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Article

Traveling Together, Traveling Alone: Experiences of Violence and Danger for Migrating Children and Families in the US–Mexico Borderlands

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Abstract

Decisions to migrate are based on individual and family assessments of risk and opportunity, shaped by economic conditions, risks and experiences of violence, resources, and networks, which interact with personal factors and opportunity. During the journey, migrating people may encounter threats to their safety and wellbeing from both human and natural hazards. This study drew on survey data from 305 Mexican and Central American participants who migrated into the US between 2013 and 2022 alone or with families and children. Respondents provided demographic data and answered questions about stressors that prompted their migration, dangerous experiences encountered on their journey, sources of support, and what they wished they had known. Factors that influenced migration included economic stressors such as loss of job and poverty, witnessing or experiencing interpersonal violence or state violence such as kidnapping or threats to self or family, and environmental factors such as natural disasters. Approximately a third of participants traveled with their children, parents or siblings. Younger migrants and migrating people traveling with children reported significantly higher likelihood of encountering dangers during migration. Implications for supporting migrating children and families who have encountered violence and trauma are discussed, as well as limitations of the research.

Keywords: immigration; children; family; safety; danger; trauma

1. Introduction

Migrating people make challenging journeys after considerable deliberation and planning that often entails a family-level decision process (Moskal and Tyrrell 2015; Tucker et al. 2013), and impacts family members regardless of whether they make the journey or remain at home (Held 2017). They consider risks and opportunities incurred by the planned journey and shape their travel around knowledge from formal and informal information sources to chart each step. The historic model that highlights push and pull factors as causes of migration fails to fully account for the complexity of migration drivers and migrant decisions, and the overlapping and intensifying circumstances that exceed singular “push” or “pull” conditions that make migration a necessity (Bruzzone 2020). Determinants of migration such as changing economic conditions, social, political and environmental shifts, geography, gender, and familial networks, interact and compound with individual and family choice and agency to shape migration decision-making (Czaika and Reinprecht 2022; Simpson 2022; Soto Nishimura and Czaika 2024) Deciding to migrate



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is a decision based on individual and family level assessment of risks and opportunities for self, family, and sometimes community (Enache 2023; Moskal and Tyrrell 2015). Individuals may be fleeing from the dire economic conditions of poverty, where they are unable to find sufficient work to subsist or any work at all (Lenhardt 2023). They may be seeking safety from directly experiencing or witnessing interpersonal violence, persecution based on religious identity, ethnicity, nationality, political beliefs, or membership in a particular social group (United Nations n.d.). Additional factors shaping individuals' and families' decisions about migration include violence from the state, or extrajudicial violence such as kidnapping, threats from gangs, murder of loved ones, and environmental conditions such as climate change and natural disasters that exacerbate poverty, civil stress, resource scarcity and violence, as well as unlivable conditions (Abel et al. 2019; Enache 2023). Determinants of migration that shape the difficult decision to leave home also encompass experiences of support or harm along the journey, which inform migration decision-making en route (Servan-Mori et al. 2014). This study was designed to explore not only what factors prompted the decision to migrate, but also the experiences of individuals and families' immigration journey to the United States and retrospective insights of the value of their migration and what they wish they had known before starting their journeys.

1.1. Decisions to Migrate

Conditions of poverty, violence, and environmental and individual threats intersect to force an individual or family from their home, to seek not just a better life, but often, survival (Carling 2024; Rosińska 2024). While migration is a choice for some individuals, for others it is inevitable, as the only option to preserve their lives and gamble for their family's safety against the dangers and deprivation that they are fleeing. Migration occurs along a spectrum from forced to voluntary, in which emphasizing force limits migrant agency and choice, but calling migration voluntary ignores the circumstances that make migration a compelling option for individual and family survival (Czaika and Reinprecht 2022; Erdal and Oeppen 2019). Yet, even in cases when migration is deemed "voluntary," individuals may have made the choice to migrate in response to high risks (e.g., violence and poverty) that limited their means of safety and survival (Li 2016; Roy and Cheatham 2023). Further, dichotomizing the constructs of forced versus voluntary types of migration reduces recognition of the complexities of migration decisions and potentially delimits international willingness to extend asylum and refugee status only to those perceived as being forced. Complexities of migration at each step of the journey, including decision-making, traveling, navigating borders, and arrival, often exceed the considerations of current policies, international laws, and national responses. For example, border responses that penalize "irregular" crossings when formal options are unavailable, militarization of the border, or parent-child separations fail to recognize the realities of migration, which include parents making the best decisions for safety, while also violating human rights. This situation compounds the violence that shapes many migrant journeys. The U.S.'s border policies reflect either the urgency of migrating people seeking safety or the international commitment to human rights and dignity and fail to respond with nuance or goodwill to vulnerable people fleeing harm or seeking a better life.

