

# ***DE LA CLANDESTINIDAD A LA LUZ: RESILIENCE MECHANISMS DEVELOPED BY CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANTS***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

How have undocumented migrants from the Norther Triangle of Central America adapted and coped with selective and restrictive immigration laws to cross the US-Mexico and the Mexico-Guatemala borders? This paper proposes the use of “resilience”, a concept developed by Ecology (Folke, 2006; Folke et al., 2003), and social resilience capacities (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013) and the concepts of the Autonomy of Migration approach (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Casas-Cortés & Cobarrubias, 2020; Hess, 2017; Mezzadra, 2011) that presents borders as a contestation between the State apparatus that denies migrants’ rights and mobility, and the set of skills, desires, resources, behaviors, and subjective practices of migrants (Basok & Candiz, 2020; Cobarrubias et al., 2011; Hess, 2017; Mezzadra, 2020).

Given the large-scale arrivals of Central Americans to the US, the US and Mexico created policies and programs to deter undocumented migration. The goal of the programs was to spread security controls across the Southern border and into Mexico through the creation and intensification of actions and policies of containment, identification, apprehension, and deportation of undocumented migrants in Mexico (Anguiano Téllez & Trejo Peña, 2007; París Pombo, 2017; Torre Cantalapiedra & Yee Quintero, 2018; Varela Huerta, 2018; Vogt, 2020). Consequently, there was a rise in apprehensions and deportations, as well as physical, emotional, and legal violence experienced migrants, as they are likely to experience robberies, extortion, physical abuse, kidnappings, and other forms of violence in transit.

To remain invisible vis-à-vis the tougher immigration laws and border regimes in Mexico and the US, migrants developed resilience mechanisms. Social resilience is the “ability of human communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure”, such as environmental variability and social, economic and political upheaval (Adger, 2000). The concept incorporates the idea of adaptation, resistance, learning, and self-organization in addition to the ability to persist outside disturbance (Abu-Amsha & Armstrong, 2018; Adger, 2000; Folke, 2006; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

Elaborating this definition and based on the of Lusk et al. (2019), I expand the literature on ways in which migrants adapt, resist, and self-organize in the face of restrictive immigration policies and border regime in the Central American-US corridor. Drawing on the literature on social resilience, I analyze migrants’ responses and suggest their classification as coping, adaptative or transformative capacities. While extensive literature has been written on migrants’ and refugees’ resilience, little attention has been devoted to classify their actions in relation to the social resilience capacities.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first presents a theoretical framework based on the Autonomy of Migration and Resilience. The second details the actions carried out by the Mexican and US governments to curb undocumented migration. The third explores the effects of such actions, suggesting increased detention, deportation and violence towards migrants. The last discusses the resilience mechanisms developed by migrants, such as the use of *coyotes*, the formation of transient communities (Díaz de León, 2020), and asylum in Mexico (París Pambo, 2019; Torre Cantalapiedra & Mariscal Nava, 2020). Most recently, the caravan of migrants of 2018 can be also be understood as a resilience mechanism.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The concept of resilience was first used in ecology in the 1960s and 1970s to explain the relationships between populations and their responses, in light of ecological stability theory (Folke, 2006). Ecologist Crawford Holling, studying ecosystems, introduced the concept of resilience as the capacity to absorb change in the face of disturbance (Folke, 2006; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). He argued, “resilience was the measure of systems and of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables” (Holling, 1973, p. 14) The concept was developed to gain understanding on non-linear dynamics, such as the processes by which socio-ecological systems maintain themselves in the face of perturbations and change.

With time, the term has evolved, critiqued and expanded. For Carl Folke (2006, p. 259), resilience “is capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and re-organize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks”. Abu-Amsha & Armstrong (2018, p. 48), argued resilience is a process of “adapting well and achieving success in the face of adversity, trauma, violent threats, or other significant sources of stress.” In the same vein, Lusk et al., 2019 (2019, p. 5) noted that resilience is the ability to overcome adversity and respond to trauma. Folke (2006) argued that the term should not only mean the capacity to absorb change, but tolerate and deal with the change that results from the self-organization in face of perturbation. In other words, the term incorporates the ability to adapt, learn, self-organize, and persist to change. These characteristics relate to the underlying principles of resilience: persistability, adaptability, and transformability (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013).

The concept has been applied in different disciplines. For instance, in anthropology, ecological economics, non-linear dynamics, cultural theory, human geography, as well as in social sciences, education, and development (Abu-Amsha & Armstrong, 2018; Folke, 2006;

Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). In social sciences, it has been applied in migration and refugee studies (Abu-Amsha & Armstrong, 2018; Alberto & Chilton, 2019; Hlatshwayo & Vally, 2014; Lusk et al., 2019; Rizzo Lara, 2012).

The extension of the term to social sciences implied the crafting of the term “social resilience.” Neil Adger (2000, p. 361) defined social resilience as the “ability of human communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure”, in the form of environmental variability, and social, economic, and political upheaval. Here, social resilience responds to a variety of threats: natural hazards and disasters; resource scarcity and environmental variability; and social change, that comprises economic crisis, migration, policy and institutional change, among others (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Further, the extension to social sciences implied a refocus on actors, rather than systems, and on capacities, as opposed to functionalities, while adding an emphasis on the context and connectedness between the social and ecological environment (*Ibid*).

