

Going to a home you've never been to: The return migration of Mexican and American-Mexican children

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This work was supported by the Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT) under grant number 43259.

Abstract

The paper has two goals. The first is to present the main quantitative findings drawn from four surveys we conducted in Nuevo León (2004, n=14,473), Zacatecas (2005, n=11,258), Puebla (2009, n=18,829) and Jalisco (2010, n=11,479) using representative samples of children aged 7 to 16. We classified children in the following categories: (a) children who are returnees (who were born in Mexico), (b) international migrant children (born in the U.S.), and (c) mononational Mexicans. Among the second group, we distinguish children who had school experiences in the U.S. and those younger transnationals who came to Mexico before enrolling in school.

The second goal is consider these children's cosmologies, revealed through interviews and survey responses, and to interpret the ways children explain their return migration from the United States to Mexico within the context of increasing voluntary and forced-return migration to Mexico. So data drawn from our mixed methods inquiry add younger voices and complicate sociological typologies about migration, motives for migration, and returnees.

Children and ‘return’ migration

Migration between the U.S. and Mexico has long included ‘return migration’ (i.e., those from Mexico returning to Mexico after a stint in the U.S.), but that portion of the migration equation has received comparatively less attention than movement from Mexico to the U.S. (Gaillard 1994). Similarly, while migration may often be ‘pioneered’ by adults travelling without children, it has long been noted that children migrate in large numbers as well (Passel 2011; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2002). Nonetheless, children’s participation in migration has also been comparatively under-emphasized (Dobson 2009, Ensor and Gozdziaik 2010).

Based on our 10-year research project studying children with prior backgrounds in the U.S. who we encountered in Mexican schools in five Mexican states, we found that, at the start of the 21st Century’s second decade, Mexican schools (for grades 1 to 9) hosted children with prior experience in U.S. schools. We have also found that, as a partially overlapping population, these Mexican schools also enrolled children who had been born in the U.S. Not only is it misleading to call these children *retornados* (they are not returning to Mexico, but rather immigrating to it), but these latter children are also U.S. citizens per U.S. law, although they are also Mexican citizens based on the citizenship rights conferred by their parentage.

In the contemporary context of return migration from the U.S. to Mexico, this paper aims to a) show the main quantitative findings in four of the five state level surveys we conducted in 2004, 2005, 2009 and 2010, b) analyze and interpret children’s answers and narratives related to that migration, including their negotiation of a new or returned-to community in Mexico and their continued relationship with those in their past place(s) of residence. In doing this, we tried to respond to Dobson’s (2009) call for ‘unpacking

children in migration research'. As Dobson wrote: 'The misperception that children are irrelevant to migration studies has been compounded by a focus on the economic, and an understanding that only adults are of economic significance.' (2009: 355).

The contexts of child mobility

Mexico is recognised as being one of the most important emigrant-sending countries in the world. Almost all of its emigrants have made the U.S. their country of destination. For decades, the predominant pattern of international flow from Mexico to the U.S. was circulatory and seasonal (Escobar Latapí *et al.* 1999). Between 1900 and the 1980s, Mexican migrants to the U.S. were generally post-schooling, unmarried (or travelling without family), young adult males who did not plan to reside abroad permanently. During this era, children did not significantly participate in these circular migratory journeys. This explains why Mexican and U.S. migration studies largely disregarded children even if they undoubtedly participated as *children left behind*.

The dominant pattern of migration changed in the late 80s, after the U.S.'s Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (Hagan *et al.* 2008). Over the next 25 years, Mexican migration transformed from a circular, largely male flow into often permanent family resettlement abroad. The causes of that crucial change were multiple. First, the militarisation of the Mexico/U.S. border produced the opposite outcome from its most commonly articulated rationale—keeping Mexican newcomers *in* the U.S. rather than *out* (Durand and Massey 2002). Undocumented Mexican migrants still crossed the border, but once established in the U.S., it made more sense to stay instead of travelling back home only to have to risk another costly, inhumane border crossing. Second, Mexicans settling in the U.S. for long periods, both undocumented and documented, wanted to have their

spouses, sons, daughters and other members of their families together. They reunited their families bit by bit in their new destinations (Súarez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2002, Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). Third, once installed in the U.S., as nuclear or extended families, sons and daughters of Mexican mothers were born in the U.S. (Batalova and Fix 2010). With childrearing (including schooling) so logistically communitarian, raising children induced migrants to settle permanently and take root in their new destinations. In turn, many members of U.S. receiving communities increasingly came to see Mexican newcomers (or at least students and their parents) as part of the community as well (Hamann and Reeves 2013). These changes explain why children are increasingly considered by researchers as part of the migration story, depicted variously as victims, persons at risk, or agents (Coe *et al.* 2011, Ensor and Gozdzic 2010, Parreñas Salazar 2005, Quiroz, 2001).