Describing motives for migration is challenging due to the multitude of reasons people choose to take the journey (Simpson 2022). However, people migrating to find work are often younger, traveling with the intention to find work and build a life or send remittances home to support family members in their country of origin (Held 2017; The World Bank 2024). Parents may migrate alone, with the intention of bringing their children to a new country in the future when they are settled, a form of sequential migration by which parents hope to spare their children some of the difficulties of journeying to and starting out life in

a new country. Child and youth migrants face vulnerability to exploitation and violence, whether traveling with family, alone, with other unrelated children and adults, or separated from caregivers (Digidiki and Bhabha 2018; Haskins 2018; Thompson et al. 2019). Children of migrating people also experience adverse impacts of separation from their families and ongoing harm (Boado and Ferrer 2021; Human Rights Watch 2024). Approximately 15% of migrants globally are children under the age of 19 (Migration Data Portal 2024).

1.2. Migration Dangers

Whether drawing information about the journey to the United States (U.S.) from informal networks or listening to official information campaigns (Huslage et al. 2024), migrating people undoubtedly encounter human and geographical dangers and hardships while traveling to the border, waiting indeterminate amounts of time in border towns to seek asylum, and/or entering “irregularly,” without legal documentation (Castles et al. 2012; Rios and Fernandez 2023). They must contend with gangs, cartels, and Customs and Border Patrol, as well as perilous rivers and miles of desert (Boyce et al. 2019; Van Ramshorst 2025). The U.S.–Mexico Border is identified by the UN as the “world’s deadliest land migration route” (Barros 2023) and presents a host of dangers. For migrating people, navigating between human violence and lethal environmental factors offers a narrow pathway between risks that could end their journey and their lives. The threat of one pushes migrating people into jeopardy with the other, as militarized borders and externalization policies force migrating people deeper into the often-lethal desert and river borderlands (Holmes 2013; Slack et al. 2016).

Human threats to people migrating through the U.S.–Mexico border include gangs, cartels, smugglers, coyotes, apprehension, abuse or deadly force from Customs and Border Patrol (Altholz 2017; Hernandez and Craig 2024), and border vigilantes (Strickland 2022). They encounter compounding violence throughout each stage of their journey (García et al. 2022). Migrants are vulnerable to extortion and violence from cartels and gangs (de la Rosa Rodríguez 2022) and risk abandonment from smugglers and coyotes (Hernández Campos and Torre Cantalapiedra 2022). Particularly for women and LGBTQIA people, there are heightened risks of sexual violence (Leyva-Flores et al. 2019; Soria-Escalante et al. 2022). They also encounter violence from other migrants; in a survey of over 12,000 migrants crossing the U.S.–Mexico border, nearly 30% reported experiencing some form of physical, psychological, or sexual abuse from other migrating people (Leyva-Flores et al. 2019). Individuals traveling with medical needs or with families are also particularly vulnerable to risks of violence (DeLuca et al. 2010) and, once engaged with Border enforcement, may be victimized or neglected with little accountability or opportunity for redress (Ochoa 2021; Stamp 2021). Policies that separate children from caregivers at the border have severe and ongoing impacts on children and family wellbeing (Naseh et al. 2024).

Environmental threats include deserts, mountains, and rivers, where migrating people are funneled into hazardous terrain as a direct result of border deterrence policies that force people to cross in remote and dangerous areas. Immigration enforcement works with full knowledge of the “geography of deterrence,” seeking to stop migration by making it as difficult as possible, forcing people into hazardous terrain where they are likely to die from extreme temperatures, harsh environments, and animal attacks (Chambers et al. 2019, p. 443; DeLuca et al. 2010). However, border enforcement methods as deterrence do not work (Cornelius and Salehyan 2007), and since the implementation of harsher border laws and militarized border enforcement, more bodies have been found in remote and hostile terrain (Koleski et al. 2022; Kovic 2018). It is difficult to accurately estimate the number of people crossing the border because individuals intentionally cross covertly to avoid detection or may fail to be counted in other official contexts (Echeverría 2020). Changing policies that

limit opportunities for asylum and push people into dangerous terrain may harm the ability to track and manage all migration in this region. However, Customs and Border Protection do offer some numerical data that can illuminate the scope of migration along the U.S.–Mexico border; they report over 2,000,000 “enforcement encounters” with migrating people in 2024, with comparable numbers of encounters for 2023 (Customs and Border Protection 2025). Additionally, they report that approximately 37% of “encountered” people in 2024 were “individuals in a family unit” and approximately 5% were unaccompanied children, with similar numbers for 2023 (Customs and Border Protection 2025). This information offers insight into the number of people making a perilous journey, but it does not tell the entire story. Humanitarian organizations that track the discovery and retrieval of remains of migrating people found along the U.S.–Mexico border region report 803 people found in 2022, 823 people in 2023, and 525 people in 2024 (No More Deaths 2025). In the past decade, along the U.S.–Mexico Southern border, over five thousand migrating people have been found dead, or reported missing (Kerwin and Martínez 2024), and experts estimate that four out of five decedents are never found (Leutert 2024a).

Four states line the U.S.–Mexico Southern Border: Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. Each of these crossing places has its own dangers for migrating people. In Arizona, border enforcement funnels people into places in the Sonoran Desert where they are most likely to die (Chambers et al. 2019; DeLuca et al. 2010). In California, the leading causes of death for migrating people are drowning and environmental exposure; the man-made environmental hazard of the border wall accounts for additional deaths from blunt force trauma for people who fall while scaling it (LaFleur et al. 2024). New Mexico shares similar desert terrain with Arizona Sonoran Desert; the Chihuahuan Desert is also lethal, with many migrating people dying from exposure to the elements (Hernandez and Edgar 2024). Texas risks to migrants include death from drowning, exposure to the elements causing hypothermia and dehydration, and vehicle accidents or suffocation while being transported in a vehicle (Leutert 2024a; Sapkota et al. 2006).

