authorities and staff, such as airports or reception centers (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2015; Torre Cantalapiedra 2023).

Importantly, the EMIF Sur presents a rare opportunity to analyze the factors associated with deported migrants' intentions to return to the US. First, the survey contains rich and otherwise scarce data on deported individuals, including demographic and family characteristics, prior migration and deportation experiences, and future migration intentions. Although reporting intentions to remigrate does not guarantee actual migration in the future, a study on Mexican migrants found that aspirations to migrate strongly predicted subsequent migration trips to the US (Creighton 2013). Additionally, prior research has used the EMIF Sur to examine the remigration intentions of de-

4. In this sense, this research is not a mixed-methods study, which is generally understood to involve two or more different methodologies.

ported Central Americans, demonstrating the importance and reliability of this survey measure (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2015; Flores 2020). Second, because deported migrants are interviewed upon their return from the US, the data excludes those who have already initiated a return journey.

Despite its many strengths, the EMIF Sur has important limitations. First, the sample includes only migrants deported from the US to NCA, excluding those deported from the US to Mexico, from Mexico to NCA, or those de facto deported to NCA. Additionally, because the EMIF Sur captures deportation events, it is possible that a person who was deported multiple times is represented more than once in the data (Torre Cantalapiedra 2023).

From 2014 through 2018, the EMIF Sur included a total of 24,272 respondents. For this analysis, we exclude 5 respondents under the age of eighteen, as well as 2,599 who responded *not sure* when asked about their intentions to remigrate to the US, thereby limiting our analyses to the adult respondents who answered either *yes* or *no*.⁵ We also remove 1,699 respondents with missing data on variables used in the analysis, resulting in a final count of 19,969 deported migrants from NCA (92 percent of the subsample). Among them, 49 percent originated from El Salvador, 30 percent from Guatemala, and 21 percent from Honduras.

Survey Measures

We use a series of multivariable logistic regression models to examine two outcome variables: future and short-term intentions to return to the US post-deportation. The first measure asks respondents about their intentions to return to the US at some point in the future, with re-

sponses coded as 1 for *yes* and 0 for *no*. We then focus on the subset of respondents who reported intentions to remigrate in the future ($N = 10,296$) to assess their short-term intentions to remigrate to the US. Short-term remigration intentions were measured using a second survey question that asks respondents if they intend to return to the US within the next thirty days, with responses coded as 1 for *yes* and 0 for *no*.

Following the approach of Jodi Berger Cardoso and colleagues (2016), we use two explanatory variables to measure what these scholars describe as the involuntary transnational family structure of deported migrants, focusing our analyses on nuclear families—specifically, children and partners—who have been separated as a result of deportation. Specifically, we rely on two survey measures to capture respondents' transnational family structure: the geographical location of a respondent's spouse or partner (hereafter partner; 1 = US, 2 = NCA, 0 = no partner), and whether respondents left children under the age of fifteen (hereafter minor children) in the US (1 = left minor in US, 2 = left no minor in the US, 0 = nonparent).⁶

Finally, we account for key demographic and migration characteristics. Online appendix table A.1 provides information on variable operationalization.⁷ Demographic controls include gender (1 = male, 0 = female); age (in years); English proficiency (1 = yes, 0 = no); Indigenous language proficiency (1 = yes, 0 = no); level of education (1 = secondary education, 2 = high school, 3 = higher education, 0 = primary or no education); and country of origin (1 = Guatemala, 2 = Honduras, 0 = El Salvador). Migration-related controls associated with migration decisions include a continuous measure for the

5. In additional analyses not shown, we found that including *not sure* responses does not change the substantive results.

6. A limitation of the measure of child separation is that it only captures geographical information on minor children left behind in the US and does not capture data on the location of children of deported parents without minor children in the US. Another limitation is that the EMIF Sur does not capture the total number of children each respondent has. Nonetheless, prior research has relied on this measure item to examine parent-child separation and remigration intentions (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2015). Despite its limitations, the measure provides valuable insight into how transnational family structures are associated with the likelihood of reporting future and short-term remigration intentions.

7. The online appendix can be found at <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/11/4/196/tab-supplemental>.

number of years spent in the US during the most recent migration spell, use of a coyote (a paid guide or smuggler) to enter the US (1 = no, 0 = yes); location of apprehension (1 = home, 2 = work, 3 = street or highway, 4 = other, 0 = desert or crossing border); the total number of deportations from the US, and a measure for deportations from Mexico (1 = one or more deportations, 0 = none), as research suggests that immigration enforcement in Mexico is associated with curbing the remigration intentions of deported migrants from NCA (Flores 2020). We also incorporate a continuous variable indicating the number of months spent in US detention prior to deportation, with values ranging from 0 to 12 months. Cases where detention exceeded 12 months are recoded as 12 months to address the skewed distribution of the data (see Saadi et al. 2025). Lastly, to control for potential time trends and seasonality, we control for the month and year of the survey, which is also the date when respondents were deported.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

The qualitative data for this article come from a larger ethnographic study focusing on how Central American youth experience violence while transiting through Mexico. During this project, the first author conducted twelve formal interviews (plus participant observation) with adult migrants who had been deported from the US at least once and were migrating through Mexico as they attempted to return to the US without authorization—the basis for their inclusion in the sample here. These interviews and field notes were collected throughout 2018 and 2019 at three different migrant shelters in Mexico, operated by civil and religious organizations. The shelters provide a range of services, including meals, basic medical attention, shelter, and legal aid, and also function as spaces where migrants can rest while traveling.⁸ The goal of the interviews was to understand migrants' motivations for migrating to the US and their experiences while migrating

through Mexico. All participants gave their consent prior to the interviews and were provided with a sheet with relevant information about the study.

