

Locked Up and Broken Down

Acknowledgment: For our research team, men's harrowing descriptions of detention and prison challenged the limits of "justice." In winter 2019, we spent many emotional meetings talking about how to honor the abuses the interviewees had endured. Early on, it became clear that imprisonment and detention were at the crux of the deportation experience. Later, Ana López Ricoy did important work on this theme, asking in-depth questions in more than 50 interviews and coding all the data to help us better assess the impacts of human caging. I am grateful to students for helping me see the grievous weight on men of being locked up.

In immigration detention, Fernando informed Camila, "They treat you like a cockroach."

Fernando, a friend of Ever, was 25, just deported, and trying to get back to his family in the U.S. when Customs and Border Patrol detained him in the Arizona desert. Though Fernando attempted to run, agents knocked him out with a shock gun. He remembered, "They threw us in dog cages, and they drove really ugly, jumping over the speed bumps, and it beat me up really badly."

Once Fernando got to detention, guards locked him up in what he called "the kennels." Speaking only in English, guards beat the migrants with sticks if they did not understand or reply.

How do migrants make sense of such treatment—or even endure?

Before removal, the U.S. sends immigrants into detention. Roughly 40 percent also spend time in prison or jail. Technically, prison is punitive, and immigration detention is not. They work under different bodies of law. Yet, the two institutions share ideologies, processes, and even buildings.¹ They also use the same techniques of control and dehumanization. Therefore, I frame immigration detention, jail, and prison as interlocked arms of the U.S. carceral system.

In U.S. prisons and ICE detention, migrants endure humiliation, verbal threats, and widespread discretionary violence, above and beyond the scope of their punishments or the law.² These facilities regularly deny men's basic needs like food, medicine, water, hygiene, and sleep. Both prisons and detention centers use

solitary confinement, a known form of torture.³ The people in charge also practice psychological warfare, lying to inmates, playing with their senses of space and time, and encouraging men to blame themselves for abuse. Faith, NGO, and government agencies at these facilities also push men to “redeem themselves” by taking responsibility for their actions, adopting strict discipline, and/or turning to God.⁴ In prison, guards sometimes wreak the most havoc by stepping out of the way, leaving rival gangs to set and enforce “the rules.” Inmates must kill or be killed.

Prisons exemplify social death.⁵ That is, like slave plantations or colonial powers, prisons cast their targets out of society, suspend their rights, and attack their bodies and self-esteem.⁶ Flirting with full-on erasure, these spaces of violence at once epitomize the law and operate outside of it.⁷ For prisoners, the conditions can feel like a “living death.”⁸ Stripped of rights and punished beyond the bounds of the law, inmates experience “social disintegration.” That is, as scholars Keramet Reiter and Susan Coutin put it, “Ties to others are cut off and prior identities stripped away, with devastating consequences for individuals’ senses of self.”⁹ The incarcerated find themselves in mental havoc, unable to understand the world.¹⁰

For migrants, such violence has double consequences. Through dehumanizing treatment, U.S. carceral institutions also compel them to give up their rights to a trial and acquiesce in their own deportations. Removal comes as a second punishment: the loss of their U.S.-based lives.

This penal system was built on the premise of deterrence. The logic holds that when states put people in cages, they “learn their lesson,” whether to avoid crime or refrain from crossing the border.¹¹ Supposedly, prisoners also serve as examples to others, persuading would-be migrants to obey the law or stay back in Mexico. This penal logic also assumes that prisoners interpret their *own* acts as crimes and their caging as proportionate punishment. Yet, evidence shows that deterrence rarely works, especially in the case of immigration detention.¹² Nor do most inmates consider imprisonment just. Instead, like most U.S. prisoners, the men we met condemned U.S. carceral practices as violations of human dignity—unfair by even the state’s own standards of treatment.

In this chapter, I explore how getting locked up before deportation changes men’s psyches, shaping their sense of themselves and the law. I show how prison, jail, and detention wear people down emotionally, producing crosscutting despair. Men we interviewed described going crazy, breaking down, or losing it. They began to ask not only “Am I part of the United States?” (as one might expect of a migrant) but also, “Am I human?” and “Am I a man?” The treatment in such facilities, they often insisted, was more fit for bugs, pigs, or dogs.

The torment made men feel powerless, eroding their will to fight.

Men also sought ways to cope. Yet their strategies varied by the facility and the time spent locked up. Their reactions also tied back to their histories of policing, with men detained after first arrest expressing most shock (and anger) while those criminalized in youth had to struggle just to survive.