Although residents who live near the border can often be ambivalent about the rate of migrant deaths (Miranker 2024), there are also formal and informal support resources for migrating people. Various *casas de migrantes* or migrant shelters, often affiliated with religious denominations, provide shelter and space for migrating people to regroup and prepare for the next leg of their journey (Olayo-Mendez 2018). Humanitarian aid organizations, working in the “gray, ethical area between law enforcement and humanitarian values and action” (Newell et al. 2020, p. 199), provide shelter, water, and supplies for migrating people seeking survival in harsh terrain (Fowler 2017). However, humanitarian organizations and local programs, such as Medical Examiners’ offices, find their ability to respond adequately to migrant deaths limited by Customs and Border Protection (CBP; Miranker and Giordano 2024). CBP does have its own Missing Migrant Program, but its effectiveness is undermined by migrants’ reluctance to seek assistance from an organization that has the authority to detain and deport them, lack of knowledge of available options, and CBP’s unreliability in responding to calls for aid (Leutert 2024b).

Despite deprivation, harm, and various risks, people continue to make journeys seeking a better life for themselves and their families. A 2014 study of factors that influence immigrating people’s decisions to continue or turn back found that conditions in countries of origin were more impactful for migrating people’s decision-making than the harms they suffered along the journey, and those who migrated with one or more children or were more than half way from their starting location to the border were most likely to persist in their journey despite suffering at least one form of violence (Servan-Mori et al. 2014).

1.3. Purpose

The aim of this research is to better understand the experiences of migration for people crossing into the United States. The study was designed to explore risk and protective factors that shape exposure to migration dangers. The research questions this study sought to answer were first, what factors contributed to their decision to migrate; second, what were their experiences of violence or support along the journey; and finally, what did migrating people wish they knew before starting their journeys and how satisfied were they with their decision to migrate? Using a sample of migrants ($n = 305$) who moved from Mexico or Central America to the U.S. during the past 10 years, self-report survey data were analyzed regarding immigrants' experiences during the journey.

2. Materials and Methods

A sample of 305 participants from Mexico and Central America completed an online survey in August and September 2022. Inclusion criteria included adults aged 18 and older who had migrated to the U.S. from Mexico or Central America within ten years prior to the survey. The survey contained questions regarding the migration journey, including information sources, experiences of violence, and satisfaction with their migration decision. Participants were recruited through Qualtrics Panels, an aggregator system that recruits U.S. adults who have agreed to respond to surveys in exchange for compensation through an incentive program. An email invitation to the online survey was sent through Qualtrics, and eligible participants were presented with a forced-response consent form. Individuals who provided consent were then shown the full survey. All study materials were available in both English and Spanish (via a back-translation process), but all participants completed the English version. Because Qualtrics recruits across large panels, we lack information regarding the number of individuals who received the survey or the response rate. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville (protocol # IRB-22-06772-XM, 25 February 2022) approved all procedures.

2.1. Demographics

The majority of participants (74.8%) were born in Mexico, and 50.5% identified as women. At the time of the survey, participants were residing in 41 different states and had been in the U.S. for an average of 7.29 ($SD = 2.29$) years. The mean age of participants was 31.68 years ($SD = 8.47$), with 62.4% of participants in the 26–44 age range. Full sample demographics can be found below in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

Variable	n	M	%	SD
Gender	305			
Woman	154		50.5	
Man	134		43.9	
Transgender woman	4		1.3	
Transgender man	6		2.0	
Non-binary/non-conforming	4		1.3	
Prefer to self-describe	1		0.3	
Prefer not to respond	2		0.7	
Race and Ethnicity				
American Indian, Indigenous, Native	14		4.6	
Asian	4		1.3	
Hispanic, Latino/a/x	223		73.1	
Black, African American	22		7.3	
White	32		10.6	
Prefer to self-describe	7		2.3	

Table 1. Cont.

Variable	n	M	%	SD
Age	274	31.68		8.47
18–25	84		30.7	
26–44	171		62.4	
45–60	18		6.6	
60+	1		0.4	
Education				
Grade school or less	24		7.9	
Some high school	34		11.3	
High school, GED	85		28.1	
Some college	49		16.2	
College degree (AA, BA, BS, etc.)	75		24.8	
Advanced degree (MA, PhD, JD, etc.)	35		11.6	
Annual Household Income				
Less than \$15k	39		12.9	
\$15k to \$29,999	39		12.9	
\$30k to \$44,999	51		16.8	
\$45k to \$59,999	54		17.8	
\$60k to \$74,999	40		13.2	
\$75k to \$104,999	42		13.9	
\$105k or more	38		12.5	
Country of birth	305			
Mexico	228		74.8	
El Salvador	24		7.9	
Guatemala	22		7.2	
Honduras	19		6.2	
Nicaragua	10		3.3	
Belize	2		0.7	

Participants entered the U.S. primarily in Texas (32.7%), California (27.3%), New Mexico (18.9%), and Arizona (9.8%), with 7.7% of respondents unsure where they entered, and 3.7% identifying entry in Florida, New York, and a variety of Mid-Western states. Approximately 70% of participants reported entering the United States between 2013 and 2016, with the remaining 30% entering between 2017–2022.