Of the twelve participants, eleven were men, aged 32 to 44; seven were from Honduras, three were from Guatemala, and two from El Salvador. The twelfth participant was a woman from Honduras. All participants had lived in the US for at least a year and a half prior to their deportation and had partners and children residing there. All but one were traveling alone through Mexico; one was traveling with his cousin. None were assisted by a smuggler or other organization. Instead, they relied on their prior knowledge and experience to navigate the journey, believing that it was not worth the time or money to hire someone to help them cross to the US. Most respondents described their deportations as unexpected.

Regarding their deportations from the US, five participants were detained while driving, four in connection with domestic violence disputes, and one for drinking alcohol on the street.⁹ Two did not disclose the reasons for their apprehension and subsequent deportation. In all cases, deportation followed within weeks of being detained, and all respondents reported having little to no contact with immigration attorneys. After returning to their home countries, nine of the twelve migrants set out for Mexico within a week—two of them immediately after leaving their home country's reception facilities. Another three returned briefly to their home villages and cities to visit parents and siblings before beginning their journeys. Four participants had been deported from Mexico at least once.

The interview data and ethnographic field notes were open-coded using MAXQDA software for data analysis, and patterns were identified as central themes in the experiences of deported migrants traveling through Mexico. Data analysis followed a grounded theory approach, drawing on open-ended interviews conducted in Spanish and detailed field notes

8. Services vary greatly from shelter to shelter.

9. Four of the migrants mentioned being detained because of traffic violations. Each was initially arrested by a police officer who then turned them over to ICE.

to identify patterns related to the research question (Lareau 2021; Weiss 1995). All identifiable information was anonymized, including names, specific locations, and details related to respondents' detention and deportation from both the US and Mexico. The only participant characteristics that were not anonymized were gender, age, and nationality.

The small sample size is partly due to the methodology used and the vulnerability of the population. The first author's primary method for meeting migrants in transit through Mexico was ethnography, which emphasizes depth in sharing and understanding people's experiences before conducting formal interviews. Thus, interviews were conducted only after establishing a certain level of rapport with the respondents. This research methodology was slow and time-consuming and limited the number of migrants who could be interviewed during fieldwork. However, given the precarious and violent conditions in which these migrants move through Mexico, the first author found this approach effective in creating an ethical space where migrants felt comfortable sharing their personal experiences and views.

The method and field site also limited the scope of the sample to a specific type of migrant. Central Americans who move through migrant shelters in Mexico are, for the most part, men and are poorer than other migrants who can afford the services of smugglers (which is a faster way to arrive at the border). Thus, the sample is likely skewed toward poorer migrants and men. However, given that the sample is composed of deported migrants with family in the US, its scope helps to triangulate the quantitative findings of this study, which focuses specifically on this subsample of Central American migrants in transit through Mexico.

In the next section, we discuss the results of both analyses and conclude that separation from minor children in the US is significantly associated with reporting remigration intentions among recently deported Central Americans, especially if they are also separated from a partner in the US or are single parents, com-

pared to their single peers without children. In turn, the eagerness and urgency to return to their family in the US shape the way deported migrants approach their journeys through Mexico.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Table 1 presents summary statistics for the sample of deported migrants across family structure. Overall, the majority of respondents identified as male (83 percent), with an average age of 28. About 60 percent were apprehended on the street or highway, and, on average, had been deported 1.34 times by US authorities. Over half (52 percent) also reported intentions to return to the US in the future, with 29 percent of those reporting short-term intentions to remigrate within the next 30 days. As for respondents' transnational family structures, 54 percent of deported migrants who separated from minor children in the US also reported having a partner in the US. In contrast, deported parents without minor children in the US were more likely to have a partner in NCA (63 percent), while nonparents were more likely to report not having a partner (91 percent).¹⁰ Reporting intentions to remigrate to the US also varied by family structure: 65 percent of respondents with minor children in the US reported intentions to return in the future, compared to 51 percent and 49 percent of deported migrants without minor children in the US and nonparents, respectively. Similarly, parents separated from minor children in the US reported higher intentions to return within 30 days compared to the overall sample (36 percent versus 29 percent). Moreover, deported parents with minor children in the US had more prolonged contact with the immigration enforcement apparatus, spending an average of 4.06 months in detention prior to deportation, nearly double the average for the total sample (2.06 months).