It appears, however, that this family reuniting, one-way migration from Mexico to the U.S. is subsiding. Since 2005, and more visibly since the U.S. economic downturn that began in 2008, Mexicans have increasingly been returning to Mexico, not always as complete family units. Some migrants returned as a result of aggressive deportation policies implemented in the U.S. (Masferrer and Roberts 2012, Rodriguez and Hagan 2004), while others returned voluntarily. The most recent demographic estimations based on the 2010 population census of Mexico show that about 1,000,000 Mexicans decided to come back between 2005 and 2010 (Giorguli and Gutiérrez 2011). Among them 25 percent were children and youth.

From a macro-scale, migrants are facing an era of restriction of migratory movements (Bhatt and Roberts 2012) and of militarisation of borders. In that context, return migration is often, but not always, a disruptive geographical relocation. Children

generally experience this disruption as an assemblage of ruptures both in institutional settings, like schools, and non-institutional ones, like neighbourhoods (Hamann and Zúñiga 2011, Quiroz, 2001). As Boehm *et al.* (2011) pointed out, migration is inherently a break, a form of dispersion, a disjuncture. For that reason, paradoxically, migration also implies formation and creation, as migrants make sense of their dislocating experiences and forge links in their new communities. The empirical material presented in the paper illustrates the children's efforts to make sense of their often-disruptive geographical experiences.

Methodology and sources of data

The main body of empirical material considered here comes from a long-term survey conducted at a stratified random sample of more than 400 schools in four states of Mexico. Since 2004, our research has focused specifically on transnationally experienced children in five Mexican states with differing histories of participation in U.S./Mexico migration (with this paper using data from four of them Nuevo León in 2004, Zacatecas in 2005, Puebla in 2009, and Jalisco in 2010). In each state we conducted surveys on representative samples of students attending 1st to 9th grades in public and private schools. The total sample of surveyed students from the four states equalled 56,010 children and youngsters between 7 and 16 years old (table 1). Among these students, we found 1,442 international migrant children (returnees or not) of whom 592 responded to the question about motives for their return to Mexico.

It is important to highlight that our samples have one important limitation: they do not capture drop out children/adolescents, and we ignore until today how many children returnees stop their schooling when returning to Mexico.

As just hinted at, our second source of data was the in-depth interviews we also conducted since 2004 with an opportunistically selected portion of the identified students with transnational experience. In these interviews, children spoke of their migratory trajectory while they expressed how they had negotiated their various dislocations. We conducted 140 interviews. For the purposes of this paper, we decided to do not refer to that second body of data.

Table 1: Student’s representative samples in four states of Mexico

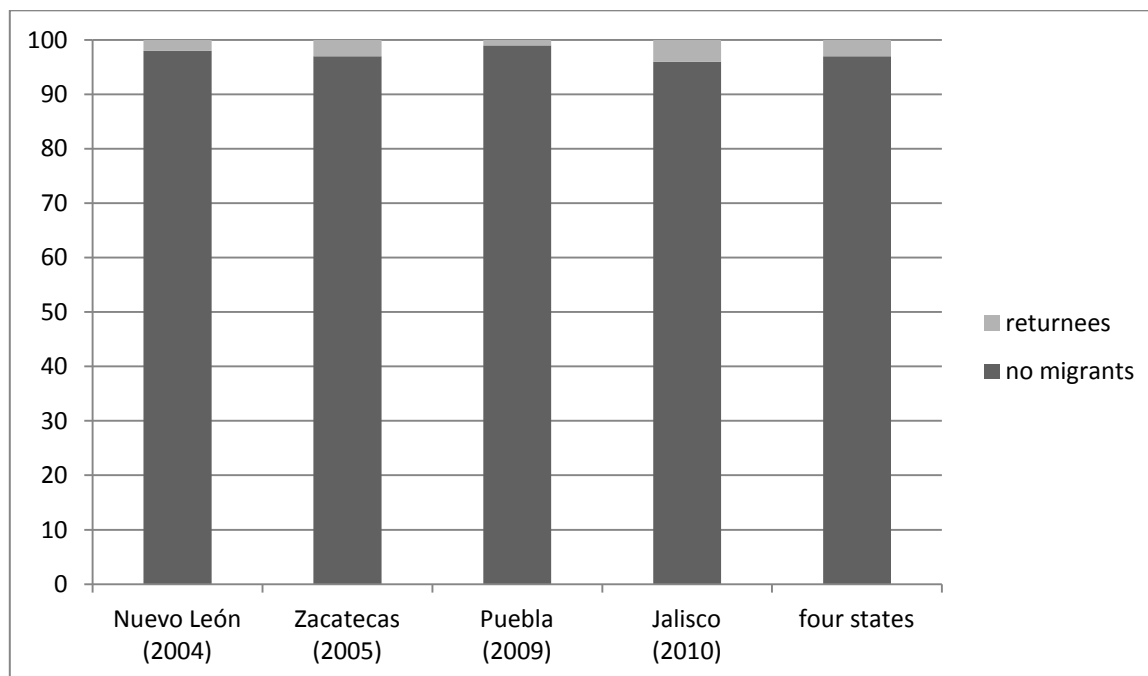
State	Total enrolment	Total schools	Sample of schools	Student’s sample	Sub-sample of students 4 th to 9 th
NUEVO LEÓN (2004)	704,000	3,310	173	14,473	10,144
ZACATECAS (2005)	282,000	4,803	218	11,258	7,619
PUEBLA (2009)	966,000	4,956	214	18,829	12,064
JALISCO (2010)	1,348,000	7,787	200	11,479	9,701
Total	3,300,000	20,856	805	56,010	39,633