In migration and refugee studies, resilience and social resilience has been used to describe mechanisms by which migrants and refugee populations cope, adapt, and self-organize to face internal and external threats. For instance, Rosario Rizzo Lara (2012) analyzes corn farmers’ responses to changes in the economic, political, and social sectors brought about by the implementation of the neoliberal model in Mexico. She argues corn farmers developed different strategies and tactics that allowed them to cope with huge corn imports, drops in corn prices, cancellation of social programs and subsidies, unemployment, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises. For instance, some farmers shifted to more profitable crops; others increased the area of cultivation; others developed new products; and others decided to migrate. In this context, Angela Mitropoulos argues migration is a strategy "that is undertaken in and against the cramped spaces of the global political economies of work, gender, and desire, among other things, but also a strategy for all that" (Mitropoulos, 2007, p. 130).

Further, Ranabir Samaddar in his research on transborder migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal explains how people resist through migration: “the decision of the immigrant to escape from the clutches of social relations and of entrenched power hierarchies in his/her home village, town or country ... is his/her resistance” (Samaddar, 1999 p.150 in Mezzadra, 2011, pp. 229–230). This concept of migrants’ resistance is shared by Sandro Mezzadra, who stresses that “even in the direst conditions people are never completely victims, are never fully deprived of their capacity to act and resist” (Mezzadra, 2020, p. 433).

Abu-Amsha & Armstrong (2018) analyze the experiences of Syrian refugee children in Beirut, Lebanon. They assessed the risks that refugee students face when trying to get an education. For instance, language barriers, cramped spaces, poor-quality instruction, as well as discrimination, including verbal abuse, corporal punishment and humiliation. The findings show how a non-formal education centre, Jusoor School, is attempting to mitigate these risks and assist students to develop resilience through education.

Lusk et al. (2019) analyze the different ways in which Central American migrants cope with assault, kidnapping, sexual violence, human trafficking, and extortion, in their transit through Mexico. They argue that even in the face of traumatic experiences, forced migrants display remarkable resilience, which is strengthened by deeply personal faith and strong networks.

Elaborating on Lusk et al.’s (2019) work, I expand on ways in which migrants adapt, resist, and self-organize in the face of restrictive immigration policies and border regime in the Central American-US corridor. Drawing on the literature on social resilience, I analyze migrants’ responses and suggest their classification as coping, adaptative or transformative capacities. While extensive literature has been written on migrants’ and refugees’ resilience, little attention has been devoted to classify their actions in relation to the social resilience capacities. This paper also responds to Keck & Sakdapolrak’s (2013) call for studies that

present a discussion between place, scale, and social resilience, understanding resilience as a product of the interaction between global and local forces.

I also draw on the Autonomy of Migration (AoM) approach to provide a lens to study the space where the actions are displayed, that is, at and beyond the border; the risks that migrants face, per the implementation of restrictive immigration policies, and the context in which these occur, understanding the social, political and social environment that influences the development of resilience.

According to AoM, the border is not only the physical border but a site of encounters, challenges contestation, and negotiation, defiance and resistance (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Hess, 2017; Khosravi, 2007). The approach understands that migration is a co-constituent to the border (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015), as the border is also reconfigured with and after migration. This model understands borders as something that can be defied and transgressed; it presents borders as a contestation between the State apparatus that denies migrants' rights and mobility, and the set of skills, desires, resources, behaviors, and subjective practices of migrants (Basok & Candiz, 2020; Cobarrubias et al., 2011).

## **CONTEXT: IMMIGRATION POLICIES IN MEXICO AND THE US**

In this highly globalized era, migration is one fundamental element of capitalism and capital accumulation through labor exploitation. The introduction of developed nations into developing nations to acquire raw materials and labor have caused the disruption of societies that result in the displacement of people from usual livelihoods, and create a mobile population in search of new sources of income and employment (Massey, 2002; Massey et al., 2002). At the same time, developed countries demand low-skilled, cheap labor to take on unwanted, often low-paid jobs from developing countries, while enacting selective policies that regulate the entrance of migrants, creating what James Hollifield called the "liberal paradox", that is, "open"

markets and "closed" political societies (Álvarez Velasco, 2016; De Genova, 2002; Hollifield, 2006). That is, developed nations promote the liberalization of economies, commercial exchange, and the flexibilization of trade regulations, reflected in the signing of free trade agreements, but create migration policies that restrain the entrance of certain populations. Immigration policies restrain the entrance of migrants from poor countries and refugees, while allowing entry to other categories of migrants—students, investors, highly-skilled workers, and tourists—creating a classification of “desired and “undesired” migrants (Álvarez Velasco, 2016). The undesired migrants are subject to racialization, policing, and the target of ferocious immigration policies that criminalize and push them into irregularity (Álvarez Velasco, 2016; De Genova, 2002; Núñez, 2020). It is in this context that “undesired migrants”— “poor” migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers—seek to enter the countries *irregularly*, as they are constrained by the migration policies imposed by developed nations. In turn, these policies create the paradox of the “revolving door” that consists of migration, deportation and (re)migration.

