



## U.S. CITIZENS IN MEXICO: DISPLACED WITHOUT PROTECTION

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## Introduction

More than 4 million Mexican migrants have been deported from the United States since 2008.<sup>1</sup> During the same period, a significant number of Mexican migrants returned, forcibly or voluntarily, to Mexico as a result of family obligations, unfavorable economic and labor market conditions in the United States, and stricter enforcement of U.S. immigration policy and laws.<sup>2</sup> The exodus of Mexican migrants from the United States has entailed an equally significant departure of U.S. citizen spouses and children to Mexico.<sup>3</sup> This has contributed to an extraordinary growth of the U.S.-citizen population in Mexico, with Mexico now outpacing Canada and the European Union as the home of the largest U.S. population outside of the United States.<sup>4</sup> While no official count exists of the number of U.S. citizens leaving the United States due to deportation or return migration,<sup>5</sup> the U.S. State Department estimates that 1.6 million Americans now live in Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Based on Mexican school records, more than 550,000 of these are the U.S.-born children of Mexican migrants.<sup>7</sup> Though the State Department

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<sup>1</sup> Rodrigo Dominguez-Villegas, “Protection and Reintegration: Mexico Reforms Migration Agenda in an Increasingly Complex Era,” Migration Policy Institute, March 7, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/protection-and-reintegration-mexico-reforms-migration-agenda>; “U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Fiscal Year 2020 Enforcement and Removal Operations Report,” U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2021, 30, <https://www.ice.gov/doclib/news/library/reports/annual-report/eroReportFY2020.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, “Before COVID-19, More Mexicans Came to the U.S. than Left for Mexico for the First Time in Years,” Pew Research Center, July 9, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/09/before-covid-19-more-mexicans-came-to-the-u-s-than-left-for-mexico-for-the-first-time-in-years/>; Rubén Hernández-León and Víctor Zúñiga, “Contemporary Return Migration: Focus on Children, Youth, Schools and Families,” *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 32, no. 2 (January 2016): 174-75, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309532384\\_Introduction\\_to\\_the\\_special\\_issue\\_Contemporary\\_return\\_migration\\_from\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_to\\_Mexico\\_-\\_Focus\\_on\\_children\\_youth\\_schools\\_and\\_families](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309532384_Introduction_to_the_special_issue_Contemporary_return_migration_from_the_United_States_to_Mexico_-_Focus_on_children_youth_schools_and_families).

<sup>3</sup> Beth C. Caldwell, *Deported Americans: Life After Deportation to Mexico* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019), 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> “International Migrant Stock 2019,” United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2019, <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp>.

<sup>5</sup> Amelia Shaw, “An Invisible Tide: Undocumented U.S. Kids in Mexico,” *The Foreign Service Journal* 93, no. 8 (October 2016): 40, <https://afsa.org/invisible-tide-undocumented-us-kids-mexico>; Patricia A. Dalton, “2010 Census: Counting Americans Overseas as part of the Census Would Not be Feasible,” United States Government Accountability Office, September 14, 2004, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-04-1077t.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> “U.S. Relations with Mexico,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, September 16, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-mexico/>.

<sup>7</sup> Brooke Jarvis, “The Deported Americans: More than 600,000 U.S.-born children of undocumented parents live in Mexico. What happens when you return to a country you’ve never known?” *The*

recognizes the vulnerability of young U.S. citizens in Mexico,<sup>8</sup> there have not yet been significant or consistent efforts to identify affected U.S. citizens, through either official counting or citizen services outreach. Such efforts can no longer be delayed since, based on interviews with displaced U.S. citizens in Mexico, a vast majority of them intend to return to the United States one day.<sup>9</sup>

The need for a census and assessment of needs is key, given that citizens who emigrate with their Mexican family members often experience persistent disadvantages in Mexico, including the inability to access U.S. or Mexican documentation, limited or no access to health services and preventative health care, job disintegration, restricted mobility, and reduced educational attainment.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the loss of language, identity, culture, and community further contribute to future social vulnerability if these individuals later decide to reenter U.S. society.<sup>11</sup> Given the serious and simultaneous barriers and vulnerabilities U.S. citizens face in Mexico, this report maintains that, without improved consular services and a diaspora policy that anticipates the likely return of these Americans, the United States risks re-inheriting a U.S. population now the size of Delaware, which may well require critical government services to reintegrate after a prolonged period abroad.

## Return Migration and the Emigration of Americans to Mexico

Migration among mixed-status families is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. In the last two decades alone, millions of Mexicans have been deported or returned to Mexico. Emigrating with them are their U.S. citizen spouses and children. The emigration of U.S. citizens to Mexico, forced or voluntary, marks an unprecedented family movement from north to south<sup>12</sup> and constitutes an extraordinary mass separation of U.S. citizens from

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*California Sunday Magazine*, January 31, 2019, <https://story.californiasunday.com/deported-americans/>.

<sup>8</sup> Nina Lakhani, "U.S.-born Students in Mexico Risk Becoming 'Lost Generation,'" *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-mexico-schools-americans-20150309-story.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Edmund T. Hamann, Víctor Zúñiga, and Juan Sánchez García, "From Nuevo León to the USA and Back Again: Transnational Students in Mexico," *Journal of Immigration & Refugee Studies* 6, no. 1 (2008): 71, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1077&context=teachlearnfacpub>.

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with U.S. wives and children of Mexican migrants, as well as migrant-serving organizations and activists, in Western Central Mexico (2022).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Claudia Masferrer, Erin R. Hamilton, and Nicole Denier, "Immigrants in Their Parental Homeland: Half a Million U.S.-born Minors Settle Throughout Mexico," *Demography* 56, no. 4 (August 2019): 1453, <https://read.dukeupress.edu/demography/article/56/4/1453/168040/Immigrants-in-Their-Parental-Homeland-Half-a>.

their communities, families, and homes.<sup>13</sup> Although this is a well-known fact, there is no reliable count of U.S. citizens who have accompanied the so-called “great return” of Mexican migrants.

Mexican academics first began studying the size and characteristics of the U.S. minor population in the 1990s when Mexican schools began filling up with transnational students coming from the United States. Early scholars, including Víctor Zúñiga and Edmund Hamann, noted that the heightened representation of U.S.-born children in Mexican schools created unexpected challenges for educators untrained for a culturally diverse classroom, often resulting in negative educational outcomes, including grade retention and the devaluing of non-Mexican schooling experience.<sup>14</sup> Since this early detection and study, American children remain the fastest-growing student population in the Mexican school system.<sup>15</sup> In a recent study using school administrative data and 2015 Mexican intercensal data, scholars conservatively estimated that over 550,000 U.S.-born children were then enrolled in Mexican schools, comprising 3% of the total K-12 population.<sup>16</sup> Further evidence obtained in a 2017-2018 study showed the size of the U.S. student body continued to climb, with U.S.-born children now making up over 4% of the national 6th grade population.<sup>17</sup> Extrapolating across all grade levels would mean that the U.S. student population in Mexico has quadrupled since scholars first estimated its size.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hernández-León and Zúñiga, “Contemporary Return Migration: Focus on Children, Youth, Schools and Families,” 176; Beth Caldwell, “Deported by Marriage: Americans Forced to Choose Between Love and Country,” *Brooklyn Law Review* 82, no. 1 (2016): 32-40, <https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1519&context=blr>.