Source: CONACYT/UDEM International Migration: school, family and return migration project (students 1st to 9th n=56,010).

Returnees, international migrants, non migrants

From our surveys, we found 1442 children and adolescents who were attending the schools in Mexico and who were living in the U. S. before (Zúñiga, 2012). They represented 2.7 per cent of the total of four samples. The proportion changes between the four states selected. As expected, in Jalisco and Zacatecas, two states with high intensity of international migration, the proportions of children “returnees” is higher than in Nuevo León or Puebla (graphic 1).

Graphic 1: children “returnees” attending schools in Mexico (per cent)



Source: CONACYT/UEM International Migration: school, family and return migration project (students 1st to 9th n=56,010).

Our surveys on this matter (Zúñiga, Hamann and Sánchez 2008), have allowed us to distinguish three different types of Mexican children’s exposure to international migration. First of all, there are children properly *returnees*. These children were born in Mexico, eventually left to the U.S. (generally with their parents or at least one of them) and after some period of residency in the U.S., returned to Mexico. In general, those students started their schooling in Mexico and were enrolled in American schools and later returned to continue their education in Mexico. We estimated in 2010 that there were about 350,000 children returnees attending the schools (1st to 9th grades) (Zúñiga and Hamann 2013).

Second, we distinguished the children who were born in the U.S. and came to Mexico for the first time in their lives, we will refer to them as: *international migrants* because this is indeed what they are. They have simply crossed the border and moved from one country to

another. So, they do not simply return to Mexico even if they are Mexicans because of their parents' nationality. Some of them have had school experiences in American schools; some others arrived to Mexico before being school-aged. The Mexican Population Census in 2010 showed that about 500,000 children and youngsters (ages 0 to 18) were born in the U.S. and were living in Mexico (Giorguli and Gutiérrez 2011). Among these American-Mexican children, we use to distinguish for our research purposes those who arrive to Mexico once they started their schooling in the U.S. and those who arrive before (see table 3).

Third, we have a number of children who belong, during a variable period of their lives, to families divided by the borders. This is the case of those who are studying in Mexico while their fathers, mothers, siblings, etc. are in the U.S. We decided to name this third category as *children left behind* (or *left at home*). National estimations of the children left at home are not available, however, as we are going to discuss below, they are significantly more than the children who are active migrants (table 2). Nonetheless, this paper will focus on the children types 1 and 2.

Table 2: children's international migration experience in four Mexican state school systems

International migration experience	Nuevo León 2004	Zacatecas 2005	Puebla 2009	Jalisco 2010	Total four surveys
Returnees	158 (1.6%)	117 (1.5%)	43 (0.4%)	212 (2.2%)	530 (1.3%)
International migrants	96 (0.9%)	139 (1.8%)	99 (0.8%)	240 (2.5%)	637 (1.6%)
Children left behind (father and/or mother in the U.S. while they are in Mexico)	454 (4.5%)	1167 (15.3%)	1062 (8.8%)	421 (4.3%)	3104 (7.8%)
No links with international migration (*)	9,436 (93.0%)	6,196 (81.4%)	10,860 (90.0%)	8,828 (91.0%)	35,257 (89.3%)
Total	10,144 (100%)	7,619 (100%)	12,064 (100%)	9,701 (100%)	39,528 (100%)

Source: CONACYT/UEDEM International Migration: school, family and return migration project (students 4th to 9th n=39,633).

(*) Some of those children had links with international migration in the past (eg one of their parents or both were in the United States). The table shows the situation as of the day of the survey.

Table 3: returnees and international migrant: prior school experience in the U. S.