Those who spent less time detained were often *defiant*. They refused to accept mistreatment or sign off on their own deportations. The longer men spent in cages, however, the more they *resigned* themselves to abuse by the carceral state. They began to believe that violence was “just how it is.” After years in prison, men often felt *broken*. They struggled to keep a hold on reality and simply to stay alive. Some came to believe that they, themselves, were to blame. Few imagined a future aside from removal; for them, deportation came as relief.

TECHNIQUES OF DEHUMANIZATION

Though few deportees are convicted of serious crimes, all face carceral deportation. That is, before removal, they spend time in prison, jail, detention, or some combination thereof. While officially administrative, U.S. detention centers look and feel like prisons, with bars, cells, guards, and barbed wire fences. Most of the facilities *used to be* prisons or jails. Unsurprisingly, participants often referred to both interchangeably as *cárceles* (jails) or *prisión* (prison).

Conditions in U.S. detention and prison routinely violate government standards of treatment.¹³ Copious scholarship and the accounts of men in this study outline a set of practices that leave men physically and mentally broken: (1) deprivation of food, medicine, hygiene, and sleep; (2) psychological warfare, including distortions of time and space, deceit, gaslighting, and solitary confinement; (3) verbal and physical assaults; and (4) ceding control to gangs, especially in prison.

Deprivation

Respondents reported that ICE detention centers and U.S. prisons were frigid and filthy. They frequently went without toilet paper or access to showers, and fewer than half had access to private toilets. Many wore the same clothes for days or weeks at a time. These reports are verified elsewhere: in one survey of more than 600 migrants detained in the U.S. in 2019, four out of five could not shower, clean themselves up, or brush their teeth; up to 85 percent reported insufficient food or water, spoiled food, or dirty or foul-tasting water; and 85 percent reported issues related to sleep, such as having to sleep on the floor or having the lights on 24 hours a day.¹⁴ Often, their cells had no windows, and facilities blasted cold air.

In the words of one interviewee, “The conditions were really bad. The showers, they were really moldy. They had flies coming out of the drain. And, well, it smelled bad. We didn’t get to go outside and see the sunlight at all. It was 24 hours inside. . . . There weren’t any windows; it was all concrete. And the guards, they were mean . . . They talked to you like you’re an animal or something. They slammed the doors really hard, like just to annoy you.”

The institutions also left men hungry, malnourished, and sick. “You’re hungry as soon as you eat,” one respondent remembered. “They give you three sandwiches [a day], one in the morning, one in the afternoon, and one at night, and a child’s

juice [box], but the sandwich is white bread and bologna . . . There is your food.” Other times, guards withheld food altogether. In one case, after one detainee stabbed another with a comb, the guards starved everyone on the block for three days. Many men also lacked medical care.¹⁵ Interviewees told of being refused insulin for their diabetes. One was left paralyzed when guards would not treat his staph infection. ICE released others back into the general population the day they had surgery or shipped them posthaste to Tijuana when they began to fall ill.

Psychological Warfare

A second technique of dehumanization was psychological warfare. Officers played with men’s sense of reality. They fed them misinformation, misled them, and messed with their senses of time. They also gaslit men and sent them to solitary confinement. Gaslighting refers to psychological abuse aimed at making victims feel “crazy.”¹⁶

Ángel, introduced at the start of this book, had a ponytail and a melancholic penchant for describing his inner state, particularly when speaking of the 12 months he spent in jail and six more detained. The treatment wore at his sanity, he told Ana:

They break you down . . . The whole drama of being inside, having to watch your back or you might get beaten up. The getting up too early [3:00 a.m.], trying to eat. You lose sleep. They hit you with information, legal words, and you don’t understand at that very moment what’s going on. So, you become, like, I don’t know, a number, like a walking—a numb walking person. You’re talking and you’re listening, but you really don’t know what’s going on. If I think back . . . *Why didn’t I say something? Why did I allow them to just manhandle me for no reason?* I mean, you get numb, and you actually don’t know what’s going on, until you just accept any offer just for the sake of “leave me alone.” . . . They break you psychologically.

The process of “breaking men down” entailed a barrage of mistreatment: lies, threats, sleep deprivation, and plays on their understanding of time. Like Ángel, men began to feel numb—disconnected from their bodies and their emotions, as if they were walking dead.

