#### 2018 Migrant Caravan

Anastasie Lenoir and Dr. Robert Irwin

# Introduction

The migrant caravan that occurred in late 2018 attracted substantial media attention in both the US and Mexico. The aim of this research is to add to the body of information of this event through use of the migrant's voices and their lived experiences. By prioritizing the migrants' narrated experiences and analyzing the effects of policies implemented by the United States and Mexico in response to the caravan, I argue that migrants' and asylum seekers' experiences have been made more difficult. This research focuses on the border areas of Mexico and Guatemala and Mexico and the United States, specifically in Tijuana.

### **Behind the Caravan**

Central American migrants have decades of a history traveling through Mexico to reach the United States. This pattern of migration generated some media and political attention in 2014, with the arrival of unprecedented numbers of unaccompanied minors at the US border (Greenblatt 2014). However, the 2018 Migrant Caravan generated longer term attention and policy changes in both Mexico and the United States when Central American migration became a major theme of the public discourse of immigration and migration in both countries.

What began as a domestic political dispute in Honduras — an effort to undermine newly re-elected President Juan Orlando Hernández and to call attention to the plight of migrants — quickly became an international row, a source of embarrassment in Honduras, consternation across the region, and political opportunism in the United States (Ahmed 2018). The US

President utilized the migrant caravan as a political weapon, calling the caravan an "invasion", claiming the migrants were criminals and threatened to use military force against them (Fabian 2018). In the US, Congress continued discussion on issues of immigration that have been present for decades. In the media, attention of the caravan chronicled the conversation in Congress about the politicized migrant caravan and the turn to immigration discussion (Sullivan 2018).

Mexico has seen itself as a sending country to the US for labor, and has historically allowed migrants to pass through the country without major issues. The high media coverage of the caravan not only engaged the US and Mexican governments, it also engaged everyday people in Mexico in the event and they began to talk about the caravan. Protests over the issues of the migrant caravan broke out in Tijuana in November 2018. Protestors took up the rhetoric that the migrants were armed and also calling them invaders ("Migrant Caravan" 2018). Nationalist discourse arose against the migrants that helped fuel the strength of the protests. In their defense, people who supported the migrants' rights came out in support of them on both sides of the border ("Supporters" 2018).

In early 2018, the US enacted new rules denying asylum to applicants claiming to be fleeing from gang violence or domestic violence (Barros 2019). The 2018 caravan renewed attention to family separation policy where adults are held at detention centers and minors released into government custody, sometimes into foster care (Gamboa 2018). Directly after the US midterm congressional elections of 2018, Trump threatened Mexico with shutting down the US/Mexico border completely and with tariffs on its exports to the US unless the Mexican government assisted in preventing the migrants from reaching the US southern border (Paletta 2019).

#### **US and Mexico Reactions**

In late January 2019 the Trump administration implemented the Migrant Protection Protocols program, commonly referred to as Remain in Mexico (United States 2020). Trump also threatened to pull aid from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras if these governments did not assist in keeping migrants from leaving their home countries (Specia 2019). Trump also forced negotiations of the "Safe Third Country" agreements with these Northern Triangle countries, under which potential refugees would be required to apply for benefits in the country where they first land, and not the country where they ultimately want to settle (Vox 2019).

Beginning in the spring of 2019, under threat from the United States, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the current president of Mexico, deployed the Federal Police to the southern border of Mexico and Guatemala, most especially in the state of Chiapas, to prevent and deter migrants from crossing into Mexico at the Guatemalan border. Lopez Obrador deployed nearly 12,000 members of its newly created National Guard to its southern border region as part of its agreement with the United States to beef up immigration enforcement efforts (Meyer and Isacson 2019). The migrants were undeterred and continued to cross into Mexico, wading through the rivers when all else failed.

Lopez Obrador spoke about supporting migrants in the first few months of his presidency, however he announced in June 2019 that the new commissioner of the National Institute of Migration (INM), the unit responsible for carrying out the detentions of migrants, imprisonments and deportations, would be the former coordinator of the Mexican prisons, Francisco Garduño Yáñez ("How has" 2019). Garduño replaced Tonatiuh Guillén, an academic profile commissioner, former chancellor of El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, who publicly advocated to remain independent of Trump's pressures.