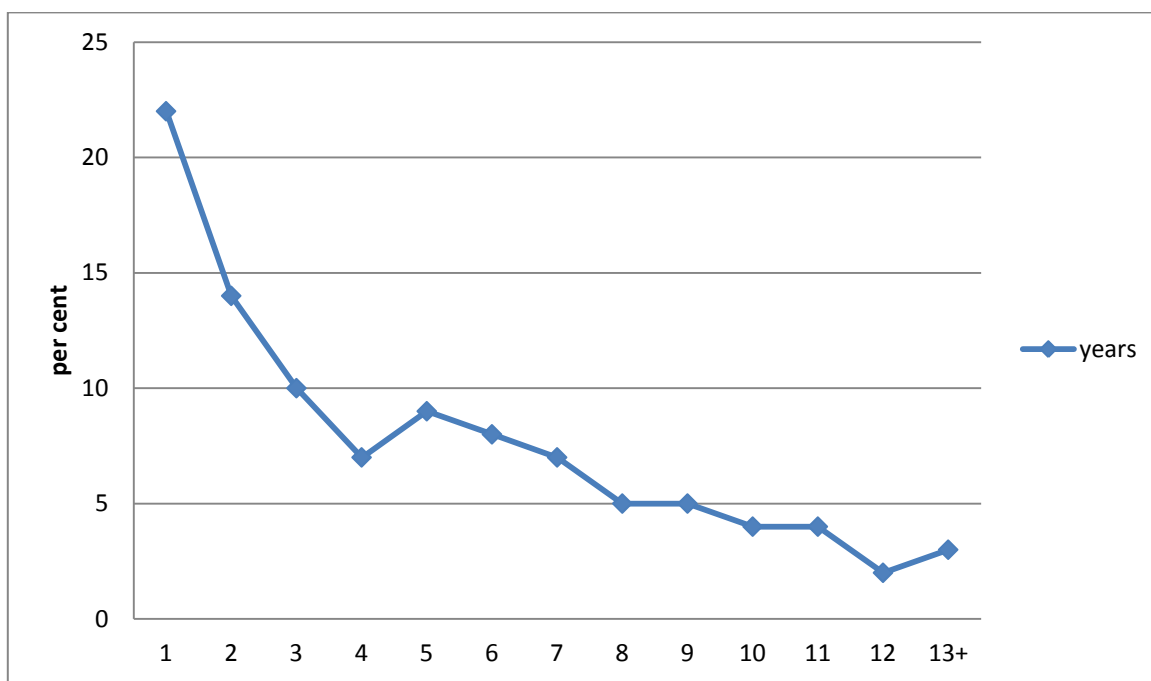
Country of birth	School years in the U. S.		Total (*)
	Yes	No	
Mexico	576	----	576 (41%)
U. S.	366	460	826 (59%)
Total	942 (67%)	460 (33%)	1402 (100%)

Source: CONACYT/UEM International Migration: school, family and return migration project (students with prior background in the U.S. 1st to 9th n=1442). Samples of Nuevo León (2004), Zacatecas (2005), Puebla (2009), Jalisco (2010).

(*) 40 children did not answer to the question about their country of birth.

Some of the children spent significant portion of their lives in the U.S., others lived only one or two years there (graphic 2). Specifically focusing on returnees (n= 576), we found that one-third had a short stay in the United States (one year or less); another third lived there for two, three or four years. Only the last third spent a considerable portion of their lives out of Mexico (five to fourteen years). Some arrived in the United States when they were very young, and passed the first stages of their lives in a country where they were not born. Others arrived in the United States once they had begun their socialisation in Mexico (when they were ten, eleven or twelve years old). Some crossed the border with documents authorising their entry into the United States; others personally experienced one or more of the various pathways used by undocumented migrants to U.S. The vast majority of them lived in the United States with their fathers and/or their mothers.