Distortions of Time and Space. ICE facilities, especially, used time as a tool of torture. Because detention is administrative (or “civil”) by law, individuals held in this manner do not have a right to counsel.¹⁷ Nor are there constitutional limits on how long they may be detained.¹⁸ There is no requirement of bond, and if offered, bond can be set at \$20,000 or more. Ironically, this “nonpunitive” designation often means *worse* delays and violations of due process than found in prisons.¹⁹ For 95 percent of detainees, getting a date in court takes more than a year.²⁰ As of 2021 the average immigrant waited 54 months (four and a half years) for a hearing.²¹ The only way to shorten the process is to relinquish one’s right to a hearing and sign one’s own deportation papers—legally marking *oneself* as a

“felon.”²² While migrants and guards often talk about “fighting your case,” in fact, this term simply means waiting it out for a hearing. Policymakers blame delays on long “backlogs,” but respondents’ stories suggest that ICE also uses delays as a tool to push migrants out of the country.

In detention, agents wielded prolonged wait times and uncertainty to pressure people to give up their rights to a trial.²³ Officers threatened to give people more time if they fought their cases or exaggerated how long migrants might have to stay: “If you don’t sign now, you may *never* get out of here.” As warnings, guards pointed to examples of people languishing in detention. Ángel remembered, “You just keep hearing the same stories of different people who are fighting their cases. I’ve met a few people that were there for four, five years fighting their cases. They keep delaying it and delaying it with the immigration courts. [And you think], ‘Oh my God, how can you do that?’ . . . I was like, ‘Am I gonna be stuck for a long time?’ . . . They want you to leave voluntarily, they make it hard.” The threats played with detainees’ sanity—pushing many to sign and get out.

ICE agents also withheld legal information, lied to migrants, or tried to intimidate, coerce, or confuse them into signing off on their own deportations. Guards mocked detainees, jabbering in English or in legal jargon the prisoners could not parse. They refused to provide information about migrants’ cases, deliberately obscured the facts, or feigned ignorance. They (falsely) promised some people legal papers or a chance to appeal, *if* they signed deportation orders. They held pens in detainees’ handcuffed hands. Under such conditions, migrants often caved in and signed. In the end, fewer than half of all hold-outs got their cases heard by a judge.²⁴

In prison, sentences were more fixed, though some facilities used extensions and commutations as punishments or rewards. For bad behavior, men stayed longer in prison. Studies also show that jails detain migrants with ICE holds significantly longer than citizens on the same charges.²⁵ Men told us time was also used as a carrot, with commutation dangling like a bonus for “good” behavior, which could include anything ranging from attending church to agreeing to their own deportations.²⁶

Both prisons and ICE also used space to isolate and disorient prisoners and their families and legal counsel. As carceral geographers highlight, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security intentionally locates detention facilities in remote areas, far from most detainees’ advocates and loved ones.²⁷ Like prisons, they also use frequent and unannounced transfers between sites as a tool of repression.²⁸ Respondents in ICE detention described being spontaneously moved into new facilities, while their lawyers and family members scrambled to find them.²⁹ Likewise, prisons often moved inmates to institutions where they knew no one—and thus had to build their social relations and senses of safety anew. One man, arrested in North Carolina, rattled off an atlas of sites:

In the federal prison, I was in South Carolina, so I went from South Carolina, they took me to an ICE detention [facility] in South Carolina, like an hour apart. From there they sent me to another ICE detention [facility] in South Carolina, even more south, and from there they sent me to Atlanta, Georgia. I was just all over the place. It's really stressful. The food is not that great, and when they put you in the bus or in the van they tie you up, your hands, your legs, like you're an animal. And once I was in Atlanta, Georgia, that was like my last ICE detention, they flew me to McAllen . . . , no, Brownsville, Texas.

Transfers often felt like their own form of punishment, whether for undesired behavior or for *being* undesirable.³⁰ They left men deeply disoriented: in time, space, and even reality.

Lies and Gaslighting. Both penal institutions and prison-based “redeemers” used stereotypes, structural vulnerabilities, and institutional inequalities to erode victims’ sense of reality and make them “take responsibility” for their own suffering. Guards misrepresented the length of men’s stays, the information relevant to their cases, or the lives awaiting them post-deportation. The accumulation of lies led inmates to distrust their own moral compass. Sociologist Paige Sweet calls this gaslighting.³¹

One such technique—especially in prison—appeared on the surface to have a genuine rehabilitative function. That is, a series of groups, ranging from evangelical proselytizers to NGOs to Alcoholics Anonymous, stepped into prisons to fulfill state mandates for “programming,” but for free. For cash-strapped, overcrowded facilities, such offers could be too good to pass up.³² Following prominent sociologist Reuben Miller, I refer to these groups as “redeemers.” As Miller argues in his book *Halfway Home*, U.S. prisons widely embrace the idea that incarcerated men have gone wrong and can save themselves from state violence simply by committing (on an individual level) to a life of personal transformation.³³

Both prisons and external organizations offer men a narrative of redemption or of God’s love, premised on their willingness to “admit” they have sinned and obey authorities (including those in penal institutions). These moralizing lessons can change how men perceive and respond to the violence they face, both behind bars and out in the world. The idea of redemption implies that men have invited mistreatment by choosing to be bad or sinful, but that they can, by the force of their wills, become productive members of society, even men of God.³⁴ In the process, these organizations sometimes reverse men’s own understandings of themselves as good people trapped by oppressive institutions. Instead, they urge men to concede guilt and internalize the state’s accusation of criminality.