<sup>14</sup> Víctor Zúñiga and Edmund T. Hamann, “Sojourners in Mexico with U.S. School Experience: A New Taxonomy for Transnational Students,” *Comparative Education Review* 53, no. 3 (August 2009): 339, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/599356>.

<sup>15</sup> Mónica Liliana Jacobo Suárez, “La Niñez y Juventud Migrante de Retorno en México: Hallazgos, Avances y Pendientes (2015-2022),” *Norteamérica, Revista Académica del CISAN-UNAM* 17, no. 2 (2022), <https://www.revistanorteamerica.unam.mx/index.php/nam/article/view/587>.

<sup>16</sup> Coordinación Interinstitucional Especializada, “Informe: Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Binacionales (EE.UU.-México) Residentes en México y No Cuentan Con Un Acta de Nacimiento Mexicana Ni Clave Única de Registro de Población (CURP),” October 2017, <http://derechoalidentidadenmexico.imumi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Informe.-Ni%C3%B1as-y-adolescentes-binacionales-residentes-en-M%C3%A9xico-y-no-cuentan-con-un-acta-de-nacimiento-mexicana-ni-CURP.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> J. Hernández, Bryant Jensen, and Eric Ruiz Bybee, “Mathematics Achievement Opportunity for ‘American Mexican’ Children in Mexico,” paper presented at the annual conference for the American Educational Research Association in Toronto, Canada, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Zúñiga and Hamann, “Sojourners in Mexico,” 337.

Efforts to capture an accurate estimate of the number of U.S.-born children in Mexico have relied primarily upon Mexican school administrative data, and little is known about the true size of the U.S. minor population that lives at the border but attends school in the United States. An additional subgroup of U.S. minors not included in the 550,000 school-based estimate includes the population of U.S. citizens who are school-age but unable to enroll in school due to the lack of required Mexican documentation (estimated to be roughly 287,000 minors).<sup>19</sup> Unprecedented in size, we believe this population will only grow as long as paths to legal status and legislative solutions remain out of reach for the 4.9 million undocumented Mexican migrants still in the United States.<sup>20</sup> As Mexican migrants are forced to return home or return voluntarily, American children will continue to head south with their families before possibly returning home to the United States as adults.

While various methodologies have been used to count at least a subset of the population of U.S. minors in Mexico, no known estimates exist to estimate the number of U.S. citizen spouses in Mexico due to deportation or return migration of their husband or wife. In 2015, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (*Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*, INEGI) documented the number of Mexican households with foreign-born family members, as well as households with family members who, within the last five years, resided abroad.<sup>21</sup> In 2020, INEGI estimated there were over 797,000 U.S. citizens living in Mexico.<sup>22</sup> INEGI estimates tend to undercount U.S. immigrants and differ drastically from U.S. State Department figures, perhaps in part due to the fact that the census only counts those who lived outside of Mexico more than five years ago. Moreover, U.S. citizens who live in rural areas often do not participate in the census.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Coordinación Interinstitucional Especializada, “Informe: Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Binacionales.”

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “Mexicans decline to less than half the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population for the first time,” Pew Research Center, June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/12/us-unauthorized-immigrant-population-2017/>.

<sup>21</sup> Coordinación Interinstitucional Especializada, “Informe: Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Binacionales.”

<sup>22</sup> “Migración,” Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática, <https://www.inegi.org.mx/temas/migracion/#Tabulados>.

<sup>23</sup> Interviews with U.S. wives and children of Mexican migrants, as well as migrant-serving organizations and activists, in Western Central Mexico (2022).

## U.S. Immigrants: Context of Reception

Despite the growing number of U.S. citizens in Mexico with specialized needs, it is unclear how Mexico receives U.S. citizens who have migrated to Mexico to be with family, or the conditions of their reception and integration into Mexico. This dearth of information is problematic, because whether a place engages in active encouragement, passive acceptance, or discouragement of immigrants affects a newcomer's ability to incorporate into and thrive in society.<sup>24</sup> When a host country's political, economic, and social receptions are unwelcoming—intentionally or not—immigrants suffer, especially when they cannot look to other places that are more welcoming and responsive to their needs.<sup>25</sup> In effect, mobility is not always an immediate option, particularly among minors whose parents or legal guardians live in Mexico and make the decisions for them. This section examines the context of reception for U.S. immigrants in Mexico and asks whether Mexico is equipped to receive these individuals, who may not speak Spanish and for whom reception by Mexican institutions is a critical factor in their political, economic, and social integration.

### *Political Reception*

The political reception context, including legalization and inclusive citizenship policies, has a strong effect on the ability of new immigrants to integrate well. In this regard, Mexican law is quite positive. The children and spouses of Mexican citizens are eligible for citizenship based on their familial ties. Under Mexico's citizenship law, the U.S.-born children of Mexican migrants are considered Mexican by birth,<sup>26</sup> and the foreign-born spouses of Mexican migrants may naturalize by applying for family unification.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, nothing under U.S. or Mexican law prevents the citizens of either country from holding more than one citizenship.<sup>28</sup> However, despite Mexico's favorable family-based immigration law and policies, lack of information, processing fees, and administrative and documentation hurdles, including non-acceptance of U.S. identification documentation, have prevented many U.S. citizens already in Mexico from obtaining dual citizenship. These individuals remain in Mexico under various legal statuses, including as temporary or permanent residents.<sup>29</sup> Others have no status or are

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<sup>24</sup> A. Portes and R.G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos (México: Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, 2021), Article 30(A)(II), <http://www.ordenjuridico.gob.mx/Constitucion/articulos/30.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 30(B)(II).