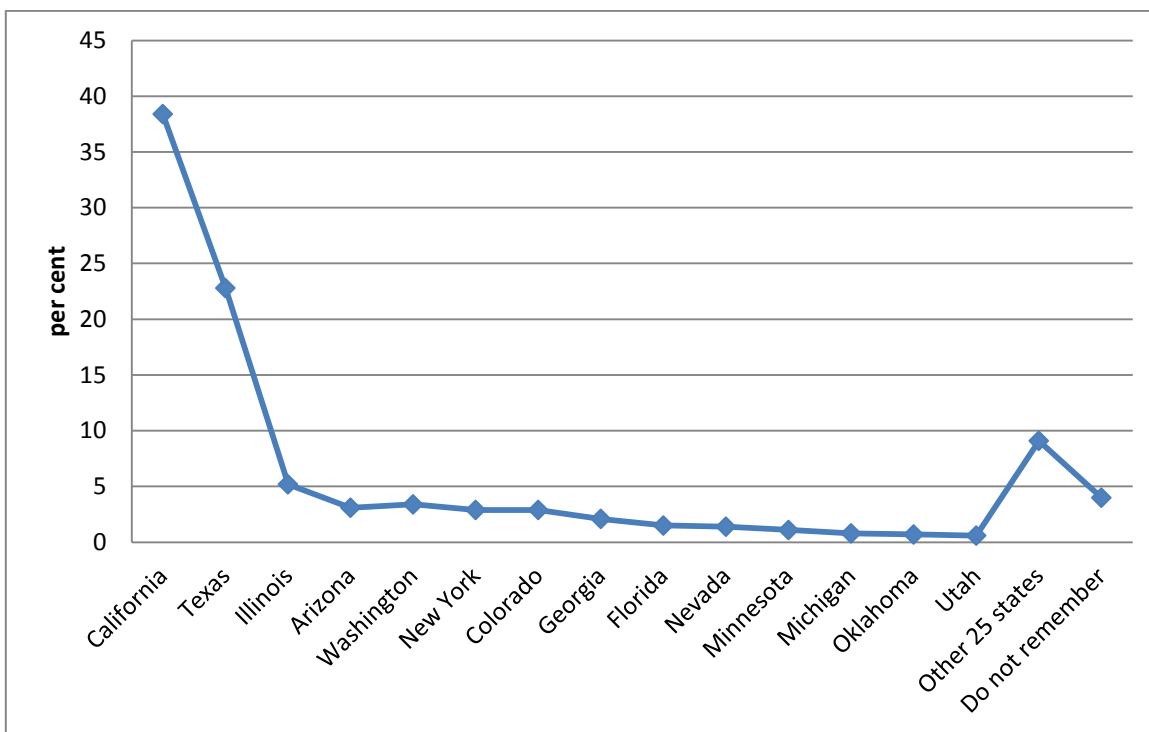
Graphic 2: years spent in the U. S.



Source: CONACYT/UEDEM International Migration: school, family and return migration project (subsample students 4th to 9th who lived in the U.S. and had school experience in the U.S. n=942).

Where were they residing before arriving to Mexico? Children show how dispersed the geography of Mexican families in the U. S. is nowadays since mid-1990's (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005). It is not a surprise to find that highest proportions came from California, Texas, Illinois, and Arizona the traditional gateways of Mexican immigration. What is new or a confirmation of the new trends was the proportion of children coming from Georgia, Utah, Washington or New York (graphic 3). In addition of this geographical dispersion, we confirmed that places of destination are related with regions of origin. For instance, children “returnees” of Nuevo León lived before mainly in Texas; most children of Jalisco were in California; in Puebla, New York and California were the main destinations; in Zacatecas, however, we found the highest geographical dispersion

Graphic 3: Where children “returnees” are coming from?



Source: CONACYT/UEDEM International Migration: school, family and return migration project (subsample students 4th to 9th who lived in the U.S. with or without school experience in the U.S. n=1092).

Moving from the United States to Mexico through children’s eyes

The first body of empirical material considered here comes from a long-term survey conducted at stratified random samples of students. The survey was conducted in classrooms, and children had a blank space on the page on which they could freely write their explanations about their return to Mexico. Interestingly, most of the children wrote just one short sentence. Very few children offered a paragraph and only one took the time to write a narrative longer than that.

We have considered various explanations for the children's brevity: (a) saving time—i.e., wanting to finish the questionnaire quickly, (b) their limited ability to write, (c) the available space on the questionnaire sheet (about 3 cm), and (d) the inadequacy of our method. However, after interviewing several migrant children (a second source of data), we have arrived at the following conclusion: transnational children generally understand the rationale behind their family's decision to return. So, for most respondents, the reason for coming back to their family's homeland was relatively clear and easy enough to summarize—hence responses that were short and concise. Per this logic, if the rationale is clear, then why justify, explain, or describe further? They just wrote the main reason for their geographical movement.

Among these surveyed students, 592 responded to the question about motives for their return to Mexico. Most of those who did not respond were (a) the youngest ones (1st to 3rd graders) because we used a shorter oral form of the questionnaire with these children that did not include this question (see Sánchez García *et al.* 2012 for more about data collection from these youngest children) or (b) those who arrived in Mexico when they were too young to be aware of the motives for their own migration.