2.2. Data Analysis

Data were cleaned and examined for missingness. Missing data accounted for less than 3% of all values and was treated by listwise deletion in SPSS, version 31. Descriptive statistics were used to address all three research questions. Additionally, Poisson regressions were conducted to further examine participants' experiences of violence in the second research question. Three separate Poisson regressions were run with each of the three danger variables as the dependent variable: (1) dangers they experienced; (2) dangers they witnessed happening to others; and (3) total dangers. A one-sample Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was run with all three danger variables to ensure a Poisson distribution. The independent variables included were gender, age, country of origin, traveling with children, and traveling with parents.

Danger Variables

Respondents were asked whether they encountered 13 different dangerous experiences on their migration journey, for example, *you were robbed*. The list of dangerous experiences was developed by the study team based on the body of literature indicating common dangers encountered among immigrants from Mexico and Central America traveling to the United States. A list of all 13 danger questions and their frequencies is presented in Table 4.

Additionally, three different danger-dependent variables were created based on these responses for the regression analyses: one for dangers they personally experienced (*danger_self*), one for dangers they witnessed others undergo (*danger_others*), and a total danger variable for all 13 experiences (*danger_total*). Of the 13 questions, eight were categorized into the *danger_self* variable (range: 0–8), five were categorized into the *danger_others* variable (range: 0–5), and all thirteen were categorized into the *danger_total* variable (range: 0–13). All three were count variables.

3. Results

3.1. Factors That Contributed to the Decision to Migrate

The influence of pre-migration factors on decision to migrate was grouped by economic factors, such as poverty and employment; interpersonal violence factors; state and extrajudicial violence factors such as government arrests, gang violence and kidnapping; and environmental factors. These are reported in Tables 2 and 3 below:

Table 2. The influence of pre-migration stressors on the decision to migrate.

Variables	A Great Deal n (%)	Some-What n (%)	Very Little n (%)	Not at All n (%)	N/A n (%)
Economic Factors					
<i>Poverty</i>	93 (35.9)	82 (31.7)	41 (15.8)	26 (10.0)	17 (6.6)
<i>Unemployment</i>	86 (33.2)	79 (30.5)	45 (17.4)	29 (11.2)	20 (7.7)
<i>Underemployment</i>	78 (30.1)	86 (33.2)	50 (19.3)	25 (9.7)	20 (7.7)
<i>Loss of job or business</i>	58 (22.3)	88 (33.8)	45 (17.3)	43 (16.5)	26 (10.0)
Interpersonal Violence					
<i>Witnessed violence</i>	80 (30.9)	89 (34.4)	43 (16.6)	23 (8.9)	24 (9.3)
<i>Experienced violence</i>	64 (24.8)	87 (33.7)	47 (18.2)	31 (12.0)	29 (11.2)
State & Extrajudicial Violence					
<i>I was threatened by a local gang</i>	60 (23.1)	54 (20.8)	36 (13.8)	74 (28.5)	36 (13.8)
<i>Family member/friend killed</i>	57 (22.0)	53 (20.5)	35 (13.5)	77 (29.7)	37 (14.3)
<i>Family member/friend arrested</i>	45 (17.4)	54 (20.8)	37 (14.3)	80 (30.9)	43 (16.6)
<i>Family member/friend threatened by a local gang</i>	45 (17.4)	73 (28.2)	42 (16.2)	67 (25.9)	32 (12.4)
<i>Family member/friend kidnapped</i>	40 (15.5)	55 (21.3)	28 (10.9)	91 (35.3)	44 (17.1)
<i>I was arrested</i>	36 (13.8)	42 (16.2)	36 (13.8)	99 (38.1)	47 (18.1)
<i>I was kidnapped</i>	32 (12.3)	47 (18.1)	25 (9.6)	108 (41.5)	48 (18.5)
Environmental Factors					
<i>Natural disaster</i>	45 (17.4)	77 (29.8)	49 (19.0)	56 (21.7)	31 (12.0)
Other traumatic experience	25 (12.4)	31 (15.4)	16 (8.0)	57 (28.4)	72 (35.8)

Table 3. Influential pre-migration stressors by gender.

Variables	A Great Deal n (%)	Women n (%)	Men n (%)	Trans Women n (%)	Trans Men n (%)	NB NC n (%)
Economic Factors						
<i>Poverty</i>	93 (35.9)	39 (41.9)	49 (52.7)	2 (2.2)	1 (1.1)	1 (1.1)
<i>Unemployment</i>	86 (33.2)	44 (51.2)	40 (46.5)	1 (1.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
<i>Underemployment</i>	78 (30.1)	40 (51.3)	37 (47.4)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
<i>Loss of job or business</i>	58 (22.3)	28 (48.3)	29 (50.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.7)	0 (0.0)

Table 3. Cont.