<sup>28</sup> Ferrantinoa, "Dual Nationality," U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Mexico, March 25, 2021, <https://mx.usembassy.gov/dual-nationality/>; Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Article 32, <http://www.ordenjuridico.gob.mx/Constitucion/articulos/32.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Interviews with U.S. wives and children of Mexican migrants, as well as migrant-serving organizations and activists, in Western Central Mexico (2022).

admitted as tourists, in which case they must leave the country every six months when their tourist visa expires to remain compliant with Mexico's immigration laws.<sup>30</sup> It is estimated that existing political obstacles have kept some 287,000 U.S. citizen minors and an unknown number of U.S. citizen spouses in legal limbo.<sup>31</sup>

Foreign immigrants, including U.S. citizens able to legalize in Mexico, receive a unique population registry code (*clave única de registro de población*, CURP), a distinct number assigned to Mexican nationals and residents. Having a CURP allows foreign residents to register for school, receive health care, open a bank account, apply for jobs, use community centers, and access daycare. Foreigners unable to legalize in Mexico cannot obtain a CURP and thus are unable to access these benefits or apply for work in the formal sector. They are also restricted from accessing documents such as a driver's license and retirement registration.

### *Economic Reception*

Economic reception difficulties—including trouble finding decent work—may also directly affect patterns of assimilation. In Mexico, foreign laborers, including U.S. citizens who do not have dual nationality, must have work authorization and a taxpayer identification number to work. Any employer with labor certification approved by the National Migration Institute may hire a foreign worker,<sup>32</sup> so long as the ratio of foreign workers to Mexican workers does not exceed 10%.<sup>33</sup> Due to a low reliance on foreign labor in the country, foreign immigrants currently comprise just roughly 1% of the formal Mexican labor force. They work primarily in business, hotels and restaurants, teaching, and industrial manufacturing jobs.<sup>34</sup> Foreign workers who face entry barriers into the formal sector, either because they do not speak Spanish or for other reasons, must compete with Mexicans in the informal sector, where there is little or no regulation of working conditions, job security, social protection, or health insurance. Under these difficult circumstances, some must look outside of Mexico for remote contract work—often compromising the long-term benefits of stable employment.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> Coordinación Interinstitucional Especializada, “Informe: Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Binacionales.”

<sup>32</sup> Instituto Nacional de Migración, “Obtención de Constancia de Inscripción del Empleador,” Gobierno de México, <https://www.gob.mx/tramites/ficha/obtencion-de-constancia-de-inscripcion-de-empleador-para-extender-oferta-de-empleo-a-extranjeros/INM799>.

<sup>33</sup> Cámara de Diputados del Honroso Congreso de la Unión, Ley Federal del Trabajo, Artículo 7, [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/156203/1044\\_Ley\\_Federal\\_del\\_Trabajo.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/156203/1044_Ley_Federal_del_Trabajo.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> “Mexico – Labor Force,” Moody's Analytics, <https://www.economy.com/mexico/labor-force>.

### *Social Reception*

The context of social reception and the availability of government and social services are key determinants for the successful integration of immigrants in a new country. Yet, despite the growing population of non-Spanish speaking immigrants in the country due to deportation and return migration, as well as increasing refugee populations and foreign investment in the country, most government offices in Mexico do not employ professional interpreters or translators. Services, information, and materials are almost exclusively provided in Spanish. Further, government officials often lack knowledge of U.S. processes or training to resolve binational issues. This unpreparedness often hinders the reintegration of deported and returning Mexican migrants and, in particular, the full incorporation of their immigrant family members.

While there are many migrant-serving organizations in Mexico—including over 100 migrant shelters<sup>35</sup>—very few of these target Mexican deportees, returnees, or their families, and even fewer have developed the capacity or expertise in binational issues that prevent the full integration of transnational families in Mexico. The lack of migrant-serving organizations<sup>36</sup> specialized in their needs has left deported and returning migrants and their U.S. family members to navigate their civic and social incorporation on their own. Moreover, U.S. citizens are often not the target of immigrant services by civil society or Mexican government agencies, which have historically focused on migration control rather than reception and integration. Though a handful of organizations in Mexico—including The Rhizome Center for Migrants, *Caminamos Juntos*, and the Institute for Women in Migration (*Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración*, IMUMI)—view transnational families as a particularly vulnerable immigrant group,<sup>37</sup> displaced U.S. citizen women and children are often left to defend their own rights with little or no assistance from civil society, institutions, governments, or the law.

Even so, U.S. citizens accompanying Mexican deportees and returnees are finding ways to ease their incorporation into Mexico. In particular, U.S. citizen women, who have migrated to Mexico with their husbands due to U.S. immigration enforcement policies and/or anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, have developed niche communities, mostly online, to support each other. The mass deportations of the last decade left many U.S. citizen women in panicked situations, scrambling to keep their families together, while

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<sup>35</sup> Reuters, “As Mexico Closes Migrant Shelters Due to Coronavirus, Those Seeking Refuge Face More Dangers,” NBC News, January 4, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/mexico-closes-migrant-shelters-due-coronavirus-those-seeking-refuge-face-n1252733>.

<sup>36</sup> Claire Altman, Sergio Chavez, and Kendal Lowrey, “Non-Governmental Organizations in Tijuana, Mexico Serving Deported Migrants from the United States,” *Frontera Norte* 33 (December 2021): 8-10, <https://doi.org/10.33679/rfn.v1i1.2148>.

<sup>37</sup> See The Rhizome Center for Migrants at [www.rhizomecenter.org](http://www.rhizomecenter.org); Caminamos Juntos at [www.cjsma.org](http://www.cjsma.org); and Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración at <https://imumi.org/>.

figuring out how to move internationally without information or support.<sup>38</sup> These women formed “exiled wives” clubs during the mass interior deportations of the Obama administration, and they continue to attract new members as U.S. women experiencing co-deportation today still seek advice on a variety of matters, including whether to move to the border and how to send money internationally, apply for residency, access health care, fill U.S. prescriptions, find online work, and pay taxes.<sup>39</sup> They look to each other for advice on how U.S. immigration laws apply to their families as they wait out their husbands’ 10-year immigration bar for U.S. reentry and prepare for a potential return to the United States.<sup>40</sup> Though they may live in different parts of Mexico, these women provide a type of kinship care where no other support exists for American women experiencing the severe impacts of deportation and traumatizing realities of moving to and assimilating in Mexico.

## Protection Barriers and Vulnerabilities

In the spring of 2022, the author, Tran Dang, conducted in-depth phone and home interviews with 10 U.S. wives, ages 33 to 54, and 11 Americans brought to Mexico as children, now ages 13 to 32. The individuals interviewed represent 15 families who migrated to Mexico between 1994-2020 from Washington, California, Texas, Missouri, Minnesota, Tennessee, Michigan, and Connecticut. They now live across rural and urban areas of Central Mexico in the Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacán states, which are, ironically, areas of the country that the U.S. State Department either advises U.S. citizens not to travel to or to reconsider travel due to high rates of crime and kidnapping.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Statement on the Effects of Deportation and Forced Separation on Immigrants, their Families, and Communities,” *American Journal of Community Psychology* 62, no. 1-2 (September 2018): 3-12, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12256>; Jacqueline Torres, Julianna Deardorff, Robert B. Gunier, Kim G. Harley, Abbey Alkon, Katherine Kogut, and Brenda Eskenazi, “Worry About Deportation and Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors Among Adult Women: The Center for the Health Assessment of Mothers and Children of Salinas Study,” *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 52, no. 2 (February 2018): 186-193, <https://doi.org/10.1093/abm/kax007>.