Irregularized migrants have been depicted as dangerous and "dirty" others—illegal, rapists, criminals, smugglers, poor—are often seen as a threat to the national security (Núñez, 2020; Vogt, 2020). Thus, the state legitimizes the (excessive) use of force against the “illegal and irregular” in the name of national security (Álvarez Velasco, 2016). It does so through the increased and continuous use of technology devices, such as the use of infrared cameras and drones; surveillance mechanisms whereby the State deploys law enforcement agencies and officers of the National Guard to the border; and the construction of mobile checkpoints and fences to control and limit the movement of people. Particularly, after the events of the 09/11 in the US, the notion security became a key element of migration governance which prompted the dissolution of the INS into agencies of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2003.

Different authors have pointed out how the intervention of the US in Central America produced mass displacement. Particularly, the US involvement in the outbreak of the Civil Wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and the military intervention in Honduras, paved the ground for mass migration since the 1970s. The intervention led to profound economic, social and political problems that resulted in migration mostly to the US, and to a lesser extent to Mexico. Amid the arrivals, the US and Mexico started to create policies to stop the entrance of *irregularized* migrants.

### **Containing (irregularized) migration**

Given the large-scale arrivals during and after the Salvadoran (1980-1992) and Guatemalan Civil wars (1960-1996), the US created policies and programs to deter undocumented migration. According to Bill Frelick (1991), in 1989 the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS)<sup>1</sup> announced “Operation Hold the Line”<sup>2</sup> targeting specifically undocumented migrants from Central America by increasing the presence of US Border Patrol. In February 1989, the US launched the Enhancement Plan for the Southern Border, whereby the INS and Mexican Immigration Services collaborated to stem and deter the flow of Central American migration. Prior to implementation of the plan, in 1988, Mexico apprehended and deported 14,000 migrants; in 1989, the number increased to 85,000; and, in the first six months of 1990, 80,000 people were sent back to their home countries (Frelick, 1991). Rodolfo Casillas (2002 in París Pombo, 2017) estimated that 130,000 migrants were deported from Mexico in

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<sup>1</sup> The Immigration and Naturalization Service was an agency of the Department of Justice until 2003, when its functions were transferred to the newly created entities: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) under the jurisdiction of the Department of Homeland Security after the restructure of the government that followed the events of 9/11.

<sup>2</sup> This program would be the first of many in which Mexico and the US would work together to deter undocumented migration, see the Enhancement Plan for the Southern Border (Frelick, 1991); Southern Plan (Anguiano Téllez & Trejo Peña, 2007; París Pombo, 2017; Torre Cantalapiedra & Mariscal Nava, 2020); South Border Program (Animal Político, 2014; Grupo de Trabajo sobre Política Migratoria, 2014; Swanson et al., 2015; Varela Huerta, 2015b).



1990, and that the number remained steady through the last three years of the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). The INS-Mexico cooperation included the training of Mexican officers, information exchange, the establishment of checkpoints along the transit corridors, and deportation of those intercepted (Frelick, 1991). The collaboration aimed to increase detention in Mexico and reduce apprehensions in the US. In 1990, apprehensions by the INS declined, without suggesting increased effectiveness of the Border Patrol or IRCA's sanctions<sup>3</sup>, rather signaling the “effectiveness” of the collaboration.

Since 1990s, the US has expanded its geopolitical influence and has intensified actions and policies of containment, identification, apprehension, and deportation of undocumented migrants in Mexico (Anguiano Téllez & Trejo Peña, 2007; París Pombo, 2017; Torre Cantalapiedra & Yee Quintero, 2018; Vogt, 2020), that is, the US externalized its border<sup>4</sup> (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Varela Huerta, 2018). Following the narrative migrants as dangerous others, in 1993, the Mexican government created the National Migration Institute (INM) (Spanish acronym) to prevent further entrances, particularly from Central America, and to tackle human trafficking and narco trafficking under the premise of national security. In 1996, changes to the Mexican General Population Law allowed the establishment of checkpoints in migration routes and other places, aside from the official points of entry, and endorsed the detention of foreigners in case of law violations that would merit their expulsion from the country (Torre Cantalapiedra & Yee Quintero, 2018). The changes in the legislation account for the criminalization of migration and the subsequent rise in irregularized migration.

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<sup>3</sup> The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 legalized the status of undocumented migrants in the US, created sanctions for employers who knowingly hired undocumented aliens, and launched a series of restrictive policies and repressive immigration controls. Subsequent immigration laws would seek to criminalize undocumented migration (Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Antiterrorism; SB1070, among others), increase apprehensions and deportations (Durand, 2013; Guerette & Clarke, 2005; Massey et al., 2002).