Variables	A Great Deal n (%)	Women n (%)	Men n (%)	Trans Women n (%)	Trans Men n (%)	NB NC n (%)
Interpersonal Violence						
<i>Witnessed violence</i>	80 (30.9)	33 (41.3)	43 (53.8)	1 (1.3)	2 (2.5)	1 (1.3)
<i>Experienced violence</i>	64 (24.8)	33 (51.6)	30 (46.9)	0 (0.0)	1 (1.6)	0 (0.0)
State & Extrajudicial Violence						
<i>I was threatened by a local gang</i>	60 (23.1)	26 (43.3)	29 (48.3)	1 (1.7)	4 (6.7)	0 (0.0)
<i>Family member/friend killed</i>	57 (22.0)	23 (40.4)	29 (50.9)	2 (3.5)	3 (5.3)	0 (0.0)
<i>Family member/friend arrested</i>	45 (17.4)	21 (46.7)	21 (46.7)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.2)	2 (4.4)
<i>Family member/friend threatened by a local gang</i>	45 (17.4)	18 (40.0)	24 (53.3)	2 (4.4)	1 (2.2)	0 (0.0)
<i>Family member/friend kidnapped</i>	40 (15.5)	16 (40.0)	22 (55.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.5)	1 (2.5)
<i>I was arrested</i>	36 (13.8)	15 (41.7)	19 (52.8)	0 (0.0)	1 (2.8)	1 (2.8)
<i>I was kidnapped</i>	32 (12.3)	12 (37.5)	18 (56.3)	1 (3.1)	1 (3.1)	0 (0.0)
Environmental Factors						
<i>Natural disaster</i>	45 (17.4)	20 (44.4)	21 (46.7)	2 (4.4)	2 (4.4)	0 (0.0)
<i>Other traumatic experience</i>	25 (12.4)	14 (56.0)	9 (36.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (4.0)	1 (4.0)

3.2. Experiences of Violence or Support Along the Journey

Participants often traveled with other companions: 39.7% traveled with their parents, 38.7% with siblings, and 34.1% with their children. Additionally, 9.5% traveled with coyotes/polleros and 8.5% did not know the people they traveled with prior to the migration journey.

Participants reported experiencing multiple dangers along their journey, reported in Tables 4 and 5: being robbed (12.8%), physically attacked (10.5%), and sexually assaulted (11.5%). They also reported observing violence against fellow companions: seeing someone else physically attacked (28.2%), witnessing criminal activity (22.3%), and seeing someone be sexually assaulted (16.4%). Participants became sick (25.2%) or were injured (15.7%) and saw their traveling companions become sick and injured (14.1%). Approximately 10% of participants reported witnessing the death of an immigrant fellow traveler. On the journey, participants reported being detained by the U.S. government (8.9%), detained by Mexican government officials (6.9%), and detained by a gang (3.3%). On average, participants reported experiencing two categories of danger along their journey; however, we do not know how many times each category of danger may have been experienced, as these were yes or no questions. Additionally, Table 6 shows the mean for total dangers based on participants' year of arrival. However, due to the long travel time that can occur, year of arrival does not necessarily equal the year that the danger occurred. The number of participants that arrive each year also varies greatly (range: 3–60) and can impact the mean.

Regression analyses revealed a statistically significant model for dangers participants themselves experienced and total dangers experienced, but not for dangers they witnessed. For dangers they experienced, reported in Table 7, age and traveling with children were negatively correlated with experiencing danger. For every year increase in age, they experienced 0.968 (95% CI, 0.951 to 0.984) times fewer dangers to self, a statistically significant result, $p \leq 0.001$. Those traveling without children experienced 34.4% fewer dangers than those traveling with children.

Table 4. Dangers experienced by self and others.

Variables	M (SD)	n	%
Total dangers	1.85 (1.82)		
You witnessed someone else being physically attacked		86	28.2
You became sick		77	25.2
You witnessed criminal activity		68	22.3
You witnessed someone else being sexually assaulted		50	16.4
You were accidentally injured		48	15.7
A travel companion became sick or injured		43	14.1
You were robbed		39	12.8
You were sexually assaulted		35	11.5
You were physically attacked		32	10.5
You witnessed the death of another immigrant traveler		29	9.5
You were detained by the U.S. government		27	8.9
You were detained by the Mexican government		21	6.9
You were detained by a gang		10	3.3

Table 5. Dangers experienced by self and others by gender.