<sup>39</sup> “South Of the Border Sisters: Deportee & Exiled Wives,” Facebook Group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/180709762465896/>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> “Mexico International Travel Information,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel/International-Travel-Country-Information-Pages/Mexico.html#Michoacan>.

Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish and were supplemented by interviews with migrant-serving organizations and activists whose primary focus is the U.S. citizen population in Mexico. The following narratives taken from these interviews reflect the multitude of concerns of U.S. citizens regarding their financial future, safety and security, legal status in Mexico, and access to health care, mobility, job opportunities, and education.<sup>42</sup>

### *Family Composition and Economic Stability*

The results of the interviews were revealing. The majority of the individuals interviewed had little international experience before leaving the United States. There were some wives interviewed who had given birth just before arriving in Mexico, or their families expanded in Mexico, with their youngest children having dual U.S. and Mexican citizenship. In some cases, their U.S.-born children were from other marriages and were not always the biological children of their Mexican stepfather, yet these young Americans were also impacted by deportation and return. The family with the highest income had access to jobs in the United States and earned a household income equivalent to \$2000/month for a family of four. These “high earners” still earned \$340 less than what expat forums suggest for a family of that size, without calculating the cost of private health care and education.<sup>43</sup> Due to the challenges many families face accessing documentation, one of the wives interviewed moved back to the United States, where her children could immediately re-enroll in school. Her family’s situation is a testament to the fact that transnational families often experience family separation multiple times as a result of harsh cross-border bureaucratic realities and an unwelcoming reception in host countries.

### *Safety and Security*

Several of the women interviewed had witnessed more than one assassination since arriving in Mexico, some occurring just yards from their homes or in areas of the city they visit frequently. One woman lives in a town where criminal groups murdered the mayor. Several of the women shared that they or their family members had been the target of crimes, including identity theft, robbery, ransom kidnapping, false imprisonment, domestic violence, fraud, shakedowns, assault, and sexual violence. One woman recalled that a child at her daughter’s school went missing and was never found. The same woman told a story of how her husband’s relative who lives in the same city had disappeared and was tortured for a week before he was let go. Another woman talked about the rise in disappearances in her town, which prompted her family’s decision to resettle in search of safety. At least one blonde woman with blue eyes stated that she rarely leaves her home because she does not want to call attention to her family. The women employed varying tactics to stay safe including keeping guard dogs, using security fencing, limiting social

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<sup>42</sup> Interviews with U.S. wives and children of Mexican migrants, as well as migrant-serving organizations and activists, in Western Central Mexico (2022).

<sup>43</sup> “Cost of living in Mexico,” Expatistan, <https://www.expistan.com/cost-of-living/country/mexico?currency=USD>.

activities, restricting access to their home, not allowing their children to walk alone, and refraining from speaking English in public. Most of the wives interviewed live in areas of the country heavily hit by cartel activity. Some have been forced to relocate to other cities after being threatened by criminal groups. One 13-year-old boy who immigrated to Mexico with his stepfather and who does not speak Spanish stated he feels anxious about cartel violence every time his family leaves their city's limits. More than one woman expressed concern that if something were to happen to her, she would not know how to access her government's services, as U.S. consular personnel are prohibited from traveling to the state where she lives. Many women believe that having dual nationality means the U.S. government will not protect them.

### *Challenges to Legalization*

While U.S. citizens visiting Mexico can easily obtain a six-month tourist visa, financial and other documentation requirements associated with obtaining resident status can delay or hamper the legalization process for immigrating U.S. citizens reuniting with their families. Complications to legalization often arise when U.S. citizens do not have original, authenticated copies of their U.S. birth certificate. Problems can also arise when U.S. citizens have gone through multiple legal name changes, or their Mexican family members did not use their full names in U.S. marriage and birth certificates, causing Mexican institutions to reject their U.S. identification documents as proof of family relationship.<sup>44</sup> A subset of U.S. citizens who encounter added difficulties in the legalization process include U.S. children who have not yet been formally adopted by their Mexican stepparent. These stepchildren do not have a qualifying relative who can support their family unity application in Mexico, as they can only legalize through a naturalized U.S. parent. Whether due to documentation or financial hurdles, a surprising number of U.S. citizens are either undocumented in Mexico or "out-of-status." As a result, they lack access to basic government services, including health care and education, and cannot work legally in the country or even open a bank account.

### *Health Concerns*

U.S. citizens in Mexico who lack legal status have limited access to affordable health care and may not be able to access or pay into the country's government-subsidized and employer-funded health care programs and pensions either through the Mexican Social Security Institute (*Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social*, IMSS), or its alternative, the Institute of Social Security and Services for the Workers of the State (*Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado*, ISSSTE), primarily for state employees. Foreign residents who do not qualify for IMSS or ISSSTE, which often reject applicants with certain pre-existing conditions, may be able to access Mexico's catchall universal health care

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<sup>44</sup> Victoria Kline, "¿Ahora Hacia Dónde? Los Retos que Enfrentan las Familias de Migrantes Transnacionales Entre EUA y México," Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración, October 2013, [https://imumi.org/documentos/ahora\\_hacia\\_donde\\_completo.pdf](https://imumi.org/documentos/ahora_hacia_donde_completo.pdf).

program, the Institute of Health for Welfare (*Instituto de Salud para el Bienestar*, INSABI) but would still need to cover part of the costs associated with visits to specialists, lab work, and medication. INSABI, however, has recently gone bankrupt, and the government has not offered a concrete plan on how it will offer and fund universal health care moving forward.<sup>45</sup> This is worrisome as INSABI is a baseline health care program that foreigners with legal residency status in Mexico can typically access. In the end, given these hurdles, foreigners who have no residency status, temporary or permanent, must pay all health care costs out of pocket.

Only one of the women interviewed had IMSS health care services through her employer. However, she has been unable to add her U.S.-born children to her coverage because they are homeschooled and do not have proof of school enrollment in Mexico, as required by the government. Another woman's husband had IMSS, but it did not cover his U.S. family members, because they were not legal residents of Mexico. Other families interviewed either did not have health care, paid out of pocket, or simply avoided going to the doctor, which means any of their existing health conditions may have worsened. Wives who suffer from migraines, rheumatoid arthritis, and high blood pressure were simply not being treated. One U.S. citizen lost basic federal disability benefits meant to assist with food, clothing, and shelter, after leaving the United States because he could not meet the Social Security Administration's physical presence requirement for beneficiaries. Another U.S. citizen, who suffers from scoliosis, degenerative disk disease, and hydrocephalus, was able to keep her U.S. disability benefits by returning to the United States often, but she did not have access to pain medication in Mexico. More generally, Americans over the age of 20 cannot get recommended periodic medical screenings in Mexico, nor can they access medications that aren't approved in Mexico.