We now turn to multivariable logistic regression models to examine the relationship between deported migrants' transnational family structure and their intentions to remigrate to the US. Table 2, model 1a estimates the asso-

10. In analyses not shown, we found that men were more likely than women to have minor children and a partner in the U.S., as well as to be a single parent with minor children living in the US.

Table 1. Summary Statistics by Transnational Family Structure

	Children		Nonparents Percent or Mean (SD)	All Percent or Mean (SD)
	Minor in US Percent or Mean (SD)	No Minor in US Percent or Mean (SD)		
Intent to return				
In the future	0.65	0.51	0.49	0.52
Within thirty days	0.36	0.27	0.27	0.29
Partner characteristics				
Partner in US	0.54	0.05	0.02	0.10
Partner in NCA	0.07	0.63	0.07	0.30
No partner	0.39	0.32	0.91	0.61
Country of origin				
El Salvador	0.60	0.45	0.49	0.49
Guatemala	0.26	0.31	0.31	0.30
Honduras	0.14	0.24	0.20	0.21
Gender				
Male	0.92	0.82	0.81	0.83
Female	0.08	0.18	0.19	0.17
Age	32.84 (7.51)	31.52 (8.51)	23.54 (5.60)	27.89 (8.26)
Speaks English	0.46	0.11	0.12	0.16
Speaks an Indigenous language	0.07	0.09	0.10	0.09
Education level				
Primary or no education	0.40	0.46	0.28	0.37
Secondary education	0.30	0.29	0.30	0.30
High school	0.27	0.23	0.36	0.30
Higher education	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.04
Years in US (last spell)	6.75 (7.62)	0.96 (3.70)	0.94 (2.96)	1.62 (4.47)
No coyote	0.30	0.29	0.25	0.27
Months detained by US authorities	4.06 (10.26)	1.73 (7.50)	1.87 (5.21)	2.06 (6.98)
Total deportations by US authorities	1.56 (1.07)	1.37 (0.76)	1.26 (0.64)	1.34 (0.76)
Deportation by Mexican authorities	0.03	0.06	0.04	0.05
Apprehension location				
Border crossing attempt	0.16	0.37	0.35	0.34
Home	0.12	0.02	0.02	0.04
Work	0.05	0.01	0.01	0.01
Street/highway	0.64	0.59	0.61	0.60
Other	0.03	0.01	0.01	0.01
<i>N</i>	2,318	8,181	9,470	19,969

Source: Authors' compilation based on EMIF Sur 2014–2018.

Note: The number of observations for the subset of deported migrants reporting intentions to return within 30 days is smaller ($N = 10,296$). Percentages may not add up to 100 because of rounding. *Minor in US* refers to children under the age of fifteen in the US.

ciation between separation from minor children in the US and intentions to return in the future. Table 2, model 2a adjusts for partner location, and model 3a examines the interaction effect between separation from minor children and partner location. Table 2, models 1b through 3b are similar to models 1a through 3a; however, these models include results for short-term remigration intentions among the subset of respondents who reported intentions to return in the future. All models include robust standard errors to account for heteroscedasticity. They also control for the demographic and migration-related characteristics discussed above, as well as country of origin and survey month and survey year fixed effects. For parsimony, we report only the results for our two explanatory variables; full model estimates, including coefficients for covariates, are available in the online appendix table A.2. We present regression results as odds ratios (OR).

Intentions to Return in the Future: In table 2, model 1a, we observe that the odds of reporting intentions to remigrate in the future are 1.61 times higher ($p < .001$) for deported migrants separated from minor children in the US, compared to nonparents. We found no statistically significant results for parents who were not separated from minor children in the US. However, after adjusting for partner controls in table 2, model 2a, we found that parents of minor children in the US (OR, 1.44, $p < .001$) and parents without minor children in the US (OR, 1.18, $p < .001$) had higher odds of reporting intentions to return in the future than nonparents. Turning to partner characteristics, deported migrants with a partner in the US had 1.33 times higher odds of reporting intentions to remigrate compared to those without a partner, while having a partner in NCA reduced these odds (OR, 0.79, $p < .001$).

To illustrate the interaction between separation from children and partner location in table 2, model 3a, figure 1 presents the predicted probability of reporting intentions to remigrate to the US in the future, stratified by partner location and separation from minor children,

with covariates held at their means. We observe that deported migrants with a partner in the US and the non-partnered have the highest predicted probability of reporting intentions to return in the future compared to respondents with a partner in NCA. Among those with a partner in the US and the non-partnered, deported migrants separated from minor children in the US have a higher predicted probability of reporting intentions to remigrate (.46 and .36, respectively) compared to nonparents. However, the confidence intervals overlap for those with a partner in the US. The predicted probability of reporting intentions to remigrate to the US is higher for deported migrants separated from both minor children and a partner in the US, compared to singles without children (.46 vs. .29, $p = 0.001$).¹¹

Intentions to Return in the Short-Term: The results in table 2, model 1b indicate that the odds of reporting intentions to return within 30 days are 1.57 times higher among respondents with minor children in the US who reported intentions to return in the future, relative to those without minor children ($p < .001$). Table 2, model 2b continues to show a significant and positive association between being separated from minor children in the US and reporting intentions to return within 30 days, relative to nonparents (OR, 1.52, $p < 0.001$). No significant results were found for partner characteristics. The significant interaction term in table 2, model 3b shows that short-term intentions vary by the partner characteristic of deported migrants who were separated from minor children in the US.

