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[Americas](#)

Pain of Deportation Swells When Children Are Left Behind

By [ELISABETH MALKIN](#) MAY 20, 2017



Alejandro Cedillo walking his children, Alejandra and Ángel, home from school in San Simón el Alto, Mexico, in March. Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

SAN SIMÓN EL ALTO, Mexico — When Alejandro Cedillo was deported to [Mexico](#) from the United States, his Florida-born son and daughter were little older than toddlers, and it would be six years before he would see them again.

Mr. Cedillo returned, alone, to his close-knit family in San Simón el Alto, the hilltop farming town he had left nine years before, when he was only 17.

To an outsider, the gold-green fields rolling across Mexico's central plain seem to promise a chance at a decent living. But drive into places like San Simón, where the concrete houses stand incomplete and the paved road peters out, and the poverty that drives people to leave for the United States comes into focus.

Like Mr. Cedillo, now 32, many of them eventually come back. Some are deported; others return to care for a sick parent or simply decide it is time to leave the United States.

But the homecoming is never the end of the story. The sequel is rarely simple, and for those with children left behind, it is agonizing.

Under President Trump's more aggressive enforcement policies, [arrests of undocumented immigrants were up almost 40 percent](#) in the first three months of his administration compared with the same period last year, and [Mexico is preparing](#) to receive a wave of returnees.

Migrant advocates here have been arguing that the newcomers need jobs, counseling and help with Mexico's cumbersome bureaucracy if they are to restart in a country that most of them left more than a decade ago.



Children playing soccer during a break at school in San Simón el Alto. Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

President Enrique Peña Nieto has allocated an additional \$50 million to Mexico's consulates to help migrants in the United States, and the country's Congress has changed the law to make it easier for children who have returned to enroll in school. Some state governments are offering small grants to repatriated migrants who are setting up businesses.

But when Mr. Cedillo was deported in 2010, there were no such programs to ease readjustment.

More than two million Mexicans were deported, and an unknown number crossed back on their own, during the Obama administration, and they have been trying to remake their lives since, reuniting with families changed over time and serving as cultural guides for their American-born children.

After arriving home, Mr. Cedillo found that the money he had earned up north helped soften the hardship of his childhood. He got construction work in the nearby city of Toluca, built a house and rented land with his father and brothers to grow corn and avocados.

In America, however, the family he had left behind began to unravel. His wife found a new partner, and the authorities in Florida, judging the couple unfit as parents, placed the children, Ángel and Alejandra, in foster care.

When Mr. Cedillo received a registered letter asking him to waive his parental rights, he decided to fight back.

“I want them to be with me, to give them values,” said Mr. Cedillo. “There are children who get everything, but they are lost, they turn to drugs.”

Forbidden to enter the United States, he needed a way to persuade a family court judge in Fort Pierce, Fla., to allow him to raise his own children. There was a home for them in Mexico, but at first he found little sympathy from the court.

“It was a hard case. Everybody was against me,” Mr. Cedillo said. “They said the children couldn’t come here because they didn’t speak Spanish, they were coming to a culture that was very different.”

Desperate, he found help from the [Corner Institute](#), which works with returning migrants in the town of Malinalco, a short drive down the mountain from San Simón.

Migrants knock at the institute’s wooden door with problems that reflect the complexities of families that straddle two nations.

There is the young woman with two small children, widowed when her husband died trying to cross the border. A family is seeking help after having lost touch with a daughter who left for the United States with a man the family did not trust. A wife needed assistance finding her husband, only to learn that he had been deported and was too ashamed to go home to her.

“Migrants are susceptible in these areas where there’s no communication,” said Ellen Calmus, the institute’s director. “They are in these informational black holes when they cross the border.”

These struggles affect migrants both when they are detained — and after they have returned to Mexico and need to navigate agencies in the United States, as Mr. Cedillo was forced to do to win back his children.

“That’s where things start going terribly wrong, and it’s an invisible humanitarian crisis,” Ms. Calmus said.

She obtained a Florida lawyer for Mr. Cedillo, and he won the custody case. In October, the children arrived to a father they barely remembered and a country they did not know.

Mr. Cedillo is now a constant presence in his children’s lives, dropping them off at school and picking them up. There, Alejandra, 9 and withdrawn, is protected by two effervescent cousins, Yaczuri and Cintia. Ángel, 10, who speaks better Spanish, has adapted more quickly.



Felipe Castañeda in San Simón el Alto, en route to the avocado grove where he works. Deported in 2008, he wants to return to the the United States legally as a temporary worker. Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

The struggles of Mr. Cedillo’s return are familiar to families across the region.

Nearly everyone in San Simón, Malinalco and the nearby town of Chalma seems to know someone who has migrated to the United States. The mayor of the Malinalco municipality, Baldemar Chaqueco Reynoso, is the only one of six siblings who did not leave.

Several members of his family now have legal residency, but his younger brother Cuauhtémoc, 38, was deported three years ago, after 16 years in the United States.

He and his wife, Isabel Mancilla, 37, faced a difficult decision over whether she and the couple's four children should come back with him. Their eldest daughter, Lorna, had finished her freshman year in a suburban Cleveland high school, and they were concerned about her education in Mexico.

But the whole family returned, and for Lorna, the first year was hard. She struggled with depression and fitting in at her Mexican high school.

"One day I looked in the mirror and thought, 'Who am I?'" she said.

The wrenching change made Lorna, 17, a cultural observer. "There, everybody was busy with school and work, and here you have more time for family," she said. "There you have a bunch of money, but you're going to waste it going shopping."

For a region with so many migrants, there are few signs of prosperity from the dollars earned up north.

Migrants send back money to pay for schooling or to build houses, said the mayor, the elder Mr. Chaqueco. "There are very few who have the discipline to save for a business," he said.

Many buy taxis and rent them out to relatives. Because so many migrants have worked at carwashes in the United States, rudimentary versions have popped up along the road between Malinalco and Chalma.



Helder Chaqueco, 10, and his twin brother, Sheldon, who were born in the United States and now live in Chalma, Mexico. Their whole family relocated there after their father, Cuauhtémoc, was deported. Credit Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

One of those is run by Orlando and Jaime Arizmendi, whose seven older brothers and sisters all live legally in the United States.

Bálfre Arizmendi, 77, the men's father, first went to California in 1976 to work in the fields. In 1986, he became a legal resident and began a cycle of border crossings set by the rhythm of the seasons.

"I went every year for seven months to work, and then I came back to plant here and teach the children how to work," he said.

He retired in Mexico, where his American [Social Security](#) check goes further, but his children stayed in California. "Now they don't want to come back," he said.

That easy movement across the border is out of reach for many of the returned migrants who hope to work again in the United States.

Felipe Castañeda, deported in 2008, cannot wait to return. He left San Simón as a young man to work in the Florida citrus groves and stayed for 15 years.

With no criminal record, Mr. Castañeda applied to return to the United States as a temporary worker and was told that he would have to wait until next year, 10 years after he was deported.

He is 45 now, earning about \$6.50 a day overseeing 20 acres of avocado trees. The wage is not low for this area, but it cannot compare with what Mr. Castañeda could make picking crops in the United States.

"My old boss told me that he needs me," Mr. Castañeda said.

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