Although the displaced U.S. women and children interviewed for this report talked about experiencing social isolation, anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts and ideations, very few of them reported receiving mental health services. The growing body of literature on mental health outcomes of U.S. children affected by deportation shows that there is a demonstrable link between detention and/or deportation of a parent and negative mental health outcomes for children separated from their parents—including increased risk of emotional and conduct problems.<sup>46</sup> Emerging evidence also shows that American children who reunite with their deported parents outside of the United States experience similarly adverse mental health effects, often

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<sup>45</sup> Ana Padilla and Sergio Baca, "Del INSABI al IMSS-Bienestar: Incertidumbre y Retos," *Expansión Política*, May 17, 2022, <https://politica.expansion.mx/voces/2022/05/17/del-insabi-al-imss-bienestar-incertidumbre-y-retos-columna-invitada>.

<sup>46</sup> Luis H. Zayas, Sergio Aguilar-Gaxiola, Hyunwoo Yoon, and Guillermina Natera Rey, "The Distress of Citizen-Children with Detained and Deported Parents," *Journal on Children Family Studies* 24, no. 1 (January 18, 2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4667551/>.

exhibiting higher levels of depression and lower self-esteem.<sup>47</sup> Whether children were separated or reunited with their parents, they reported low scores on “freedom from anxiety” and higher scores on “unhappiness and dissatisfaction,”<sup>48</sup> indicating that deportation itself could be a decisive factor impacting children’s mental health realities. The U.S. citizens, both children and adults, who were interviewed for this report, particularly those impacted by deportation, expressed that their immigration to Mexico, a traumatic life event in itself,<sup>49</sup> was coupled with feelings of grief and loss due to separation from family, friends, community, and country. Though the government offers some mental health resources, mental health services in Mexico are not language accessible or catered to the specific experiences associated with deportation or forced return. Similarly, there is no coordinated government-led regional humanitarian response for migrants and their families who experience multiple traumatic events across borders.<sup>50</sup>

### *Job Disintegration of U.S. Wives*

Despite their education level (a bachelor’s degree in many cases), and regardless of valuable U.S. work experience, the interviewed women reported not qualifying for most available jobs in Mexico, primarily because they did not have work authorization or did not speak Spanish. U.S. companies with English-speaking offices in Mexico are typically unaware of the existence of these Americans, and U.S. citizen wives do not have opportunities to interview for higher paying jobs with benefits. The majority of the women interviewed bypassed local job integration barriers by taking online jobs for low-skilled English speakers or working as caregivers for retired Americans or as business owners. There is another subset of women in the interior of Mexico—although it is more common for women living at the border—who willingly return to the United States to take seasonal jobs or to maintain their professional licenses and use their U.S. earnings to support their families. Several U.S. wives mentioned they still have loans and U.S. debts they cannot repay with their new base earnings, as salaries are much lower in Mexico. They also worry about not having any savings during their transitory years in Mexico, especially when they will need to purchase a home, cars, and other

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<sup>47</sup> Larisa M. Grams-Benitez, “A Longitudinal Examination of Life Events, Service Utilization, and Mental Health Outcomes Among Latino Citizen Children in Mixed-Status Families” (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Psychology, 2019), 9, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2287985129?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true>.

<sup>48</sup> Karla García Hernández, “How Undocumented Latino Parents’ Legal Status Affects Their U.S. Citizen-Children’s Health” (Bachelor of Science Thesis, Dominican University of California, 2019), 16, <https://scholar.dominican.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1137&context=senior-theses>.

<sup>49</sup> Sean D. Cleary, Ryan Snead, Daniela Dietz-Chavez, Ivonne Rivera, and Mark C. Edberg, “Immigrant Trauma and Mental Health Outcomes Among Latino Youth,” *Journal on Immigrant Minor Health* 20, no. 5 (October 2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6436088/>.

<sup>50</sup> “Live Chat Series: Repatriation and Mental Health,” The Rhizome Center for Migrants, streamed live on May 3, 2021, YouTube video, 1:02:09, <https://youtu.be/DeEw5Sa69DY>.

assets when they return to the United States as older adults, assuming their husbands will be able to return to the United States with them. Their lower or zero contributions to United States Social Security and inability to access a pension or U.S. company retirement savings plan will also leave them ill-prepared for retirement as they spend their primary working years in Mexico.

### *Mobility Restrictions*

A significant number of U.S. citizen minors in Mexico do not have proper U.S. travel documentation because they lack information, proof of U.S. citizenship, identification documents, and/or the financial ability to pay the passport application and execution fees.<sup>51</sup> Regardless of the place of residence or income level of the applicant, the U.S. State Department charges between \$135 and \$165 depending on the minor's age.<sup>52</sup> In Mexico, where the average daily minimum wage is less than \$9,<sup>53</sup> the passport fee prohibits most low-income Americans residing in Mexico from achieving full mobility as U.S. citizens. Without a passport, American children cannot travel as U.S. citizens, lack the only U.S. government-issued photo proof of identity that does not require U.S. residency, and, once they are back in the United States, may have trouble meeting identification requirements for other documents such as driver's licenses.

### *Hurdles to Education*

According to an inter-institutional report that looked at birth registration, public education registration numbers, and 2015 INEGI intercensal data, more than 287,000 U.S.-born children under 18 do not have a Mexican birth certificate or other sufficient documentation required to register for school.<sup>54</sup> These children have not registered their birth in Mexico and are not recorded in the national civil registry. Therefore, they have not been given a national identifying number. They are commonly known as the "invisible ones," or *los invisibles* in Spanish, because they lack protection from both the country of their birth and their host country.<sup>55</sup> Without a national registration number, or CURP, these children cannot obtain other official documents in Mexico or access basic constitutional rights such as an education.

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<sup>51</sup> "Inspection of Embassy Mexico City, Mexico," U.S. Department of State, Office of Inspector General, June 2015, 30, <https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/isp-i-15-28a.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> "Passport Fees," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/passports/how-apply/fees.html>.

<sup>53</sup> "Incremento a los Salarios Mínimos para 2022," Comisión Nacional de los Salarios Mínimos, Gobierno de México, December 1, 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/conasami/articulos/incremento-a-los-salarios-minimos-para-2022?idiom=es>.

<sup>54</sup> Coordinación Interinstitucional Especializada, "Informe: Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Binacionales."