Figure 2 shows that, among respondents who reported intentions to remigrate in the future, single parents separated from minor children in the US and deported migrants separated from both minor children and partners in the US have a higher predicted probability (.22 and .20, respectively) of also reporting short-term remigration intentions compared to singles without children. Notably, there is evidence that among deported migrants separated from minor children in the US, those with

11. In analyses not shown, we examined heterogeneity in results with subgroup analyses by gender and found consistent patterns. However, due to the small sample size, we could not examine women's short-term remigration intentions.

Table 2. Odds Ratios from Logistic Regression Analysis of Intentions to Return to the US Among Recently Deported Central Americans

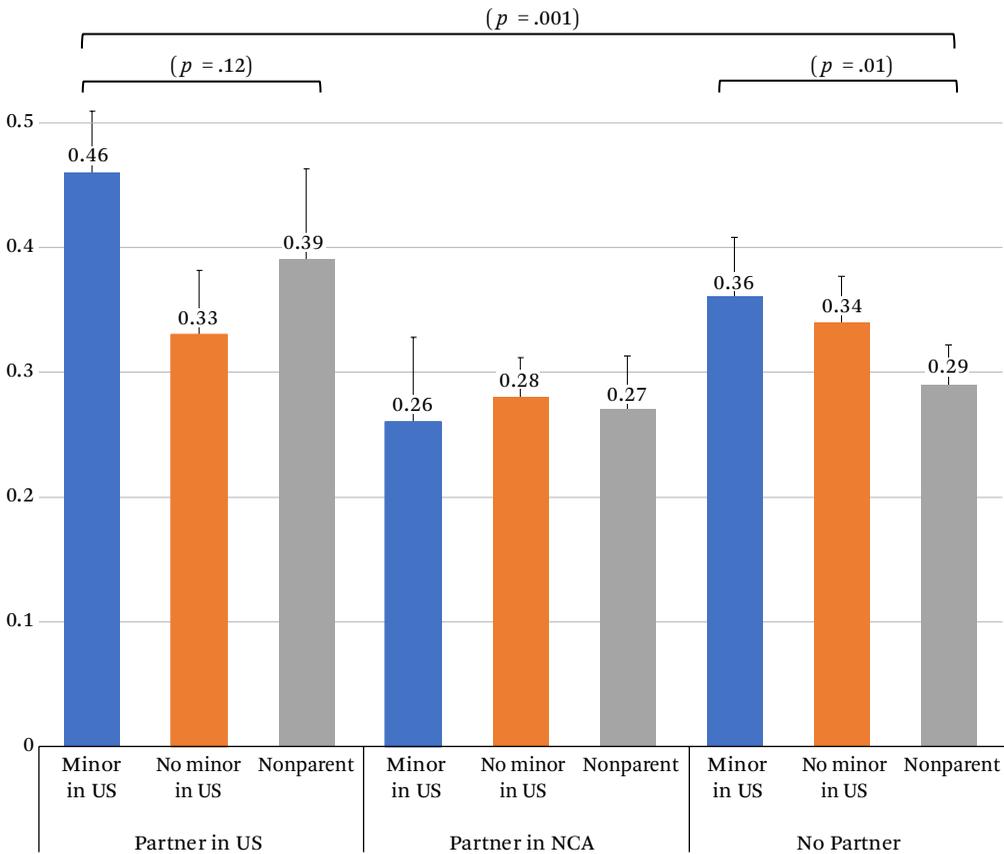
	In the Future			Within Thirty Days		
	Model 1a	Model 2a	Model 3a	Model 1b	Model 2b	Model 3b
Children characteristics						
Minor in US (reference: nonparent)	1.61***	1.44***	1.38***	1.57***	1.52***	1.77***
No minor in US	1.05	1.18***	1.26***	1.01	1.05	1.05
Partner characteristics						
Partner in US (reference: no partner)	—	1.33***	1.55**	—	1.07	1.06
Partner in NCA	—	0.79***	0.91	—	0.94	1.17
Interaction						
Partner in US × Minor in US	—	—	0.98	—	—	0.86
Partner in NCA × Minor in US	—	—	0.70	—	—	0.41**
Partner in US × No minor in US	—	—	0.60**	—	—	1.25
Partner in NCA × No minor in US	—	—	0.82*	—	—	0.80
Constant	0.36***	0.35***	0.35***	0.17***	0.17***	0.17***
Observations	19,969	19,969	19,969	10,296	10,296	10,296

Source: Authors' compilation based on EMIF Sur 2014–2018.