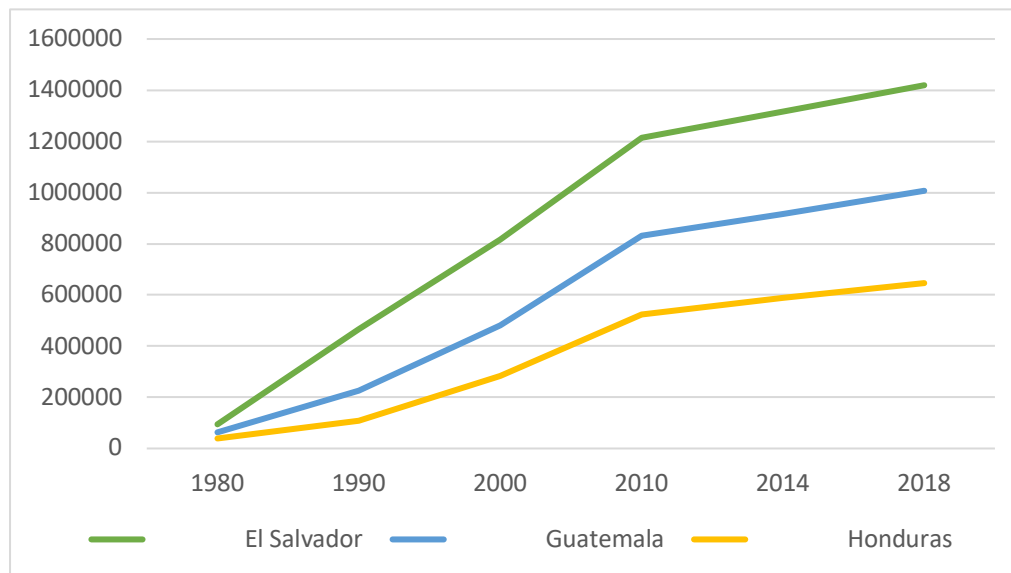
<sup>4</sup> Border externalization refers to the set of policies and procedures that states employ before the arrival of people at the border and remain after people have entered their territory. It aims to prevent migration. It often includes the participation of diverse actors -- public, private, state, and supranational (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Varela Huerta, 2015b).

The continuous arrivals from Central America (see Figure 1) after Hurricane Mitch and Stan added pressure on the Mexican government, who in 2001 implemented the Southern Plan in collaboration with the US. The goal was to increase and spread security controls across the border with Guatemala and Belize, so, mobile checkpoints in unofficial points of entry, typically placed along highways, were installed in the southern states of Veracruz, Tabasco, Chiapas, and Oaxaca, (París Pombo, 2017; Torre Cantalapiedra & Yee Quintero, 2018). The government also installed surveillance devices – infrared cameras– and built detention facilities across the country, going from 25 facilities in 2000 to 52 in 2005. The actions shifted the policies of containment, as migration control extended beyond the border region and into the country (Torre Cantalapiedra, 2019).

In 2007, presidents Felipe Calderon and George Bush signed a security partnership called "*Iniciativa Mérida*", under which US\$ 2.8 billion was ostensibly used to address drug trafficking and organized crime. In practice, the money was directed towards immigration enforcement. Hence, Mexico continued the militarization of borders and routes, highways, and railways, the construction of detention facilities, and training of officials on security matters (París Pombo, 2017; Vogt, 2020). During this time, Felipe Calderon also started the "war on drugs", which ultimately affected migrants, as they became targets of drug cartels who systematically extort, rob, abduct, and kill migrants. By the same token, the Southern Border Program (SBP), part of the National Security Plan, created in June 2013, was officially launched by the Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto, in 2014 vis-à-vis the so-called "humanitarian crisis" (Animal Político, 2014; Grupo de Trabajo sobre Política Migratoria, 2014; Swanson et al., 2015; Torre Cantalapiedra & Yee Quintero, 2018). The program was to provide security and target narcotrafficking, but in practice, the SBP aimed to prevent arrivals, and increase detection, detention, and deportation of undocumented migrants (Grupo de Trabajo sobre Política Migratoria, 2014; Swanson et al., 2015). Special emphasis was placed

on detaining and deporting unaccompanied children, given that more than 67,000 minors were detained in the US in 2014 (Department of Homeland Security, 2015). The result was a major increase in the number of apprehensions and deportations in the following months in Mexico. Most importantly, the high ratio of apprehensions and deportations indicated the limited humanitarian screening, assessment of their needs, causes of displacement, and inadequate due-process protections (Dominguez Villegas & Rietig, 2015).

Figure 1. US Immigrant population by country of origin, 1980-2018



Source: Elaborated by the author with information (Migration Policy Institute, 2019)

In the US, a series of programs were also implemented to curb migration from Mexico and Central America, which included, but were not limited to, the fortification of the border with the construction of the wall across the southern border, the deployment of thousands of border patrol officers, the construction of detention centers, and the implementation of laws that criminalize migration and deny migrants rights (Torres, 2018; Vogt, 2020).

In December 2018, President Trump implemented new policies to curb mass migration from Central America. The US government announced the launching of the “Migrant

Protection Protocols” (MPP) an initiative whereby undocumented foreigners entering or seeking admission to the U.S. may be returned to Mexico for the duration of their immigration proceedings (Department of Homeland Security, 2019b). The MPP were implemented in January 24<sup>th</sup> 2019. The *unilateral* initiative, -also known as *Quédate en Mexico* (Remain in Mexico), meant that thousands of Central Americans whom were able to arrive to the US-Mexico border to seek asylum in the U.S. were sent back to Mexican border towns, Ciudad Juarez, Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo, Tijuana, Mexicali, to wait for admission, hearings, and in the best-case scenario, adjudication.

Throughout the first quarter of 2019, migrants continued to arrive to both Mexico and the United States. As a result, in May, president Trump announced an increase in import tariffs to Mexican products, progressively from 5-25%. In a statement that followed, it was said that tariffs would increase gradually to reach 25%. The goal of the initiative was to stem the flow of undocumented migration. Kevin McAleenan, the acting Secretary of Homeland Security revealed the White House wanted Mexico to “increase security at the border with Guatemala, crack down on criminal gangs that help migrants, and help the United States more with asylum seekers” (Karni et al., 2019, para. 18). At the same time, it was expressed that the success of the strategy would be measured by the number of people crossing the border, and Mexico’s performance would be judged on “day to day or week by week” basis (*ibid*).