As already noted, generally children responded to the question about the motives for their return to Mexico with a short sentence. 'My father found a job' (survey of Nuevo León, 2004, girl, 14, born in Mexico) is a typical example of a short response on a survey. We can interpret this response as 'my father found a job in Mexico, and that job is either better than the ones he had in the United States or at least good enough that it enabled a move that was desirable for other reasons.' One can even find shorter responses, like the following: 'Freedom' (survey of Nuevo León, 2004, boy, 15, born in Mexico). Fortunately, that boy was not the only one using the word 'freedom' (*libertad*). Others used exactly the

same word. So, we can read this shortest answer through the lens of other explanations for returning that describe obstacles that migrant children had to overcome, including using public spaces, taking part in outdoor activities, making friends in the neighborhoods in which they lived, and the lack of freedom of movement in the areas where they lived in the United States. As Leslie Reese (2002) discovered in a fascinating comparative study of Mexico-born adult sibling pairs who were, alternately, raising children in the U.S. or Mexico, in the U.S. Mexican parents were much more restrictive and vigilant about their children's whereabouts and company than were their siblings raising families in Mexico. For the boy who wrote 'freedom' as the only and convincing reason for returning, living in the United States was an experience full of personal and family restrictions.

Our judgment after reading the shorter answers is that children were convinced that there is something (a fact, an accumulation of facts, or a condition, or several conditions) that pushed their families to take the crucial and significant decision to move from the U.S. to Mexico. Let us offer another example: 'My mother got very sad' (survey in Puebla, 2009, boy, 12, born in Mexico). Should we interpret the mother's sadness as the result of a lack of adaptation, loneliness, nostalgia, and/or negative family dynamics? We do not know. The only thing we know for sure is that a 12-year-old boy understood his mother's lack of happiness living abroad as the explanation for his family's decision to return.

We read carefully the 592 children's answers and took them as sincere explanations for their family's decision. Of course, the children's displayed understandings are not comprehensive and likely ignore other parts of the returning story. Nonetheless, those responses express the ways these children explained a crucial event in their lives (Kamya 2009).

As a first step, we classified the 592 responses into three types (table 4): (a) answers that did not represent the international return as a disruptive geographical movement: these children described the family's plan to return with reference to a specific goal that was to be achieved (14 per cent of the total responses); (b) answers that referred, in an explicit way, to disruption and painful family events that pushed them to return (71 per cent); and (c) answers that expressed confusion or an apparent lack of comprehension about the family's decision to return (15 per cent) (see table 4). The latter might be an indicator of children's disagreement with the parental decision to return. In fact, some of the responses of this third type clearly reveal disagreements between children and their parents.

As a second step, we further categorised children's responses under themes and concerns. As a result of that exercise, we found that 'type A' return movements were related to circularity, schooling, legal formalities, and religion. Examples of children's responses classified in this category are: 'We wanted to stay there only one year' [survey of Nuevo León, 2004, boy, 14, born in Oklahoma]; 'Every year I come [to Mexico] for vacations and this time I decided to stay here to study in the school' (survey of Zacatecas, 2005, girl, 14, born in California); 'To learn Spanish better' (survey of Puebla, 2009, boy, 15, born in New York); 'My father built a house' (survey of Jalisco, 2010, boy, 12, born in California); 'My dad was studying medicine just for one year [in the U.S.] and then he finished in Mexico' (survey of Nuevo León, 2004, girl, 14, born in Mexico); 'bacanse (sic) my mom b grandma b grandpa wonted me to study for a moment here [Mexico]' (originally in English, including orthographic errors, survey of Jalisco, 2010, girl, 13, born in California); 'Because my dad is a missionary and sets up churches' (survey of Jalisco 2010, boy, 12, born in Mexico), 'The reason I came back is that every year we come back and forth' (survey of Nuevo León, 2004, girl, 14, born in Colorado).

Table 4: Why did your return to Mexico: children's written answers distribution

Returning to Mexico	Motives of returning	Types	subtotal
Mostly planned 14%	Circularity	Circularity (short stay in Mexico)	3%
		Planned return (decision to stay in Mexico)	4%
	Schooling	Finish studies in the United States	2%
		Continue schooling in Mexico	4%
	Other	Fill out legal formalities	0.7%
		Religion	0.3%
	Mostly unplanned 71%	Family	Reunification
Troubles			12%
Duties			9%
Life style		Unacceptable live in the United States	6%
		Mexico is better	6%
Job		Job scarcity in the United States	4%
		Job opportunities in Mexico	4%
Legal status		Deportation, fear of deportation, legal issues	10%

Incomprehensible decision 15%		Don't know, my parents just decided, I do not agree with	15%
Total			592 (100%)

Source: CONACYT/UEDEM International Migration: school, family and return migration project (students who responded to the question n=592). Samples of Nuevo León (2004), Zacatecas (2005), Puebla (2009), Jalisco (2010).