Variables	Total	Women	Men	Trans Women	Trans Men	NB/NC
You witnessed someone else being physically attacked	86	43(50.0)	39(45.3)	0(0.0)	1(1.2)	2(2.3)
You became sick	77	46(59.7)	27(35.1)	3(3.9)	1(1.3)	0(0.0)
You witnessed criminal activity	68	31(45.6)	35(51.5)	2(2.9)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
You witnessed someone else being sexually assaulted	50	21(42.0)	28(56.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	1(0.0)
You were accidentally injured	48	25(52.1)	20(41.7)	2(4.2)	0(0.0)	1(2.1)
A travel companion became sick or injured	43	19(44.2)	23(53.5)	1(2.3)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
You were robbed	39	16(41.0)	21(53.8)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	1(2.6)
You were sexually assaulted	35	17(48.6)	16(45.7)	0(0.0)	2(5.7)	0(0.0)
You were physically attacked	32	20(62.5)	9(28.1)	1(3.1)	1(3.1)	1(3.1)
You witnessed the death of another immigrant traveler	29	14(48.3)	14(48.3)	1(3.4)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)
You were detained by the U.S. government	27	9(33.3)	16(59.3)	1(3.7)	0(0.0)	1(3.7)
You were detained by the Mexican government	21	9(42.9)	11(52.4)	0(0.0)	1(4.8)	0(0.0)
You were detained by a gang	10	5(50.0)	5(50.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)	0(0.0)

Table 6. Total dangers experienced by participants' year of arrival.

Year of Arrival	Participants	Dangers Experienced	M
2013	57	100	1.75
2014	50	118	2.36
2015	60	112	1.87
2016	40	74	1.85
2017	29	47	1.62
2018	26	46	1.77
2019	23	39	1.70
2020	11	40	3.64
2021	6	9	1.5
2022	3	10	3.33

Table 7. Poisson Regression for Danger to Self-Dependent Variable.

Variables	B	SE B	p	Exp(B)	95% CI
Intercept	1.110	0.328	<0.001	3.036	1.596, 5.773
Gender	−0.034	0.131	0.793	0.966	0.748, 1.248
Country of origin	0.172	0.155	0.266	1.188	0.877, 1.609
Age	−0.033	0.009	<0.001 ***	0.968	0.951, 0.984
Traveling with parents	−0.061	0.134	0.646	0.941	0.724, 1.222
Traveling with children	−0.421	0.132	0.001 **	0.656	0.507, 0.851

B = unstandardized coefficient, SE B = standard error, p = significance, Exp(B) = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval. ** p-value less than 0.01. *** p-value less than 0.001.

For total dangers experienced, reported in Table 8, age and traveling with children were again statistically significant. For every year increase in age, they experienced 0.987 (95% CI, 0.975 to 0.998) times fewer total dangers, a statistically significant result, $p = 0.027$. Those traveling without children experienced 25.0% fewer dangers than those traveling with children. Regression coefficients and standard errors can be found in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 8. Poisson Regression for Total Danger-Dependent Variable.

Variables	B	SE B	p	Exp(B)	95% CI
Intercept	1.273	0.231	<0.001	3.571	2.271, 5.616
Gender	−0.127	0.093	0.173	0.881	0.734, 1.057
Country of origin	0.088	0.109	0.418	1.092	0.882, 1.352
Age	−0.013	0.060	0.027 *	0.987	0.975, 0.998
Traveling with parents	−0.156	0.096	0.104	0.856	0.710, 1.032
Traveling with children	−0.288	0.094	0.002 **	0.750	0.623, 0.902

B = unstandardized coefficient, SE B = standard error, p = significance, Exp(B) = odds ratio, CI = confidence interval. * p-value less than 0.05. ** p-value less than 0.01.

Along their journey, participants utilized sources of support “to a great extent,” including their faith (33%), family and friends (24%), strangers (16%), companions met on the journey (15%), and NGOs or humanitarian aid organizations (11%).

3.3. What Participants Wished They Had Known and Satisfaction with Decision

What participants wished they had known. Although almost 73% of participants reported gathering information about their journey before departing, participants identified that they wished they had known more about the length of the journey (37.4%), how to find a coyote or smuggler to help them (16.1%), and how to navigate the trains across Mexico (18.7%). Participants also wished they had known more about the difficulty of the journey (31.1%), the extreme temperatures (31.5%), accessing food (20%) and water (16.4%), what to do if they encountered Border Patrol (14.4%), and what to do when they reached the border (22%). A table with a more in-depth overview of what migrating people wish they had known is included in Table 9 below.

Satisfaction with decision to migrate. Participants answered 5-pt Likert agree/disagree statements about their decision to migrate to the United States. Over 42% of respondents felt that moving to the U.S. was the best decision for their family, with 22% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing, and approximately 36% neutral on the move. Approximately 43% of respondents also felt that their children were happier in the new country and would have a better life due to their parents’ migration to the U.S. (44.5%), with approximately 20% disagreeing. Over 44% of respondents felt that moving to the U.S. was the best decision for themselves, with about 24% disagreeing, and 36% neutral.

Table 9. Participants wished they had known in advance.

Variables	n	%
That the journey would be longer than expected	114	37.4
That the temperatures would be more extreme than I expected	96	31.5
That the journey would be more difficult than I had expected	95	31.1
That the journey would be shorter than expected	81	26.6
How to find more support or help along the way	78	25.6
What to do when I reached the border or entered the US	67	22.0
That I would have trouble having enough food during the trip	61	20.0
That I would see other immigrants struggling or suffering on the journey	59	19.3
More about La Bestia or the trains in Mexico	57	18.7
That I would have trouble finding enough water during the trip	50	16.4
How to find a coyote	49	16.1
That I would have to walk longer than expected	47	15.4
That the journey would be less difficult than I had expected	45	14.8
What to do if I saw US immigration patrol	44	14.4

4. Discussion

Study findings offer insight into factors that spur migration decisions and experiences along the way. Participants endorsed many of the dangers identified in the literature regarding natural environments and risks, human threats, and compounding violence through stages of migration (Androff and Tavassoli 2012; Galvez et al. 2025; Solano and Massey 2022).