Note: All models control for gender, age, English, Indigenous language, education, years in the US, coyote, months detained by US authorities (values exceeding twelve months coded as 12), total deportations by US authorities, deportation by Mexican authorities, and apprehension location. All models include country of origin and survey month and survey year fixed effects. *Minor in US* refers to children under the age of fifteen in the U.S.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Figure 1. Predicted Probability of Reporting Intentions to Return to the US in the Future, by Partner and Children Characteristics



Source: Authors' compilations based on EMIF Sur 2014–2018.

Note: Derived from table 2, model 3a. Hatched lines on bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Brackets and accompanying information report results of two-tailed difference in means.

a partner in NCA had the lowest predicted probability of also reporting an intention to return within 30 days (.12), compared to .22 respondents without a partner and .20 among those with a partner in the US.

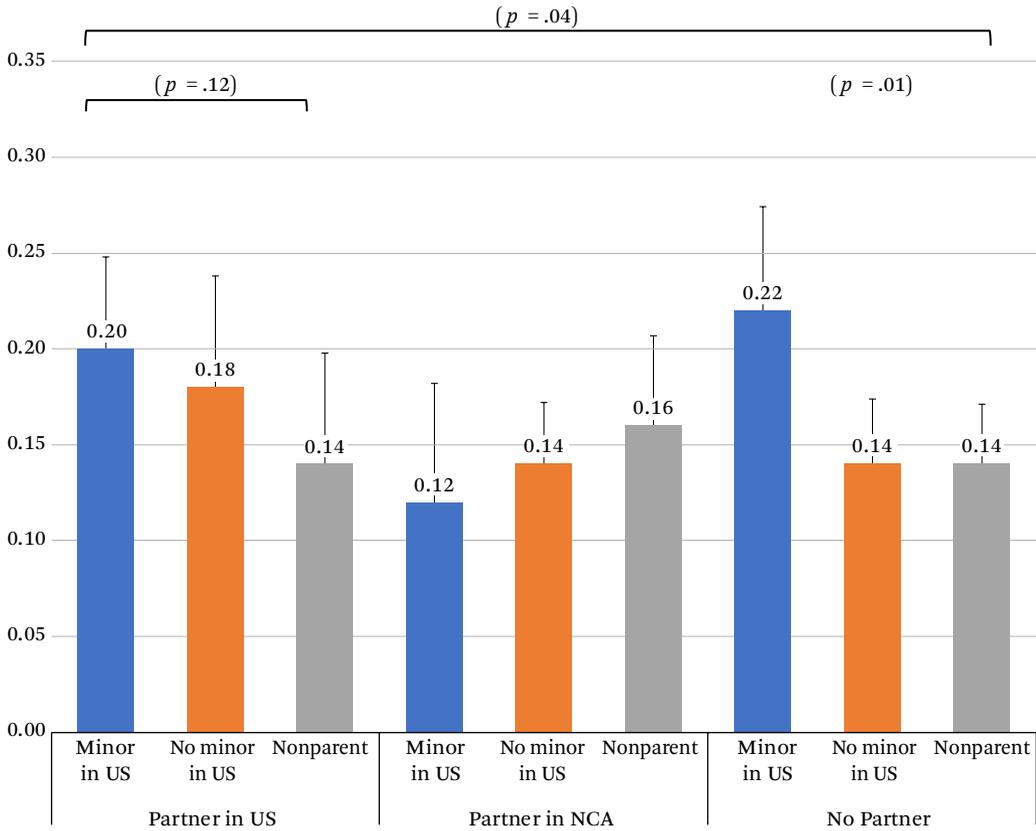
Overall, we find that deported parents separated from minor children in the US report significantly higher intentions to remigrate to the US in the future and the short-term, especially when they were also separated from a partner in the US or were single parents, compared to singles without children. In particular, separation from minor children and a partner in the US emerged as a crucial factor in increasing the probability of reporting intentions to remigrate in the future, while being a single parent of mi-

nor children in the US increased the probability of also reporting intentions to remigrate within the next thirty days.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

While our quantitative results are telling, they do not fully capture how and why deported parents with minor children in the US navigate the urgency of remigrating. Thus, we now turn to our qualitative results to explore the mechanisms that shape the migration journeys of these parents as they pursue their remigration intentions. For undocumented immigrants, precarity and the threat of deportation lurk at every stage of the journey through Mexico. Rising rates of detention and deportation of Cen-

Figure 2. Predicted Probability of Reporting Intentions to Return to the US Within Thirty Days, by Partner and Children Characteristics



Source: Authors' compilations based on EMIF Sur 2014–2018.

Note: Derived from table 2, model 3b. Hatched lines on bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals. Brackets and accompanying information report results of two-tailed difference in means.

tral Americans in Mexico, combined with Mexico's increasingly restrictive migration policies and pervasive violence and insecurity in the region, have transformed the journey to the US Southwest border by land into a potentially deadly passage. We identify three key ways separation from family in the US affects the transit experience of deported NCA migrants. First, sudden deportations disrupt family economic and social dynamics, often leaving loved ones in the US to grapple with the collateral consequences of deportation. This instability intensifies the deported person's urgency to remigrate as quickly as possible to stabilize their family's situation, especially when they are the primary economic provider. Second, these family pressures lead migrants in transit to take

greater risks to hasten their return journey. Third, despite facing several obstacles during their transit, including deportations, assaults, and health issues, deported parents exhibited remarkable determination throughout their journey through Mexico. These themes are explored in greater detail in the following subsections.