<sup>55</sup> Jarvis, "The Deported Americans."

Undocumented U.S. children of deported or returned migrants may request a one-time, one-year temporary CURP, which they may use to attend public school through high school, a constitutional right.<sup>56</sup> However, interviewees mentioned that because they lacked a permanent CURP, they have not been able to obtain proof of completion of elementary or junior high studies, or enroll in high school.<sup>57</sup> Students who find themselves in this education limbo either drop out of school or search for alternative options they can afford outside of Mexico's public education system. Private schools, including parochial schools, and homeschooling, are options for U.S. citizens to continue their education while in Mexico. Students attending private schools not registered with the Department of Education (*Secretaría de Educación Pública*) must still pass an evaluation exam administered by the National Institute for Adult Education (*Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos*, INAE) to certify grade completion. However, students who do not have a permanent CURP cannot sit for the exam, and they continue to be held back by documentation requirements they cannot meet.<sup>58</sup>

As a result, due to the myriad administrative, social, economic, and cultural issues displaced U.S. children confront in Mexico, they are six times more likely to drop out during high school than their U.S. counterparts.<sup>59</sup> Without a high school diploma, these U.S.-born children cannot continue their education, may resort to a life of crime, or may take low-paying jobs in Mexico or the United States.<sup>60</sup> They are also precluded from joining the U.S. Army, an aspiration several children expressed in their interviews for this report. If and when they return to the United States, their ability to move up the socioeconomic ladder will be hampered by the persistent disadvantages they experienced in Mexico and their loss of cultural, language, and social ties to the United States after living their formative years and partial adult life abroad.

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<sup>56</sup> "Ley General de Educación," Cámara de diputados del honroso congreso de la unión, 2019, <https://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LGE.pdf>.

<sup>57</sup> Registro Nacional de Población, "Conoce la CURP Temporal Para Personas Mexicanas Repatriadas," Gobierno de México, October 26, 2021, <https://www.gob.mx/segob%7Crenapo/articulos/curp-temporal-para-personas-mexicanas-repatriadas-para-ejercer-sus-derechos-286489?idiom=es>.

<sup>58</sup> Dirección General Adjunta de Programas Especiales Ceneval, "Exámenes para la Acreditación de Conocimientos," Secretaría de Educación Pública, <https://www.sep.gob.mx/work/models/sep1/Resource/887/1/images/05exacenevaldbasica.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> Steven A. Camarota, "Immigration from Mexico: Assessing the Impact on the United States," Center for Immigration Studies, July 1, 2001, 18, <https://cis.org/Report/Immigration-Mexico>.

<sup>60</sup> Amelia Shaw, "An Invisible Tide: Undocumented U.S. Kids in Mexico."

## Protecting the Lives and Interests of U.S. Citizens

Since the founding of the U.S. consular corps in the late 1700s, consular officers and institutions have recognized the importance of protecting the lives and interests of Americans overseas.<sup>61</sup> Due to Mexico's proximity to the United States, its cooperation on U.S. border security matters, and its historic importance as a foreign trading partner, the U.S. Mission in Mexico includes one of the oldest and largest U.S. consular operations in the world.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the embassy located in Mexico City, the U.S. consular network in Mexico includes nine consulates, nine consular agencies, and one consular agent located in each of the 15 Mexican states.<sup>63</sup> Together, they oversee the largest U.S. visa services operation in the world and are responsible for the protection of the largest population of U.S. citizens living outside of the United States.<sup>64</sup>

The Bureau of Consular Affairs, the entity that oversees all consular affairs abroad, provides emergency and routine service for Americans overseas. These include protecting the rights of incarcerated Americans,<sup>65</sup> providing information to victims of crimes,<sup>66</sup> assisting with the return of remains or burial overseas,<sup>67</sup> and, in extreme cases, lending financial assistance to Americans stranded abroad.<sup>68</sup> Eligible U.S. citizens may claim and receive veterans' and Social Security benefits regardless of whether they reside in the United States. Processing these applications, as well as passports, birth

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<sup>61</sup> "About: Bureau of Consular Affairs," U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, <https://www.state.gov/about-us-bureau-of-consular-affairs/>.

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Mission to Mexico, "U.S.-Mexico Consular Dialogue," U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Mexico, October 28, 2021, <https://mx.usembassy.gov/u-s-mexico-consular-dialogue/>.

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Mexico, "Consular Districts in Mexico Map," <https://mx.usembassy.gov/find-your-consular-location/>.

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Integrated Country Strategy: Mexico," March 10, 2021, [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ICS\\_WHA\\_Mexico\\_Public-Release.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ICS_WHA_Mexico_Public-Release.pdf); "Inspection of Embassy Mexico City, Mexico," U.S. Department of State; Maria Lazzarino, "AILA Liaison Notes from Meeting at Tijuana and Mexico City," ASISTA, January 14, 2019, <https://asistahelp.org/aila-liaison-notes-from-meeting-at-tijuana-and-mexico-city/>.

<sup>65</sup> Chaseaj, "Arrest of a U.S. Citizen," U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Mexico, April 2, 2021, <https://mx.usembassy.gov/arrest-of-a-u-s-citizen/>.

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Mission to Mexico, "Victims of Crime," U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Mexico, April 6, 2021, <https://mx.usembassy.gov/victims-of-crime/>.

<sup>67</sup> U.S. Mission to Mexico, "Death of a U.S. Citizen," U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Mexico, June 23, 2021, <https://mx.usembassy.gov/death-of-a-u-s-citizen/>.

<sup>68</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Mexico, "Emergency Financial Assistance," <https://mx.usembassy.gov/emergency-financial-assistance/>.

registrations, requests for Social Security numbers, and registration for the Selective Service, can all be initiated from abroad. The consular corps also provides notarial services, information on tax obligations, and medical and legal options for U.S. citizens in Mexico.

In an effort to cultivate mutual understanding and share best practices, the U.S. and Mexican consular corps initiated the annual consular dialogue in 2013. The annual meeting of the U.S. and Mexican consular corps recognizes that each country's population is now the largest foreign-born population in the other country. These binational dialogues provide an opportunity to discuss and improve the protection of children, binational families, documentation of nationals, and provision of services to citizens of both countries, including dual nationals. In addition, they allow for the development of collaborative mechanisms and the exchange of information on issues of mutual interest.