Regarding the factors that influenced the decision to migrate “a great deal” or “somewhat,” economic factors were high and included poverty (67.6%), unemployment (63.7%), and underemployment (63.3%). Interpersonal violence was also a key reason individuals reported migrating, with 65.3% indicating that witnessing violence and 58.5% that experiencing violence influenced their decision to migrate a great deal or somewhat. Nearly half (42.5%) reported that having a family member or friend killed influenced the decision to migrate a great deal or somewhat, with 43.9% having been threatened personally by a local gang. These results reflect extant research on pre-migration experiences and encounters, including poverty, violence, and high rates of gang activity and homicides, that prompt migration (de Jesus and Hernandez 2019; Roy and Cheatham 2023; The World Bank 2020; UNICEF 2020; United Nations 2021).

During the journey, participants reported observing violence, criminal activity, and encountering and witnessing illness and injury to themselves and others while migrating. This echoes literature regarding traumatic injuries incurred by migrating people navigating the U.S.–Mexico border (Tenorio et al. 2024). In fact, during the series of years (2013–2021) when research participants reported migrating to the United States, the remains of over 2600 people were found along the U.S.–Mexico border, underscoring the lethal danger that participants encountered on their journeys (No More Deaths 2025). Regardless of dangers, individuals and parents will travel to seek safety and better opportunities for themselves and their family members (Servan-Mori et al. 2014). Stress along the journey is prevalent and positions migrant individuals to experience high rates of trauma that yield both acute and lasting impacts as they settle and navigate a new life in the U.S. (Leyva-Flores et al. 2019; Medecins Sans Frontieres 2019; Reed-Sandoval 2019). These impacts are compounded over time, as individuals encounter additional stressors once in the U.S. (Green 2019; Held et al. 2022a, 2022b; Jolie et al. 2021).

Threats to family that shaped migration decision-making also emerged in dangers encountered along the journey. Particularly concerning in study findings is that younger migrants were more likely to encounter dangers and threats to their wellbeing than those

who are older. Increased dangers were also significantly higher among people traveling with children. Prior studies find that despite perils, caregivers are more likely to continue their journey if they are migrating with a child (Servan-Mori et al. 2014). Our findings, along with the work of prior scholars, indicate that youth, younger adults, and parents may be exposed to higher levels of stress and trauma than others on the journey. Nevertheless, they persist in seeking safety for their children and families. However, youth may also have more limited life experiences to cope with such stress. In addition, the stress experienced by parents can have direct and indirect harmful effects on their children even as they continue their migration journey to seek a better future for their child (Fortuna et al. 2019; Held and Cuellar 2016; Maru et al. 2023).

4.1. Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the data source itself is a limitation. Data include participants who elected to participate in Qualtrics panel surveys, so it may not reflect the broader sample of Mexican and Central American individuals who had arrived within the past decade. Additionally, because participants only completed the English version, findings may not reflect the experiences of individuals who have not had opportunities to gain English proficiency. Specifically, individuals with more limited access to the internet or reduced computer skills may have had less access to information to prepare for the journey and could have experienced different situations throughout. Survivor and entry bias are also limitations. With the high death rates among those making the journey to the U.S., in addition to gang or U.S. and Mexican government encounters that would end the journey early for many people, experiences among those who survived and were able to enter the U.S. will not fully capture the stressors of all migrating individuals or reflect prevalence of dangers that may be encountered. The cross-sectional nature of data and retrospective collection process means that we could not conduct temporal analyses and that recall bias may influence responses. A longitudinal study may better illustrate experiences at different points in time, based on sociopolitical constructs in both the sending country and the U.S. Finally, the lack of qualitative data means that experiences are grouped into one category, so that we cannot separate the severity of frequency of experiences individuals had. Someone who endured or witnessed severe, repeated violence is likely to have a distinct experience as compared to someone who experienced a less severe, single episode—though both are likely to have harmful impacts. Despite limitations, findings yield meaningful implications for practice and policymaking.

4.2. Implications

Migrating individuals are exposed to high rates of hardship in their home countries that influence the decision to migrate. These hardships are very often followed by treacherous journeys that inflict further stress and trauma. Arriving in the U.S. after encountering multiple forms of trauma may place individuals at elevated risk of poorer health, mental health, and overall well-being. The effects of such stress are not limited to individuals but extend to family members, elevating risks of interpersonal violence and intergenerational trauma. Providers and practitioners must be attentive to the experiences of migrating individuals, including the heightened exposure to violence among younger individuals and those traveling with children. In response, assessing for exposure to and symptoms of trauma is essential.

Identifying trauma is one step and must be followed by culturally responsive interventions that account for the specific norms of individuals being served (Coatsworth et al. 2002; Griner and Smith 2006; Parra-Cardona et al. 2016, 2019). For example, family-based programs that incorporate Mexican and Central American values, such as familismo

and comunalismo, can improve engagement and participation rates, as well as trust in providers and interventions (Coatsworth et al. 2002; Griner and Smith 2006). Employing trauma-informed strategies that promote known protective factors among Latino families, such as biculturalism, ethnic identity, family relationships, and resilience, may be essential strategies to fostering post-traumatic growth and healing.