The Nuclear Family and Urgency to Return

Consistent with previous research, deported adults described their deportations as a shocking event for themselves and their families (Andrews 2023). This study's novel contribution lies in revealing how family separation as a result of deportation intensifies the urgency mi-

grants feel to return to the US as quickly as possible.

When asked about their main reasons for returning to the US, all twelve respondents noted the harm their absence was causing their families, especially economically. For instance, Rodrigo, a 34-year-old man from Honduras, expressed his urgent need to return to the US to stabilize his family's financial situation: "Right now, what most worries me is getting there [to Texas] as soon as possible and paying off what we owe. My wife right now is working more, but that's still not the same as me working in construction. And it's not the same either with our son, who has to stay home alone now. Our family members already gave us money, and we have to pay it back. That's what I'm thinking about right now. It's what most worries me, and the longer it takes, the worse our situation will get with all the debt."

Rodrigo further explained that if he did not return to the US soon, his wife would likely have to sell his cars to cover rent and food, and to send him money as he moved through Mexico. Since coyotes often charge Central Americans between \$15,000 and \$19,000 to travel from their home countries to their destinations in the US, many deported migrants, like Rodrigo, request only the minimum amount, typically just enough to cover the coyote fee to cross the US-Mexico border. Deported parents did this as a strategy to avoid placing additional financial strain on their families. In Rodrigo's case, he expected that once he reached the US-Mexico border, his wife and extended family (such as his cousins) would likely need to send a much larger sum to pay coyotes for his crossing and to finance the final leg of his journey to Texas. As a result, many opted for the cheapest mode of transportation through Mexico: walking without the assistance of coyotes to save money.

Given these financial pressures, migrants often prioritized returning quickly despite the precarious conditions, sometimes even hatching return plans while still in US detention centers or on their repatriation flights. Rodrigo, for

example, described his thoughts during the flight back to Honduras: "When they put me on the plane, that's when I knew they were going to kick me out. And since then, I've been thinking about what I could do to get back quickly to my family. With my wife. I got there [to Honduras], got off the plane, and the Honduran government gives you a lot of speeches. But I already knew that I wasn't going back to stay. I was going to return fast."

Even those who were no longer living with their children or had separated from their partners felt pressured to return to the US to cover their family's expenses, such as rent and car payments. They also expressed fear that their cars might have to be sold, leaving them without transportation to get to work or visit their families.¹²

While discussions about returning to the US were often centered on family finances, some deported parents also emphasized the emotional difficulty of being separated from their families. Six out of the twelve respondents mentioned feelings of loneliness and isolation due to their separation from children and partners, as well as anxiety about their loved ones' well-being. On one occasion, a man was seen leaving a migrant shelter to stand outside alone for an extended period. Later, he shared that he was trying to stay calm and hold back tears after a phone conversation with his children.

Our findings reveal that the economic concerns of deported migrants in our study are twofold: In the immediate term, they feel an urgent need to return to the US to ease financial woes; in the longer term, they fear being unable to reunite with their families and stabilize their financial situation, especially if deportation leads to job loss or forces them to sell their belongings. These economic pressures are further compounded by deep feelings of loneliness and isolation during their perilous journey back to the US. The last point is especially salient for deported migrants from NCA, who, compared to their Mexican counterparts, face a longer and more expensive journey. In the following section, we explore how this ur-

12. In addition, two men mentioned that their employers were holding jobs for them, but they were worried the jobs would not remain available for long. Thus, their urgency to return was motivated by their need for employment and their concern that they could lose their jobs and have to start over.

gency to return shapes their approach to crossing Mexico.

Balancing Risk and Reward: Approaches to the Journey

While eager to reunite with their families in the US, deported Central Americans are acutely aware of the perils of crossing Mexico. All respondents recalled their previous experiences as migrants moving through Mexico, describing the journey as arduous and tiring. They were also aware of the increasing risk of delinquency and robbery along the route. Each of the twelve respondents expressed fear and concern for their safety, noting that they would likely go hungry, sleep in fields or on the streets, and face the threat of robbery and kidnapping. This sense of insecurity was not confined to the US-Mexico border—which is often the focus of studies on Mexican migration (for example, Andrews 2023)—but persisted throughout their entire time and journey through Mexico. Despite these dangers, their strong desire to reach the border often led them to take calculated risks to keep advancing.