Tapachula, Chiapas in Mexico houses the main hub of governmental offices where migrants in transit may obtain their travel documents to legally pass through the country. Under continued pressure from the United States to prevent migrants from arriving at the US/Mexico border, the Mexican government began granting migrants travel documents that restricted their movements to Mexico's southernmost states, which prevented them traveling legally through the country (Timmons 2019). This was intended to keep the migrants stranded in the southern states of Mexico. The government employees would make mistakes on the documents, such as a name spelling, to impede migrants ability to obtain the documents they needed to travel (Amin, 211, 2019).

Migrants in Mexico faced the real threat of racial profiling by the police, many of them violently pulled off the street by the police and moved to detention centers within Mexico (Perez D. 2019). In January 2019, Mexico further responded to the pressure to keep migrants from reaching the US border and to encourage the migrants to remain in Mexico by offering expedited humanitarian visas that allowed people to move freely and seek work anywhere in Mexico for a year, offered access to health services and education, and the right to leave and reenter the country and if visa holders wished to remain in Mexico, they could renew it. However the program was closed down because it was too successful. Instead, migrants were allowed to apply for work visas that only allowed them to stay in the seven southern states (Lin 2019). Some migrants faced with these conditions within Mexico chose to stay in Mexico, and some chose to return to their home country and some chose to ignore the restrictions of their migrant status in Mexico and continued their journey towards the US border.

The Migrant Protection Protocol forces migrants seeking asylum to remain on the Mexican side of the US/Mexico border during their often lengthy wait for court hearings. The migrants waiting on the Mexico side of the border are living in extremely uncomfortable accommodations; shelters created from converted business spaces, industrial buildings or open sports complexes for housing (Silva 2019). In response to the current pandemic, the US administration has decided to close down the US/Mexico border to nonessential traffic and it has shut off access for anyone trying to claim asylum from the border (Ahmed et al 2020). Tijuana houses a large migrant population and with the closure of the border all court cases are on hold until the courts reopen. These people are the most vulnerable population, and their options for food, shelter and healthcare are basic and delivery mechanisms fragile during the public health crisis (Irwin 2020). Lack of adequate access to healthcare and cramped living conditions can increase the spread of the virus within these communities that already live in marginal spaces and place increased social and economic pressure on the communities where they are residing.

## **Migrant Experiences**

The lived experiences of the migrants tell the story of the problematic implementation of policies by the US and Mexican governments. The following three stories illustrate the timeline of these policies. The caravan began around October 2018, and for a short time, the migrants crossed into Mexico with minimal problems. With increased media coverage, which led to pressure from the US administration on the Mexican government, the caravan crossing the Mexico/Guatemala border rapidly became more problematic and increasingly militarized. The US/Mexico border became hyper militarized, the caravan arrived to protests in Tijuana, and in January the US implemented the MPP program.

A Honduran man, who chose to remain anonymous, recounted his experience as a migrant and what happened to him during his trip through Mexico, his time in the United States and his returns with his family (the author chose to use the pseudonym Rubén). He owned an auto shop in Honduras where the local gang extorted him for "renta", a fee, imposed upon him with the very real possibility for murder if he was unable to pay. Rubén then witnessed a kidnapping near his home, and the authorities refused to provide him protection after he testified against the man accused of the kidnapping. He knew that he was in danger for his life, and because of this and the financial pressures he faced, in October 2018 he decided to leave his pregnant wife and his son to join the caravan (Un migrante, 124a, 2018).

Douglas Oviedo's story begins on October 22, 2018 when he left Honduras hoping to join the caravan. He arrived at Tecún Umán, a city that lies at the border of Guatemala and Chiapas, at midnight on Wednesday, October 25th, where he slept outside for three nights waiting for permission to enter Mexico, which was never granted. He crossed into Chiapas trying to catch up with the caravan and was caught by Mexican immigration officers and was deported back to Honduras the same night, without an option to challenge this action legally. He returned the next day, arriving in Tecún Umán on Sunday. Upon arrival, he was surprised to see he was not alone there, but among another 4,000 migrants waiting there to cross into Mexico. He says that the thing that hurt him the most was that, "on the other side of the wall an army of federal police, immigration officers, the navy - [were there] to not let us enter" (Oviedo, 166a, 2019). On this day, the Mexican government began firing on the migrants with rubber bullets and tear gas. Oviedo witnessed two people die after rubber bullets hit them. He says, "It was a night of terror" (Oviedo, 166a, 2019). The next day, the entire group of migrants entered Mexico by crossing the Suchiate River together, attempting to provoke dialog with the Mexican authorities. Instead, the Mexican government flew a helicopter in overhead to incite fear, but the group kept pushing forward. In the space of a week or two, the Mexican/Guatemalan border had become more militarized, perhaps due to increased pressure from the US on the Mexican government.