While direct interventions are a vital component of addressing symptoms of trauma, additional steps are essential to reducing further trauma and harm encountered by migrating individuals. One approach is expanding availability of information and support for migrating people. Although aid to irregular migrants can be criminalized and advocates incur legal risks for providing humanitarian services (Marti and Zepeda-Millán 2020), organizations such as Humane Borders and other human rights-oriented organizations work to provide key resources, such as life-sustaining water in desert terrain, and support the survival and safety of migrating people in other ways. An important finding was that individuals wish they had known before starting the journey. For example, over one-third (37.4%) wish they had known how long the journey would be, with almost as many wishing they had prior information on the difficulty of the journey (31.1%) and the extreme temperatures (31.5%). Participants also indicated that they would have wanted prior knowledge on other areas, such as how to access food (20%) and water (16.4%), navigating trains, finding a coyote, and what to do upon entry and encountering border patrol. This information can be disseminated in multiple ways. First, organizations and providers who engage with migrating people can hold information sessions and disseminate one-pagers and infographics to share accurate information about the journey. In addition, use of social media and connecting with community organizations in Mexico and Central America to provide concrete information to share could strengthen dissemination of knowledge among individuals who are considering the journey. Government announcements in the U.S. and in Latin America could also be utilized for delivering this content.

Additional steps can be taken to address needs after arrival. In the current context, individuals moving to the U.S. are exposed to high rates of discrimination and poverty while also often lacking access to public benefits, basic needs (e.g., affordable housing and food), and live with a persistent threat of detention and deportation (Green 2019; Held et al. 2022a). These post-migration experiences further both acute and lasting effects of trauma and can worsen individual, family, and intergenerational outcomes (Held et al. 2022a, 2022b). Becoming familiar with local and federal policies, in addition to the impacts of these policies, is a crucial step toward advocating for inclusive and fair legislation that reduces harm to health and well-being.

While current political narratives often frame migrants as a faceless looming threat to stir xenophobic fears of “border invasion” and validate harsh penalties for irregular migration and blame immigrants for harms inflicted on them during their journey (Obinna 2025; Porotsky 2021), our data in fact shows that many migrating people are children and their families, seeking safety for themselves and their loved ones. Shifting who we imagine immigrants to be can shift the individual, community, and national responses we build or endorse from our legislators. It can center immigrants’ humanity and support their perseverance. In addition to advocating for policy reform that addresses the human-inflicted harm along the border to all migrating people including children and families, practitioners can partner with communities to provide training and education to individuals (e.g., teachers, after-school program staff, and juvenile justice) who engage with immigrant families. Educating direct contacts, as well as the general public through churches, community centers, and other forums, may help to center migrants’ stories of resilience and hope, while reducing misunderstandings or politicized narratives around

motives for immigration and thus discriminatory comments and practices (Cattaneo and Grieco 2021).

Researchers are positioned to both advocate for fair policies and to serve as a liaison between the body of knowledge and community partners and practitioners. Researchers can engage in training along with practitioners. In addition, researchers can build robust relationships with community partners to support their work on promoting positive mental health and well-being among migrating communities. Providing access to current knowledge, measurement tools, and culturally responsive interventions can strengthen the ability of providers to deliver effective services. As well, researchers can support program and outcome evaluations that aid community partners in refining their programs for improved responsiveness and in having meaningful data for future funding streams. Finally, scholars can expand on findings of this study by including individuals who have attempted but not succeeded in crossing the U.S.–Mexico border, conducting a longitudinal study, and applying a mixed-method framework.

The ill effects of familial separation for children left behind when caregivers migrate are substantial, as are the harms to children separated by border enforcement policies (Boado and Ferrer 2021; Human Rights Watch 2024). Organizations and migration information and resource efforts attuned to the lived experiences and needs of migrating people, in particular children and families, would orient towards identifying family-specific services and resources, sharing information that emphasizes not only pathways to legal status, but also practical supports to facilitate child and parent physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing during and after the journey. Research participants wished they had more information about the length, temperatures, and difficulty of the journey; effective support of migrant wellbeing would work to equip people who migrate with this kind of information, not to deter them, but to give them the needed informational tools coupled with resources to safely navigate their journey. People often migrate for a better life for their families; our data indicates that despite encountering increased dangers, especially when traveling with children, most participants believed that through migrating to the U.S., they had improved their children's opportunities for a happier life and future.

5. Conclusions

The migration process exposes individuals to a wide range of natural and human-created hardships and potential trauma while simultaneously providing opportunities for improved lives, well-being, and, oftentimes, survival. Strengthening both knowledge of migration challenges for individuals who are considering migration to the U.S. and trauma-informed services to migrating individuals who are on their journey or who have already arrived is a key strategy to improve the decision-making process and reduce the negative impacts of the journey for those who take it. Future research should explore these strategies of information dissemination and pilot trauma-informed services specific to the needs of migrating people.

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