These opposing forces—fear and urgency—were a recurring theme in interviews. Brandon, a forty-three-year-old migrant from Honduras interviewed in Northern Mexico, explained: “Right now, all I want is to get to [the US-Mexico border city of] Tijuana and cross as soon as possible. That’s why I am not staying in this [shelter] for very long. I am not planning to rest much these days; I just want to move as fast as I can to the border.” While Brandon recognized that rest and careful planning would be beneficial as he traversed the most dangerous stretch of desert in Mexico, his urgency to reunite with his family pushed him forward. Brandon left the shelter early the next morning, after spending just one night.

In fact, many respondents chose to sacrifice rest in favor of moving more quickly, driven by the urgency of their situation. Sergio, a twenty-eight-year-old man from Guatemala, acknowledged his fatigue and the potential dangers of sleep deprivation, but he saw it as a necessary tradeoff for a faster return to the US. As he explained: “Many people here tell us about how hard the crossing is, and I’m already feeling it

this week I’ve spent traveling. But I try not to think about it because right now, my family comes first.” Others took even greater calculated risks. For example, Yoni, a forty-two-year-old man from Honduras traveling through southern Mexico, decided to join a group of men preparing to leave a shelter and head north, despite feeling that they were neither reliable nor trustworthy. He decided the risk of traveling with them was worth it if it meant reaching the US as fast as possible. Some respondents also braved harsh weather conditions, such as traveling through pouring rain or extreme heat, and traversed areas notorious for violence or danger. At a migrant shelter near the Arizona–Mexico border, for example, a group of three migrants preparing to cross the desert expressed that they were terribly afraid of what awaited them. Still, they viewed this route as the quickest way to return to the US and calculated that this path would reduce the likelihood of being apprehended by immigration authorities.

The urgency to reunite with their family as quickly as possible impacted how deported migrants approached their journey through Mexico. Most were not interested in staying in Mexico and applying for legal protection, as they believed doing so would prolong their stay in the country for at least a few months. One respondent described attempting to apply for asylum in southern Mexico but quickly becoming disheartened. The distance from his family weighed heavily on him, and he grew anxious about the suffering they were enduring in the US. Unable to endure the wait, he abandoned his asylum petition and resumed his journey north, explaining that he “couldn’t keep waiting.”

Migrant Determination

The urgency to reunite with family in the US remains strong even among those who have endured violence or forced removal while transiting through Mexico. Six of the twelve respondents had been robbed at some point in Mexico before the interview, and four had been deported from various parts of Mexico to their home countries following an earlier deportation from the US. One respondent also suffered a severe concussion after falling from a train,

likely due to exhaustion. These traumatic experiences of violence, removal, and danger are known to negatively impact migrant mobility (Díaz de León 2023; Galli 2023; Vogt 2018). Yet, despite the toll these experiences took, they did not quell migrants' overwhelming desire to continue moving and reunite with their families in the US as quickly as possible.

Being deported from Mexico and having to start over can place considerable mental strain on migrants and double the already expensive costs for those who have hired smugglers. However, for the four migrants deported from Mexico, the setback of another deportation did not deter them from their goal. While it created additional suffering and uncertainty, they viewed deportation from Mexico as merely a temporary delay in their arrival in the US. For instance, when Luis, whose story is introduced at the beginning of the article, was asked about his feelings after being deported from Mexico back to El Salvador, he described it as a depressing moment, mostly due to the need to start over and the temporary loss of communication with his family. He also knew that upon arriving in El Salvador, he would need to ask his wife for more money to restart the journey. Despite the stress and frustration, none of the migrants reported that deportation from Mexico led them to abandon their efforts. Instead, deportations from Mexico led migrants to explore alternative migration strategies. For example, Felipe, a thirty-three-year-old Honduran interviewed near the Mexico–Guatemala border, had initially attempted to migrate cheaply without borrowing money from his family in the US. However, after his deportation from Mexico, he sought a loan from his US relatives to travel more quickly, such as by bus. He believed this borrowed money would allow him to reach his destination, resume earning money, and reunite with his family more quickly. In this case, subsequent deportations increased his urgency to return by the fastest means possible.

Regarding crime, half of our interviewees reported being robbed at some point during their journey through Mexico. They were stripped of cash and cellphones, and, in some cases, they were also subjected to physical assault. Such experiences were demoralizing and stressful, making them more cautious about their move-

ments and the routes they took thereafter. However, they remained undeterred in their goal of reaching the US as soon as possible. For example, Francisco, a thirty-five-year-old Salvadoran, described being robbed near a train track in southern Mexico: “I mean, it does sting when they rob you, but at least they didn’t do anything else to me. It doesn’t make you want to give up. But it does make you think, like what if this keeps happening? What if I don’t make it? What will happen to my family? And you think about how you have to be careful, because you *have* to make it [to the US]. You just have to keep advancing as much as you can, because you have to get there.”

Francisco’s account illustrates how, despite the violence and loss, the urgent need to reunite with family as quickly as possible remained a driving force. While incidents of robbery made them reconsider their approach to the journey, they did not alter their ultimate goal.