When Rubén arrived in Tijuana, he had hoped that he would be placed on a waitlist for asylum in the United States and if not there, then in Mexico (Un migrante, 124a, 2018). He heard rumors that if he crossed the border and was caught by the US Border Patrol, he would have the same rights to apply for asylum. He chose to cross the border into the US on November 21, 2018 when immigration agents picked him up and took him to a detention facility where he stayed in a cell for 10 days. After these 10 days, the agents administered his credible fear interview, during which the interviewer asked if he was afraid to return to his home country. He responded yes, and that the local gang had been exhorting him, however he did not speak of his lack of protection after the trial he appeared in and only half of his story was told. He was told that he couldn't apply for asylum because his problem was not due to politics or police. However his wife tells us that it was not safe for him to return to his city because the gang members were already looking for him (Una migrante, 124c, 2019) and he had no protection from the government.

He recalls that at times he was fed at 2am, sometimes only twice a day. At the conclusion of his interview, the officials asked him to sign a form, to which he refused, because he was afraid it would mean deportation. One immigration officer became very angry and aggressive with him, insulting and mocking him. Another officer screamed at him in the face, repeatedly, using foul language. He felt afraid the men would hurt him, but he continued to refuse to sign the document. Three agents then put on gloves, grabbed his hands and then forced him to bend backwards. They then forcibly placed his thumbprint on the form and he says, "so

the form isn't signed, it's just got my fingerprint" (Un migrante, 124b, 2019). After more than two months, and several facility transfers, he was deported to Honduras on February 16, 2019.

Oviedo made it into Mexico, arriving at Ciudad Hidalgo in Chiapas and eventually caught up with the caravan in Tapachula along with a group of people with whom he was developing a deep bond with and he called "mi gente" or my people. He says that he encountered many people who welcomed them as migrants and found help at shelters and at the same time there were people who had a "racist heart" that said no to them, that blocked them and tried to instill fear in them (Oviedo, 166a, 2019). Along the way, people voiced their fears of the narcos, the Zetas, the other gangs and their fear of the Mexican immigration officers. Oviedo said, "I was able to see with my own eyes how migration would grab the innocent children, the innocent women and they would forcibly put them in the 'dog kennels' to deport them back to Honduras" (Oviedo, 166b, 2019).

Douglas arrived in Tijuana on November 25, 2018. In Tijuana, the caravan migrants were received in a repurposed athletic building turned improvised migrant camp and he saw some migrants sleeping outside in tents in the field. From here he went to another improvised migrant camp named El Barretal, a converted concert arena, where he stayed for two and half months. He signed up for his wait list number on December 17, 2018 and on January 29th he was taken to San Ysidro where he had his credible fear interview. He waited for 26 hour in a cell prior to the interview and suffered verbal abuse from the immigration agents during this time. He, along with others, were returned to Mexico after their interview, because this week the MPP program was implemented. On March 19, 2019 he had his first court date in the US, where he went but his court date was postponed until May 7, 2019. He saw that at the beginning of the implementation of the MPP, only men were being returned to Mexico. By April, he saw entire

families being returned (Oviedo, 166c, 2019). Oviedo had his final court date on September 16, 2019. He was the only one of 50 people granted asylum that day; the rest were returned to Tijuana (Oviedo, 166d, 2019).

Extortion and death threats from gangs may not be the most effective argument when applying for asylum to the United States. However, Rubén's story demonstrates the dismal care he received while in the United States and he narrates the abuses he suffered at the hands of the US immigration agents through lack of adequate food, lack of clear communication, and with both verbal and physical abuse by those in power. He did not know to tell the agents in his credible fear interview about the threat to his life from the gangs based on his court testimony and the lack of protection from the government agencies which may have been a better argument to qualify him to apply for asylum. His interview was mismanaged, specifically through the physical brutality of the agents. He was deported based on a removal form that he did not sign and had he been given an opportunity to tell his full story about lack of protection from the government this may have warranted a court hearing. Oviedo arrived at the US border after Rubén and by the time of his interview, the US had enacted the MPP policy. He was one of the first persons to be sent back to the Mexican side of the border under this policy, and his story shows the lengthy wait he endured in Tijuana from his arrival in November, to his wait list number in February to his final court hearing in September.