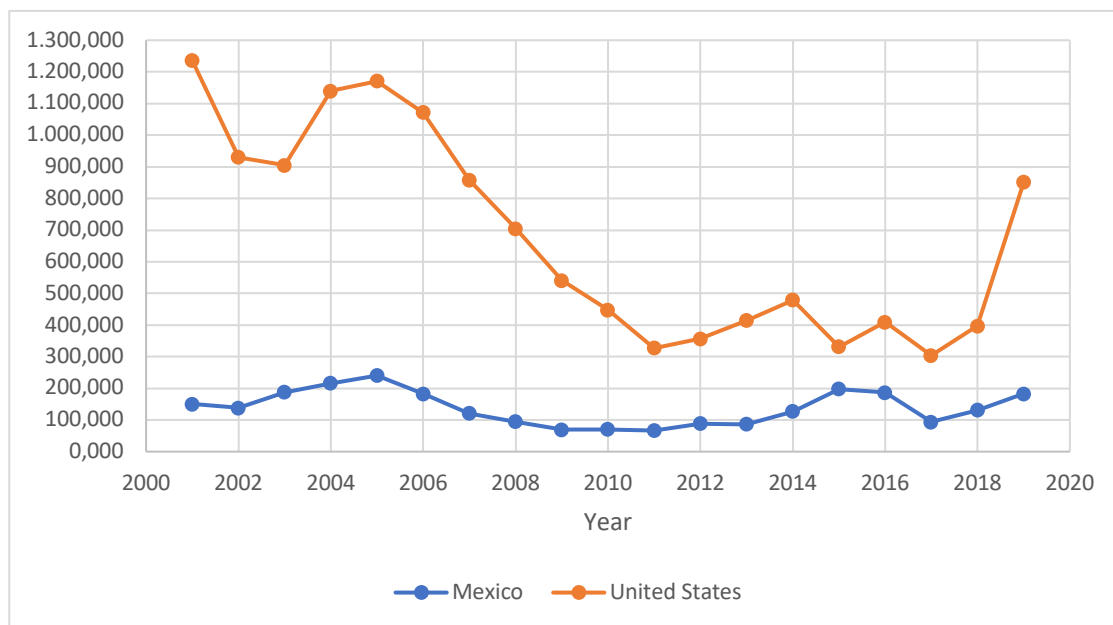
Mexico endorsed the initiative. Following a series of talks, the governments, in a joint declaration announced: a) Mexico would deploy its National Guard to curb irregular migration, firstly, to the southern border; b) the US would expand the MPP across the Southern border; c) in the event of not having the expected results, both governments would take action and additional terms would be discussed and announced within 90 days; d) the U.S. and Mexico welcomed the adoption of the Comprehensive Development Plan to promote prosperity, good governance and security in Central America (Department of State, 2019). In addition, the

Mexican government was to take action to dismantle human smuggling, trafficking organizations as well as their transportation networks. In terms of those who were returned to Mexico as part of the MPP, the administration would offer jobs, healthcare and education. The U.S. in turn, said it would expedite adjudication of asylum procedures. Recent figures released by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) showed that 60,000 people have been sent to Mexico (Barnes, 2020).

**RISKS: DETENTION, DEPORTATION, AND VIOLENCE(S)**

Over the past 20 years, the implementation of the restrictive immigration policies and the joint programs with the US resulted in very high numbers of detentions. For instance, in figure 2 shows an increase in apprehensions in 2004 by the US Border Patrol because of the heightening of measures in the aftermath of the 9/11. A decrease can be seen in the 2007-2008 period following the US Great Recession. However, migration augmented in the mid 2010s and with that detentions in both Mexico and the US. Central American apprehensions increased by 85 percent after the implementation of the Southern Border Program (Vogt, 2020).

Figure 2. Migrant detentions in Mexico and the US, 2001-2019



Source: elaborated by the author with information from (Department of Homeland Security, 2019a; UPMRIP, 2020).

Further, the number of deportations has also increased. The high percentage of deportations in relation to detentions speaks to the lack of assessment of migrants' and asylum seekers' needs when they are apprehended and the fast-track deportation policy employed. Often, Mexican authorities do not explain the right to asylum and due process to the detainees; rather, immigration officers state that if they apply for asylum or file an administrative appeal against deportation, they will stay in detention indefinitely, which ultimately prevents them from taking actions (Gandini et al., 2020). In fact, in 2013, 94 percent of those detained in Mexico were deported back to their home countries. The increase in apprehensions and deportations relates to the criminalization of migration.

Table 1. Apprehension, deportations, and deportations as a percentage of detentions in Mexico, 2013-2019

Year	Detentions	Deportations	% of deportation in relation to detentions
2013	86 298	80 902	94%
2014	127 149	107 814	85%
2015	198 141	181 163	91%
2016	186 216	159 872	86%
2017	93 846	82 237	88%
2018	131 445	115 686	88%
2019	182 940	149 812	82%

Source: by the author with information from (COMAR, 2020; UPMRIP, 2020)

The control exercised at the border has also led to an increase in the physical, emotional and legal violence experienced by migrants, as they are likely to experience robberies, extortion, physical abuse, kidnappings, and other forms of violence in transit, not only by criminal organizations but often by immigration officials. The joint programs created and employed to fortify the Mexican and US borders only exacerbated the conditions under which undocumented migrants were making the trips to Mexico and the US. In 2010, the killing of 72 undocumented migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, and in 2012 in Cadereyta, Nuevo Leon caused outrage on the part of civil society, activists, and scholars, who demanded that the government provide protection and respect migrants' human rights (París Pombo, 2017; Varela