Recognizing the high vulnerability of transnational families,<sup>69</sup> the U.S. Mission to Mexico implemented the *iDocuméntate Ya!* program in 2015 under the leadership of Karin Lang and Lisa Gisvold, former chiefs of the American Citizen Services unit at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. The organization of mobile passport fairs in select areas of Mexico and U.S. collaboration in the *Soy México* ("I am Mexico") program, which assists with obtaining U.S. identification documentation and alleviated the apostille requirement, has made it possible for U.S. children in Mexico to obtain their U.S. passports and apply for dual citizenship.<sup>70</sup> The initiative has also raised awareness of their existence and particular needs. Since the passport program was established, the U.S. State Department continues its outreach to U.S. citizens through collaborative efforts with the Mexican consular network in the United States to reach U.S.-born children of Mexican migrants still in the United States.<sup>71</sup> With over 287,000 American children still estimated to be without proper documentation in Mexico,<sup>72</sup> vulnerable children remain a top agenda priority for both countries.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Nina Lakhani and Monica Jacobo, "Uprooted in Mexico: the US children 'returned' to a country they barely know," *The Guardian*, July 13, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/13/immigration-us-children-migrants-returned-to-mexico>.

<sup>70</sup> Secretaría de Gobernación, "Miguel Ángel Osorio Chong, Secretario de Gobernación, en el Programa Soy México, Registro de Nacimiento Población MéxicoAmericana," Gobierno de México, September 20, 2016, <https://www.gob.mx/segob/prensa/las-fronteras-geograficas-deben-ser-un-punto-de-encuentro-e-intercambio-el-secretario-de-gobernacion>.

<sup>71</sup> Shaw, "An Invisible Tide: Undocumented U.S. Kids in Mexico".

<sup>72</sup> Coordinación Interinstitucional Especializada, "Informe: Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Binacionales."

<sup>73</sup> U.S. Mission to Mexico, "U.S.-Mexico Consular Dialogue."

## Transforming the Consular Function: Mexico as a Case Study

Political, economic, sociocultural, and other forces motivate states that experience mass emigration to enact policies for their diasporas. Mexico is an example of a country with a significant population abroad that has wrestled with developing an emigration policy that both protects nationals in foreign nations and safeguards the country's interests. The explosive growth of Mexico's population in the United States coincided with decisive government action to cultivate relations with its U.S. diaspora beginning in the 1980s and particularly after 2000.<sup>74</sup> Between 1980 and 1990, immigrants of Mexican origin in the United States nearly doubled, increasing from 2.2 million to 4.3 million.<sup>75</sup> By 2000, the Mexican-born population in the United States reached 9.2 million, doubling again between 1990 and 2000.<sup>76</sup> The growing impact of migrants' transnational activities, the country's interest in cultivating business relations with Mexicans in the United States, the changing needs of Mexican citizens in the United States, and Mexico's steady reliance on remittances created a situation in which Mexico had no choice but to engage its diaspora abroad.

The transformation of Mexico's emigration policies from limited to active engagement corresponded with the expansion and reinforcement of consular offices and the simultaneous creation of Mexican origin-reaching programs promoting education, health, culture, business, and tourism. These diaspora-reaching programs remain persistent mainstays of Mexican consular initiatives in the United States.<sup>77</sup> According to Carlos González Gutiérrez, the founding executive director of the Institute of Mexicans Abroad (IME), the modern arm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs serving Mexicans abroad through the country's consular network, the role of the Mexican government is not only to encourage remittances, but also to improve the quality of life and integration of Mexicans into U.S. society.<sup>78</sup> Part of that work includes protecting the human and legal rights of Mexican nationals across Mexico's 50 consulate districts in the United States.<sup>79</sup> Sociolegal

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<sup>74</sup> Alexandra Délano, "From Limited to Active Engagement: Mexico's Emigration Policies from a Foreign Policy Perspective (2000-2006)," *International Migration Review* 43, no. 4 (December 2009): 764, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2009.00784.x>.

<sup>75</sup> Emma Israel and Jeanne Batalova, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, November 5, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexican-immigrants-united-states-2019>.

<sup>76</sup> Israel and Batalova, "Mexican Immigrants in the United States."

<sup>77</sup> Laureen Laglagaron, "Protection through Integration: The Mexican Government's Efforts to Aid Migrants in the United States" Migration Policy Institute, January 2010, 9-10, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/protection-through-integration-mexican-governments-efforts-aid-migrants-united-states>.

<sup>78</sup> Laglagaron, "Protection through Integration," 14.

<sup>79</sup> Ricardo D. Martínez-Schuldt, "Mexican Consular Protection Services Across the United States: How Local Social, Economic, and Political Conditions Structure the Sociolegal Support of Emigrants,"

service provisions extended by the Mexican government that relate to human rights, penal, migratory, labor, civil, and administrative issues depend on the vulnerabilities experienced by Mexican citizens in local contexts.<sup>80</sup> With increasing discrimination and anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States, consular protection services went beyond traditional administrative tasks to include sensitization and documentation campaigns, including campaigns focused on using a consular identity card and easily accessing birth records, know-your-rights training, and bulked-up legal assistance programs.<sup>81</sup> Collaborative partnerships with government offices, service providers, and institutions, as well as the employment of mobile services and innovative marketing strategies to reach its hard-to-reach diaspora, proved instrumental to the success and capacity of Mexico's consular programs.<sup>82</sup>

Mexico's flexible and evolving interpretation of its consular function allowed the consular mission to effectively protect its citizens abroad in all aspects of their lives. Their outreach capacity, broad programs, and expansive relationships with government and civil society have been heralded by U.S. officials who glean their value.<sup>83</sup> Their initiatives have also been studied by other Latin American consulates as a model for responding to contemporary challenges of citizens in a global migration context.<sup>84</sup> The country's explicit emigration

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*International Migration Review* 54, no. 4 (December 2020): 1016-1017,  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319901264>.

<sup>80</sup> Martínez-Schuldt, "Mexican Consular Protection Services."

<sup>81</sup> Pablo Mateos, "Mexican-U.S. Asymmetrical Diaspora Policies in the Age of Return Migration," *Migration Letters* 17, no. 1 (2020): 148, <https://doi.org/10.33182/ml.v17i1.866>.

<sup>82</sup> For example, see Michael A. Flynn, Donald E. Eggerth, Brenna M. Keller, and Pietra Check, "Reaching 'Hard to Reach' Workers: Evaluating Approaches to Disseminate Worker Safety Information via the Mexican Consular Network," *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene* 18, no. 4-5 (2021): 181, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15459624.2021.1903014>; Paula Helu-Brown and Concepcion Barrio, "Latinx Mental Health in the Mexican Consulate: Addressing Barriers Through Social Good," *Research on Social Work Practice* 30, no. 2 (2020): 159, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731519839465>; Ricardo D. Martínez-Schuldt, "Mexican Consular Protection Services across the United States: How Local, Social, Economic, and Political Conditions Structure the Sociolegal Support of Emigrants," *International Migration Review* 54, no. 4 (2020): 1026, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319901264>; Xóchitl Bada and Shannon Gleeson, "A New Approach to Migrant Labor Rights Enforcement: The Crisis of Undocumented Worker Abuse and Mexican Consular Advocacy in the United States," *Labor Studies Journal* 40, no. 1 (2015): 33-34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160449X14565112>.