Besides this first category of responses, we found a second category—family concerns—that represented most children's explanation for their journey/return to Mexico. Family issues are expressed by children in different ways. One is related directly to family reunion in Mexico. Some wrote: 'Because my family is here' (survey of Nuevo León, 2004, boy, 15, born in Mexico); 'Because I needed to come with my family and grandparents' (survey of Zacatecas, 2005, boy, 11, born in Texas); 'My father wanted to return and I wanted to know my family' (survey of Puebla, 2009, boy, 10, born in New York); and 'My father wanted to see us grow up in Mexico' (survey of Jalisco, 2010, boy, 13, born in Mexico).

Undoubtedly, reuniting family members in the country of origin (Mexico) is often associated with legal conditions that impede a family from instead reuniting in the United States. What several children in the surveys implied was that their families could not be together in the United States; thus they decided to reunite in Mexico. Short answers from the children seem to communicate that they did not accept the economic, emotional, and practical consequences of being separated.

However, the first type of family concern (reunion in Mexico) was not quantitatively the most important. Other more disturbing family conditions explain, from the children's perspective, their migration back to their homeland. Children refer to crucial

and unexpected family incidents like deaths, illnesses, the needs of grandparents and other elderly relatives, and financial costs that pushed children's families to return to Mexico. As several wrote: 'Because our grandparents needed us to help them to do important things' (survey of Zacatecas, 2005, boy, 15, born in Mexico); 'Because my grandparents were sick and we had already been living there [the United States] for a long time' (survey of Zacatecas, 2005, girl, 12, born in Mexico); 'My grandfather, the father of my mother, was dying and he asked for her' (survey of Puebla, 2009, girl, 14, born in New York); 'Because my mom was very sick' (survey of Puebla, 2009, boy, 11, born in California).

Other family issues were presented as family conflicts, such as divorce, hostility from other members of extended family living in the United States, and abandonment. That group of motives represented exactly the opposite of the family reunion spirit because, in those cases, returning migration was motivated by the desire to be separated. However, in both situations, the decision of whether to come back to Mexico continues to be a family issue. When a 16-year-old boy wrote 'conflicts with my grandparents' (survey of Nuevo León, 2004, born in Mexico), he was declaring that his grandparents lived in the United States and his father or his mother had problems with them. So they decided to return to Mexico. Other children simply wrote: 'family problems.'

In sum, the vast majority of children's responses indicated that family issues were the motives for returning migration. Most of those responses described the desire to continue living together. Others emphasised family responsibilities. And finally, some responses revealed that family conflicts were the source of their decision to return.

However, it was not exceptional to find children's responses describing explicitly legal circumstances that preceded the return of their families to Mexico. They were aware of the macro-scale forces pushing them from one country to another. Although we never

explicitly asked about deportation or other legal issues, some responses unmistakably reported the deportation of family members: ‘We are here because my father used to drink, and then he went to jail and they sent him to Alabama, and then we went to visit him. Then, they told him they will send him to Mexico. Then, we came back home’ (survey of Zacatecas, 2005, boy, 9, born in Georgia) and ‘My dad got deported’ (originally in English, survey of Jalisco, 2010, girl, 12, born in Massachusetts). In one of the longer explanations of this type, a girl reported ‘Because they *transported* –literally translated from Spanish– my father, and my mother took the decision to come here so we could be all together; because my father was really happy drinking a beer, then the police arrived’ (survey of Jalisco, 2010, girl, 10, born in California).

Yet deportation-related migrations to Mexico were not always concurrent with a family member’s deportation. Some children described deportation-related family reunions in Mexico where the reunion came possibly well after the initial deportation: ‘My mother took us to see my dad’ (survey of Jalisco, 2010, girl, 11, born in Mexico); ‘[We returned] because my father wanted to see us being raised by him’ (survey of Jalisco, 2010, boy, 13, born in Mexico).

In other cases, the children’s responses showed their personal or their family’s concerns about deportation as a precipitating factor for their move, with the decision to return intended to less traumatically pre-empt that eventuality: ‘I had no documents, I was illegal, so I had to come back’ (survey of Jalisco, 2010, girl, 16, born in Mexico) and ‘They [my parents] were afraid they [American migration authorities would] push them back to Mexico and then they left me behind alone’ (survey of Puebla, 2009, girl, 13, born in Mexico). It is important to note in this second case that protecting the child from the prospective trauma of deportation was the reason for return, but then her parents returned to

the U.S. where, likely without documentation, they would continue to be vulnerable to deportation.

The two main stories/explanations shared by children so far then amount to something like this: (a) ‘We are a family; because governmental forces and laws separated my family or were able to divide us, we decided to reunite in a place in which we have the right to continue being together.’ Or (b) ‘we are a family, if someone among us needs our help, we are ready to respond positively.’