Huerta, 2017). The killings exhibited the atrocities that migrants experience throughout the migratory route. Undocumented migrants in transit through Mexico are robbed, kidnapped, raped, tortured, killed, forcibly disappeared, and extorted by criminal organizations, police, and even the migration officers. In 2009, the National Commission on Human Rights released figures showing that every year about 20,000 migrants are kidnapped by organized crime; and up to two-thirds suffer extortion or robbery (Sorensen, 2013). Also, a large percentage of women are raped in transit (Castillo, 2019). In 2017, *Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) reported that more than 68 percent of the Central American migrants and refugees interviewed suffered physical violence; while 31.4 percent of women and 17.2 percent of men were sexually abused during their transit through Mexico (MSF, 2017).

## **MECHANISMS OF RESILIENCE**

Considering the obstacles and restrictions imposed in the region, as well as the legal, physical and emotional violence that migrants experience in transit, migrants have developed resilience capacities, which allow them to cope, adapt, and transform. Keck & Sakdapolrak (2013) argue coping capacities encompass reactive (ex-post) and absorptive measures that allow people to cope with events so as to restore their level of wellbeing. Adaptive capacities include proactive or preventive measures that people employ after an experience, which allow them to anticipate risks. The authors argue the difference between coping and adaptive capacities stands in the temporal scope of the activities, as the first involves short-term rationale and the second, long-term planning. A third resilience capacity is addressed by the authors: transformative or “participative capacities.” This refer to the people’s capacity to access assistance from other actors (civil society and NGOs), participation in decision making processes, and creation of institutions that improve their well-being. The difference between

transformation and adaptation relies on the degree of change that it is sought. The first seeks radical change to enhance people's lives.

Using this perspective, I argue that migrants have been able to develop a series of tactics and strategies that allow them to cope, adapt and transform. For instance, migrants have sought to hire coyotes to cross the borders; formed small communities in transit; applied for asylum in Mexico; and have formed large-groups to migrate collectively. These strategies can be classified as coping, adaptive or transformative capacities.

a) *Coyotes*<sup>5</sup>. Undocumented migrants often hire coyotes to cross international borders (Zijlstra & Van Liempt, 2017). Authors studying migration from Mexico to the US have largely discussed the use of coyotes and their types (Bustamante, 1997; Guerette & Clarke, 2005; Paris Pombo, 2018; Spener, 2009). One early account of the interactions of undocumented migrants and coyotes in the US-Mexico border was written by Jorge Bustamante in 1973 who, using participant observation, claimed to be an undocumented migrant crossing the US-Mexico Border (Bustamante, 1973, 1997). Bustamante talked about how migrants approach the encounters with coyotes, the crossing experience, and the cost of coyotes. Wendy Vogt (2020, p. 8) contends coyotes are often seen as facilitators, guides, and even protectors, and migrants depend on them for their connections, information and knowledge about the transit. More recently, smugglers have been associated to the organized crime that operates in Mexico, particularly in the states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas and how organized crime has taken over the routes usually used by migrants, while demanding coyotes and migrants for "taxes" to cross the territory. Migrants from the Northern Triangle of Central America have largely used coyotes to cross Mexico in their attempt to reach the US; however, the securitization

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<sup>5</sup> In Spanish, the word *coyote* has been commonly applied to a human smuggler. They have "facilitated" undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States and from Central America to the United States for several decades. *Pollero* is another term for a smuggler and used interchangeably. The literature on smugglers has shown how as a result of increasing immigration control enforcement, migrants have opted to "hire" *coyotes*, who force them to pay thousands of dollars (Guerette & Clarke, 2005). For a more detailed account of migrants' and coyotes' experiences see (Spener, 2009).



implemented by Mexico and the US have caused a large increase in the cost of coyotes. For instance, in 2018 the cost to cross Mexico was about 7,000 dollars per person (Varela Huerta & McLean, 2019). This has forced migrants, specially, Hondurans to take on different alternatives for crossing. The strategy of hiring coyotes speaks about an adaptive capacity, in that people have learned that in order to cross, they need to plan accordingly, by saving money or asking for a family member. More importantly, those who cannot afford the trip, also adapt by seeking alternative opportunities for crossing.

b) *Formation of small groups and communities.* Those who are unable to hire a smuggler, use different strategies to cross the border, such as walking in small groups and forming communities along the routes (Díaz de León, 2020; París Pombo, 2018a; Sorensen, 2013). María Dolores París Pombo (2018) and Ninna Sorensen (2013) explain that groups are usually formed of family, acquaintances, and friends, of three to eight people. Often, migrants find other migrants during the journey and thus create small networks for safety and communication. Migrants travel in small groups, by foot, sometimes by boat, or on the tops of freight trains<sup>6</sup>. They usually travel at night or dawn, following routes established by fellow migrants, that extend into the wilderness to remain invisible to surveillance mechanisms and the policies that deter unauthorized migration. Alejandra Díaz de León, in her study of undocumented Central American migrants to the US, found that throughout the journey migrants create a “transient community” that provides them with essential information about the journey, resources that compensate for the lack of kinship among them, and even a sense of shared identity on the basis of shared experiences of suffering—“a shift of ‘me’ to ‘we’ among migrants” (Díaz de León, 2020, p. 2). I argue that this is a coping strategy, in light of

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<sup>6</sup> The case of migrants traveling on top of the trains in Mexico, known as “*La Bestia*” is widely known. The route goes from the Southern state, Chiapas, to the border state of Tamaulipas. It takes its name as there are many risks and dangers throughout the route.