Migrants were acutely aware of the tension between moving as quickly as possible and exposing themselves to additional risks. Oscar, a forty-three-year-old from Honduras, spoke of the “contradiction” between his urgency to reach the US and the dangers that could derail his journey. He had already fallen from a train after dozing off, nearly losing a hand under the wheels of the train car. Still, he said, “I’m going to keep risking my life to get there, that’s just how it is.” Oscar’s words reflect the pull of family reunification—strong enough to compel deported migrants to take on additional risk while transiting through Mexico, even as they remain painfully aware of the challenges involved in reaching the US-Mexico border. His words also reflect the profound legal violence that deported migrants endure under restrictive immigration policies (Escamilla García 2024; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). These policies not only separate families but also make safe and legal avenues for reunification nearly impossible, leaving many deported migrants with little to no choice but to take life-threatening risks in order to be reunited with their loved ones.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we investigate the remigration intentions of deported Central Americans and

the transit experiences that shape their perilous return journeys through Mexico as they attempt to reach the US undetected. Specifically, we examine how involuntary transnational family structures, focusing on separation from minor children and partners in the US, are associated with future and short-term intentions to remigrate, and how the urgency to reunite with these family members affects deported migrants' transit through Mexico. Findings from our analysis of survey data on recently deported NCAs, along with interviews with deported NCA migrants in transit through Mexico, tell a powerful story: Deported migrants separated from minor children in the US report greater intentions to remigrate to the US—particularly when they are also separated from a partner in the US or are single parents. Despite the perils of crossing Mexico in an era of intensified border externalization, deported parents remain determined to follow through with their plans, constantly weighing how to make the journey as quickly and safely as possible.

This article contributes to the post-deportation literature in several ways by demonstrating that deportation is neither an isolated nor a final event—it implicates entire social structures, while also affecting people at the most individual level. First, we build on existing literature that demonstrates how family separation is linked to the remigration of deported parents. We further expand on this finding by demonstrating that separation from minor children and a partner in the US significantly increases the probability of reporting intentions to remigrate to the US in the future. Of those who reported future intentions to return, being a single parent of minor children in the US increases the probability of also reporting intentions to return in the short-term, compared to single people without children. Meanwhile, deported parents with minor children in the US and a partner in NCA were the least likely to report short-term remigration intentions. These findings reveal important differences related to transnational family structures and the timing or urgency of return.

Second, this article advances the literature on remigration by examining how deported migrants navigate their return journey to the US

amid the context of border externalization. By focusing on Central American migrants' experiences as they traverse Mexico, we highlight the role of the nuclear family in motivating attempts to remigrate, even in adverse conditions. Respondents' narratives illustrate the economic and emotional disruptions caused by deportation, which spur their urgent attempts to return and alleviate their family's suffering. Furthermore, interviews reveal that migrants perceive their families' economic situations worsening the longer they are away, which contributes to a sense of urgency. However, migrants are also aware that transit through Mexico is dangerous, often leading them to move rapidly and take significant risks to minimize their exposure to violence and expedite their arrival in the US.

Future research can build on this study's contributions while addressing some of its limitations. First, future research should incorporate more dynamic measures related to the children of deported migrants, such as their age, gender, nativity, legal status, and primary place of residence. This would, for instance, allow for a better understanding of the remigration intentions of parents with minor children in NCA, who may support their children through remittances, an important question our data cannot answer. Second, future research should examine remigration experiences across different groups of deported migrants, such as women, children, the elderly, and those who reenter the US with the assistance of a coyote, as each group may have distinct motivations for remigrating that could affect their movement and transit experiences to the country of deportation. Finally, comparative studies of deported migrants who have settled in Mexico after being unable to reach the US could offer valuable evidence into the externalization of the US-Mexico border, which increasingly continues to expand into countries like Guatemala and Honduras.

Our findings challenge the assumption that deportations and border externalization effectively deter or reduce unauthorized migration to the US. Instead, they point to the need for a fundamental rethinking of how migration to the US is understood in an era increasingly defined by heightened immigration enforcement

and mass deportations. As we demonstrate, forceful removal has not curbed unauthorized migration; rather, it has produced a distinct flow of migrants—those who return to the US after deportation. As Carolina Valdivia (2025, this issue) reminds us, “for many deportees, it is often a matter of when to attempt reentry, not if.” This dynamic is especially salient for deported parents who are separated from their nuclear family in the US. Given the legal barriers that make it nearly impossible for families to reunite through legal channels, deported parents may see unauthorized reentry as their only viable option, one that exposes them to significant legal risks and dangerous conditions during their return journeys (Boehm 2017).

The need to understand the remigration intentions and experiences of deported migrants has become even more urgent amid the second Donald J. Trump administration’s intensified efforts to detain and deport undocumented immigrants, which has in turn heightened the risk of family separation. One recent example is the termination of Temporary Protected Status for Honduras, leaving nearly 72,000 Hondurans without protection from deportation (Kim 2025). This urgency is further amplified by US and Mexican immigration control policies—namely, deportation and border externalization—that create a hostile and deadly immigration environment in Mexico for migrants attempting to reenter without authorization. Thus, this study underscores the need for immigration policies that move beyond deterrence and punishment and instead focus on keeping families together.

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