After Rubén was deported the first time, he arrived in Honduras at the San Pedro Sula Airport, where he contacted his wife to have her meet him there with his son so they could immediately travel together back to Mexico. While crossing from Chiapas into Oaxaca, they were caught by the Mexican authorities and they were placed in a detention facility where they stayed for two weeks. They were refused the option of deportation together because his wife was too far advanced in her pregnancy to fly and the Mexican authorities expected her to give birth in the detention facility.

While in the detention facility she was forced to sleep on a mat on the floor, and when she started vomiting blood, she received extremely poor medical treatment from immigration officers who verbally abused her. She was not allowed to take her change of clothes from her husband and washed her clothes while in the shower every day and wore them in the sun to dry. Mexican authorities offered to release her and her son back into Mexico but as she was so far along in her pregnancy, she was afraid to be stranded with her son and without her husband to provide for them. Taking advantage of the consul not being there one day and his replacement's lack of knowledge of their situation, they secured the deportation of their family together. Once they arrived back in Honduras, they immediately began their trip back to Mexico, destitute and begging for food (Una migrante, 124c, 2019). They made it to Huixtla in Chiapas, where their daughter was born. At the time of their video recording, this family decided to stay in Mexico and hope to establish residency there. Rubén's story clearly outlines the increased militarization of the Mexican migration infrastructure and their actions in an attempt to prevent migrants from moving through Mexico.

Migrants who pass through Mexico do not always come from Central America and this is not always apparent in media discourse in both the United States and Mexico. Two men who came from Cameroon narrate the bureaucratic problems they encountered once they arrived in southern Mexico in mid-2019. Although their journeys were separate, they share similar qualities. Amin and Gilmore became targets of the state after participation in protests turned violent that broke out in Cameroon regarding the inequity which English speakers experienced within the nation's borders (Amin 2019 and Glimore 2019). The military imprisoned both men and after their release, they faced the real threat of death from the government, so they chose to leave and seek asylum in the United States.

Amin arrived at the border of Mexico and Guatemala prior to Gilmore. When he arrived at Tapachula, he said that he did not encounter any immigration officers (Amin 2019) and proceeded to the immigration office there. Gilmore attempted entering Mexico via a boat and was captured by Mexican immigration officials and immediately sent back to the Guatemalan side of the border. He stayed there for a couple of hours, where Guatemalan authorities found him and demanded a twenty dollar payment to stay. He then attempted to cross into Mexico again, once again in a boat, where he was apprehended by the police who brought an immigration officer to speak with him and the others he was traveling with. This time he was able to explain his situation to the Mexican authorities who took him to the immigration office.

Each man experienced similar problems once they arrived in Mexico. Both were issued a Regional Visitor Card that only allowed them to stay for seven days in Mexico and only in the states of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco and Quintana Roo. Amin wanted to apply for a visa to travel and stated that he was sent on a run around by the immigration offices after finding out that his Regional Visitor Card had his name spelled incorrectly, even after he submitted a copy of his passport to clear up the original mistake on the legal document. Gilmore also experienced this issue and states that "almost everyone has issues with that pass [Regional Visitor Card] because it seems as if it is an intended act to actually create problems with your name spelling or arrangement of your name so that you become frustrated and then you maybe decide to seek asylum here [in Mexico]" (Gilmore 2019).

Each man suffered through the extremely long and arduous journey of traveling to Ecuador and then up to the southern border of Guatemala and Mexico and once they arrived in Tapachula, they found themselves stranded there due to the perceived intentional actions of bureaucratic mistakes that prevented them from traveling outside of Mexico's southern states. These two men may have a legitimate case for asylum and are potentially being kept from their legal right to travel through Mexico via the bureaucratic controls that can be understood as one way of Mexico attempting to restrict migrant movement without violence.

# Conclusion

These new anti-migranttion control and determent processes that have been implemented since the arrival of the 2018 caravan have made the life of migrants and asylum seekers very difficult. The stories of the migrants speak to unfair or illegal outcomes that demonstrate human rights abuses. Further research is important, looking at other migrant groups that have traveled through Mexico as well as continued research on the effects of Covid-19 on migrants awaiting their asylum cases in Mexico.

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