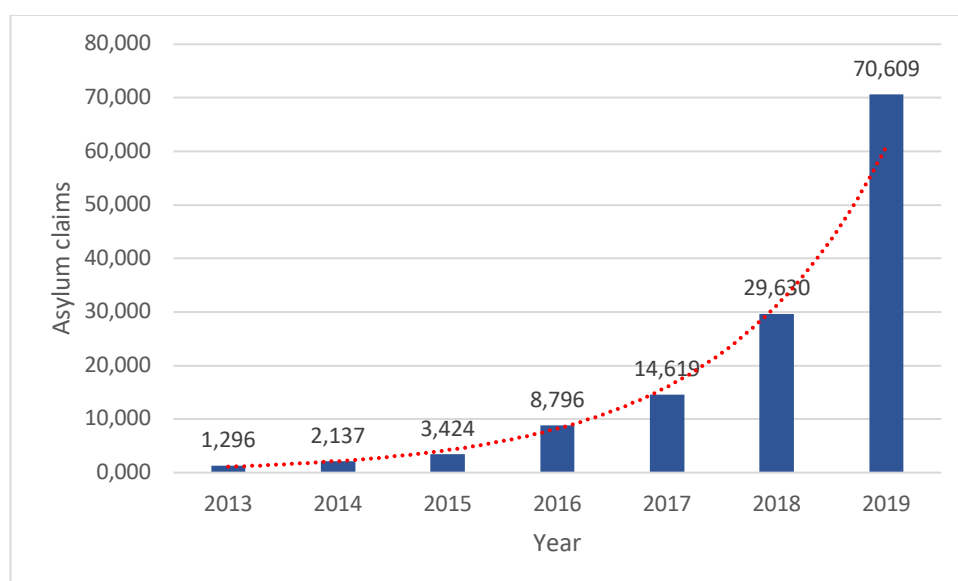
the formation of small communities along the trail. It is rather a reaction to what they experience in transit, as it is not a long-term plan or solution.

Further, Ninna Nyberg Sorensen (2013) explains Hondurans hardly have the economic means to hire coyotes, so, they decide to travel by themselves, which in turn exposes them to different dangers along the migratory route. According to a survey conducted among Honduran, Guatemalan and Salvadoran migrants deported from the US and Mexico, Hondurans ranked third in the use of a coyote to cross the border, being Guatemalans the ones that use them the most (Bojorquez Chapela et al., 2019). Also, they started to migrate to the US at the end of the 1990s, thus they have fewer family members in the US compared to its Salvadoran or Guatemalan counterparts who can help them to finance the trip (Blanchard et al., 2011; Sorensen, 2013). Small-group migration, then, was a rather different strategy to mitigate the risks associated with illegal, clandestine crossings, and the lack of funds to make the trip.

c) *Access to shelters*. Migrants have learned from experience that there are multiple religious and community-based shelters along the Central America-US corridor. Even volunteers working at the shelters in Guatemala inform about the partner organizations that are in Mexico. Migrants are also assisted by activists and NGOs that promote migrant and refugee rights, providing them with information about regularization procedures, asylum, legal orientation, food, shelter and clothing. Many of these organizations, such as *Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano*, bring to light the violence and abuses migrants experience, and the lack of government's responsibility and accountability in Mexico. This strategy could be defined as a transformative capacity, in the sense that looks to create radical change in the way that migrants make the trip upwards. Also, it speaks about the access migrants have to different institutions and resources.

d) *Asylum in Mexico*. Over the last five years, the number of asylum seekers in Mexico has skyrocketed (see Figure 3). The immigration and refugee policies in both Mexico and the US have led to an increase of asylum claims in Mexico, as people look for ways to avoid deportation (París Pambo, 2019). According to the Mexican Refugee Law (LRPCAP) (Spanish acronym), asylum seekers must remain in the state in which they apply for asylum, because if they move to a different state, Mexican Refugee Agency, COMAR, rules the case as abandoned and finalizes the asylum procedure. As most people apply in the first state they arrive at, they get “stuck” in what activists such as Cristóbal Sánchez and Martha Soler have labeled “*Ciudades cárceles*” (jail cities) (Latin American Studies Association, 2020). In other words, most Central American migrants apply for asylum in the state of Chiapas. COMAR’s reception center in Chiapas registered more than 50 percent of all claims in 2018 (16,640) and about 60 percent in 2019 (45,821) (COMAR, 2020). This border town is overcrowded given the mass arrivals of migrants from Central and South America. The labor market in the cities has become saturated with little room for employment, which causes migrants to live in precarious situations, while adding emotional stress to them.