But these two main explanations do not encompass all the answers we reviewed. Some children’s responses indicated that they did not understand their families’ decision to return and/or that they felt excluded from. Such responses usually said something like, ‘they [my parents] just decided.’ Sometimes children appended to this summation negative, contradictory and conflicting feelings, either because they did not want to return to Mexico or because their parents did not take into consideration their point of view.

Children’s understanding about return migration also sometimes referenced lifestyles and living conditions in both countries. Seven percent of all the reviewed responses named hard living conditions in the United States as a reason for youngsters’ move (back) to Mexico. Others emphasised the attractiveness of being in Mexico (6 per cent). Among the first group, we counted three particular conditions: lack of freedom, exhausting jobs, and an isolated and therefore boring way of life. In other words, some children knew well the consequences of new forms of capitalism for their lives. Among the second group, we heard two unexpected explanations from children: Mexican food and having the opportunity to have fun with friends. The last of these ties to our earlier reference to Reese’s (2002) research and Mexican children’s better access to public space in Mexico than in the U.S. Many children’s responses emphasised the unexpected and

undesirable conditions of life in the U.S. As one child poetically responded after reading the question Why did you return to Mexico?: ‘To live life’ (survey of Zacatecas, 2005, girl, 13, born in California).

Given the research on adult return migrants in Mexico (Ordaz and Li Ng), it is striking to also acknowledge issues that might be relevant to adults but that children did not much reference in their explanations. Explicit responses talking about job issues were particularly infrequent. Job scarcity in the United States or father’s unemployment, the housing crisis and economic troubles were not relatively important reasons asserted by children for explaining the returning decision. Nor were job opportunities in Mexico frequently mentioned (although we did share an exception to this trend earlier). It seems, from the children’s perspectives, that economic concerns are not really the push-pull factors for returnees compared to family considerations (duties, reunion, troubles, etc.) or legal issues. Framing this another way it seems that the more tangible world of family looms larger in migrating children’s cosmologies than the more abstract world of economic survival, except when an obvious element of that latter world (like enforcement of immigration laws) makes that world more tangible.

Table 5: Why did your return to Mexico, typical children's written answers

Returning to Mexico	Motives of returning	Types	Examples
Mostly planned	Circularity	Transient circularity	<i>Every year we come back and then return to the United States/we are here just for a while</i>
		Planned return to Mexico	<i>We were there [the USA] just for a short period /we were there [the USA] just for the money</i>
	Schooling	Finish studies in the United States	<i>My father was studying in the United States and he finished</i>
		Continue schooling in Mexico	<i>My parents wanted I learn Spanish/be educated in Mexico</i>
	Other	Fill out legal formalities	<i>My father wanted to get my mother's papers in order</i>
		Religion	<i>My father is a minister of church affairs</i>
Mostly unplanned	Family	Reunification	<i>we wanted to be together/we wanted to be with our father, my brothers and sisters/my family (all my family) is here/I wanted to know my family/we wanted to see our mother</i>
		Troubles	<i>My mom and my dad had problems/divorce</i>

		Duties	<i>My grandparents were sick (or died)/my grandparents wanted us here</i>
	Life style	Unacceptable live in the United States	<i>we couldn't go out/we got bored/my father were exhausted/I really don't like to live there</i>
		Mexico is better	<i>I (we) like Mexico/Mexico missed us</i>
	Job	Job scarcity in the United States	<i>My dad had no job in the US/economic crisis in the US/we lost our house</i>
		Job opportunities in Mexico	<i>my father's (mother's) job here is better/my father started a business</i>
	Legal status	Deportation, fear of deportation, legal issues	<i>My father got deported/we fear to be deported/someone was threatening us</i>
Incomprehensible decision		Don't know, don't agree	<i>I don't know why/my parents just decided/my parents forced me/my mother wanted to come back</i>

Conclusions

If someone asks us why Mexicans, including the U.S.-born children of Mexican nationals, are leaving the United States and moving/returning to Mexico, we now have a multi-faceted response enhanced by listening to children who have negotiated this transition in different and complex ways. From a macro-level and an etic standpoint (Harris

1976), they are sons and daughters of economic crisis, job scarcity, anti-immigrant contexts, reinforced borders, and new forms of segregation and laws (Bhatt and Roberts 2012). As noted, the children's trips back to their parents' homeland are often pushed by state forces: its enforcement and bureaucracies of deportation (Golash-Boza 2013). However, in the midst of those global trends, viewing things from a more emic (Harris 1976), meso-level perspective, children referenced various family concerns as their dominant explanation for being part of a return migration from an archetypal receiving country to a traditional sending country. They illuminated that some families do not accept the emotional, economic and cultural risks, as well as the suffering and 'family costs' of living 'divided by borders', to use Dreby's (2010) phrasing. They decided to return to the country of origin to live together.

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