<sup>83</sup> Shaw, "An Invisible Tide: Undocumented U.S. Kids in Mexico."

<sup>84</sup> Martínez-Schuldt, "Mexican Consular Protection Services," 1018.

policy and proactive engagement with its diaspora is a useful case study for countries challenged by new priorities and the need to improve consular working practices. The growing population of U.S. citizens living in Mexico, whether by choice or necessity, could benefit from similar policies that address their immediate access to rights and desire to return to the United States.

## Conclusion

Among U.S. citizens immigrating to Mexico in recent years are an unknown number of U.S. citizen spouses (and their children), primarily in their 30s and 40s, who married Mexican citizens and were co-deported or departed voluntarily with their undocumented husbands.<sup>85</sup> The challenges they face are unique, immense, and numerous. Barriers to residency requirements, age and language discrimination, security concerns, adjustment to a lower standard of living, and inability to access health care and jobs have kept them dislocated in Mexico.<sup>86</sup> As they count down the 10-year reentry immigration bar that applies to their husbands, a consequence of unlawful presence in the United States, these women struggle to establish and reinvent themselves in the country their husbands fled for a better life.<sup>87</sup> These American women encounter difficulties and an unwelcoming reception politically, economically, and socially as a result of the lack of recognition of their challenges and the absence of processes or social services that address their needs. Their arrival in Mexico from a more developed country further limits the support they receive from extended Mexican family, local communities, and the Mexican government.

In addition to the challenges these U.S. women face, their children, also often U.S.-born, face their own hardships as they transition from life in the United States to life in Mexico. More than half struggle to obtain residency in the country and have been unable to integrate into the Mexican education system or access health care and other basic rights and services.<sup>88</sup> While a significant number of U.S. minors live along the border and many manage a binational life, the remainder live in interior cities, villages, and small towns. Many also live in primarily indigenous states, where they experience unique and challenging social conditions and even abject poverty, sometimes living without basic

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<sup>85</sup> April M. Schueths and Nathan Palmer, "Family Preservation Strategies: Regendering Labor in Mixed-Status Marriage After Co-Deportation," *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* XLVIII, no. 1 (March 2021): 58, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350592252\\_Family\\_Preservation\\_Strategies\\_Regendering\\_Labor\\_in\\_Mixed-Status\\_Marriage\\_After\\_Co-Deportation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/350592252_Family_Preservation_Strategies_Regendering_Labor_in_Mixed-Status_Marriage_After_Co-Deportation); Beth Caldwell, "Deported by Marriage," 2.

<sup>86</sup> Interviews with wives and children of those deported to Mexico, as well as migrant-serving organizations and activists, in Western Central Mexico (2022).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Coordinación Interinstitucional Especializada, "Informe: Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes Binacionales."

utilities like running water.<sup>89</sup> Longing for home, a vast majority express a strong desire to return to the United States one day.<sup>90</sup> Additional future obstacles such as reintegration into U.S. society will also be complicated. At that time, without deliberate and explicit support from the U.S. government, they may lack the cultural capital, language skills, education, and ability to access anything but the most rudimentary jobs, limiting their ability to climb the socioeconomic ladder.

As the U.S. population in Mexico continues to grow due to deportation and return migration, the social and resource implications of their eventual likely repatriation must be factored. Who will reorient them? Where will they live? Will they have health care? Will they require government financial assistance? Will schools and institutions be ready for them? Who will hire them? What will be their labor force characteristics? Will they understand their obligations as citizens? Failure to weigh these questions now will have serious implications for the United States in the future, as a large, invisible, and sometimes non-English-speaking population reenters the United States.

## Recommendations

An emigrant policy that responds to current protection and binational needs of U.S. citizens in Mexico and considers their impending “great return” to the United States would prioritize the elimination of actual and perceived integration and reintegration barriers as outlined in the recommendations below.

### *Integration in Mexico*

To facilitate the integration of U.S. citizen immigrants into Mexican society, we recommend that the U.S. consular corps in Mexico prioritize the following actions.

- Provide orientation and information services, as well as direct and bridge services, to help arriving Americans connect to immigration, legal, educational, housing, job, language, health care, and community programs and assistance in Mexico.
- Launch a sensitization campaign regarding U.S. identification documents and naming conventions at public and private institutions, while pushing for acceptance of U.S. identity documents as proof of identity.
- Create a liaison position within the Bureau of Consular Affairs to coordinate with the U.S. National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems and individual state vital statistics departments, as well as the Mexican civil registry and migration institute, for prompt authentication and apostille of U.S. birth certificates.

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<sup>89</sup> Masferrer, Hamilton, and Denier, “Immigrants in Their Parental Homeland,” 1456.

<sup>90</sup> Hamann, Zúñiga, and Sánchez García, “From Nuevo León to the USA and Back Again.”

## U.S. Citizens in Mexico: Displaced Without Protection

- Create a second liaison position within the Bureau of Consular Affairs to coordinate with the Mexico Department of Education (*Secretaría de Educación, SEP*) to safeguard the right of U.S. children to education and intervene in individual cases.
- Conduct regular outreach and visits to vulnerable communities where there is a known high concentration of U.S. citizens.
- Coordinate health services that link low-income U.S. residents with free and low-cost medical services.
- Work closely with the Mexican Census Bureau to accurately count the number of U.S. citizens in Mexico in order to inform future programming and services.
- Partner with local government agencies and service providers in direct contact with U.S. citizens to provide and expand service capability.

### *Reintegration in the United States*

To aid in the eventual reintegration of this population into American society, we recommend that the U.S. consular corps in Mexico prioritize the following actions.

- Provide information services, as well as direct and bridge services, to help departing Americans understand their obligations as U.S. citizens and connect to U.S. legal, educational, housing, job training and assistance, language, health care, and community programs and assistance.
- Work with companies like Kuepa that offer GED testing in Mexico to ensure U.S. citizens will have a high school diploma when they return to the United States.
- Coordinate with the Department of Labor to encourage U.S. citizens coming from Mexico to obtain occupational licenses and sign up for trade schools in order to meet demand for U.S. workers.
- Cultivate long-term relations with the U.S. diaspora via cultural activities and community outreach programs.
- Fund English language programs directed at U.S. citizens.
- Assist Americans in obtaining a copy of their birth certificate.
- Accept applications for a Social Security number and card, or card replacements, at any consular office.
- Ensure every American can receive their U.S. passport, and access at least one form of government-issued photo ID before returning to the United States, by eliminating the passport fee or adopting a country-specific or means-based fee schedule.