Figure 3. Asylum Claims in Mexico, 2013-2019



Source: Elaborated by the author with data from (COMAR, 2020)

The downside of this resilience mechanism is that the asylum system in Mexico is collapsed (París Pombo, 2019), and has systematically failed to meet the demands of refugees. The 2017 earthquake in Mexico caused serious delays in the processing of data, as the main COMAR building in Mexico City suffered grave damage. The offices relocated, but the backlog only mounted. In 2018 and 2019, the massive number of arrivals challenged and aggravated the already difficult situation: as of March 2020 only about 30% of all ever received claims have received a resolution (COMAR, 2020). The adjudication process is very slow given the shortage of personnel and resources, so asylum seekers wait more than double the estimated time<sup>7</sup> stipulated by the law, in a very precarious situation. For instance, asylum seekers have limited access to the labor market and thus lack funds to find adequate housing and meet basic needs such as clothing, education and food. At the same time, migrants and asylum seekers are easy targets of the organized crime that operates in the border cities. A report by the International Crisis Group in 2018 stated that some asylum seekers wait more than 150 days before receiving the adjudication of their claims (International Crisis Group, 2018). In fact, asylum seekers who apply for refugee once they are apprehended must wait several weeks in detention until their cases are opened by COMAR. During detention, they suffer discrimination, robberies, harassment, verbal and physical violence, among others (Gandini et al., 2020). Finally, the low rates refugee status in Mexico and the conditions under which asylum seekers wait for the resolution of their cases often leads them to disillusion and further abandonment of cases (París Pambo, 2019), and the use of other strategies to pursue their migration project.

This strategy of applying for asylum in Mexico can be deemed as a coping capacity. Many migrants change their mind while they are in transit after the traumatic experiences they have;

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Refugee Law (Ley de Refugiados, Protección Complementaria y Asilo Político -LRPCAP-), asylum seekers must wait 90 days to receive adjudications of their cases after COMAR has initiated their processing.

thus, many decide to apply for asylum in Mexico as opposed to continue their journey to the US. Other migrants fleeing persecution learn about asylum in Mexico while they are in detention centers or in shelters. Hence, they apply once they have heard about it. In other words, it is a reactive capacity that responds to how events unfold.

*e) Migration in caravans.* In the fall of 2018, a form of migration was employed by migrants: the caravans. The caravans were formed of large groups of people from the Northern Triangle of Central America walking together towards Mexico and the US, requesting a “free pass through Mexico.” Whether motivated by political, social, or economic reasons, Central American migrants have traveled to the US clandestinely. Routes established throughout the years, along with the enlargement of networks, the use of coyotes, and the advantages of technology (smartphones), and the leverage of social capital have allowed the crossing of thousands of undocumented migrants and asylum seekers for more than five decades. However, this form of clandestine migration changed in the fall of 2018. On October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018, a group of around 200 people gathered at the bus station in San Pedro Sula, Honduras to walk together to the US (Arroyo et al., 2018). As they moved forward, hundreds of Hondurans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorians joined the group. A few days later, more than 4,000 people arrived at the Mexico-Guatemala border demanding a “free pass” through Mexico (Ahmed et al., 2018; Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano, 2019; El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2018). Even Mexicans, who wanted to migrate to the US joined the caravan. In the following days, more groups formed in El Salvador and Honduras arrived at the Mexico-Guatemala border with the same purpose. Despite the harsh treatment by the Mexican government in Tapachula, Chiapas, where migrants at first were welcomed with tear gas and military troops, thousands continued to walk together aiming to reach the US (Prensa, 2018).

Central Americans, who for years had been victims of torture, rapes, kidnappings, disappearances, arbitrary detention, and denial of access to regularization and asylum procedures, walked together for more than 3,000 miles demanding that the Mexican government allow them to cross the country, either to stay there or reach the US-Mexico border, where they could apply for asylum. This last strategy is transformative. It seeks radical change not only in terms of how migrants experience the transit, but also to make themselves visible before a system that has rendered them invisible and illegal.

## **CONCLUSION**

Over the past 50 years, Central Americans have migrated to the US for economic, social, political and environmental reasons (Blanchard et al., 2011; Hamilton & Chinchilla, 1991; López Recinos, 2020; París Pombo, 2017; Rodríguez Chávez, 2016; Rodriguez, 1987; Saul, 2020; Stanley, 1987; Varela Huerta & McLean, 2019; Willers, 2019), mostly in a clandestine manner, individually or small groups (París Pombo, 2018; Sorensen, 2013), because of the tightening of migration policies and border enforcement to deter undocumented migration (Álvarez Velasco, 2016; Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Frelick, 1991; Massey et al., 2002; Torre Cantalapiedra & Yee Quintero, 2018; Varela Huerta, 2015).

However, Central American migrants have proved to be resourceful and resilient. They have developed a series of tactics, and strategies, to cope with, adapt and transform amid external and internal disturbance. This case study contributes to the literature on social resilience by showing how the different strategies that migrants employ can be deemed as coping, adaptive or transformative capacities.

Often, migrants have been depicted as victims or recipients of humanitarian aid, invisible, deprived from agency (Dikeç, 2013; Mezzadra, 2020; Suárez-Navaz, 2007). They have not been seen as political actors, as their presence in the societies is denied, and their

vulnerability as “non-citizens” make them prone to defenseless and exploitation in the labor market (Dikeç, 2013). However, migrants express their agency through different actions, strategies, and resistances.

With their everyday and the more public actions (i.e, the caravan), migrants challenge migration policies and border regimes that had forced them into invisibility, and irregularity, while looking to transform their *status quo* (Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano, 2019; Garibo García & Call, 2020; Hess, 2017; Mezzadra, 2020; Sarabia, 2020; Varela Huerta & McLean, 2019).

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