Solitary Confinement. Solitary confinement is another common tool of abuse. In prison and in detention, men described being sent to solitary for minor

misbehavior, their own “protection,” or little reason at all, sometimes for months or even years.³⁵ As criminologist Keramet Reiter explains, solitary confinement arose as a technique to undermine Black inmates’ radicalism in California prisons in the 1970s.³⁶ Even though solitary was originally meant to be brief and exceptional—a parsimonious punishment—many facilities now hold inmates for 23 hours a day in featureless cells, with no visitors or human contact and no end in sight.³⁷

One participant, in prison for selling drugs, spent a month in “the hole” for making what guards said were inappropriate gestures. Likewise, at the California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi, outside of Bakersfield, Isaac, a 37-year-old man with gelled, black hair and tattoos down his arms, said he was threatened, cursed at, beaten, put in a circle of naked men, and then instructed to see who could grab a set of prison-issued underwear first (“and that was just the reception”). Later, when Isaac started giving other inmates tattoos, guards threw him in solitary for six months.

Even when guards used solitary confinement for obvious retribution, they would claim that it was protective—for a prisoner’s “own good.” Challenging guards’ authority, being threatened by other inmates, and experiencing mental health episodes could all get people sent to “the hole.”³⁸

Physical and Verbal Assaults

A third technique of erasure was verbal and physical abuse.³⁹ Among 69 interviewees who spoke in detail of their time in detention or prison, 24 said they faced verbal abuse, 31 witnessed beatings, and 24 were beaten themselves. A few spoke of being tied up in their cells or forced to give sexual favors to guards.⁴⁰ They said they were screamed at, sworn at, insulted, called “wetbacks” and pigs, beaten, tripped while handcuffed, and thrown into doors and walls. Correctional officers forced others to sign things. Guards told men that they were assholes, that they’d ruined their lives, that they would never find work again, or that everyone outside hated them. Lazaro, a 38-year-old man who’d been detained in the Adelanto facility outside Los Angeles, remembered, “A lot of us didn’t speak English, and so sometimes people would tell [the officers] they didn’t understand, and they’d grab them, and they’d say, ‘Stop fucking around here. You are not going to be here with your bullshit. We are going to beat the crap out of you . . . There are cameras all over the place here, but we’ll take you where there are no cameras and beat the shit out of you.’” This violence went beyond beatings to mistreatment like waking people in the middle of the night, imposing “routine” and arbitrary pat downs and cavity searches, and destroying detainees’ scant property.⁴¹

While abuse occurred in both detention and prison, the violence was more routine and extreme in the latter. There, inmates’ criminal convictions gave guards extra impunity. For instance, Ever (Camila’s brother) had his arm dislocated by a prison guard. He remembered, “You’re in [hand]cuffs. Even though you’re cuffed up already, they’re still kicking you, tripping you, spitting at you, yelling at your face.”

Ceding Control to Gangs

In prison (and, to a lesser extent, in detention), the state often did the most harm by stepping out of the way, leaving men to the whims of gangs. In the process, guards also deflected the blame for violence.

Not everyone who served time in prison spoke of abusive guards, but most had a lot to say about gangs. Often, they told us, gangs viciously attacked other inmates. Some men said they'd been raped, stalked, beaten, or otherwise abused; a few showed us scars from being attacked. Others told of having to kill in prison. Gangs forced some to act as violent enforcers or risk death themselves, even when they wanted out. Gaspar, the young man raised in Compton whose drug dealing ended in a deadly car chase, spent 42 months in prison. He explained:

In prison, everything is ruled by gangs. In the street, everything is ruled by gangs, but in jail, the gangs *rule*. That is, you can be alone in jail, not join anyone, but literally you have to be watching your back and your ass 24/7, all the time. You can't even go to the dining hall, even though there are guards watching you. Literally, I had to sit down and be like this [looking around] . . . The guy in the cell next to me, they stabbed him because he owed a cigarette, and they killed him! They cut his throat . . . I tried to keep a low profile in there, but like I told you, if you don't join a gang everything gets really ugly, really complicated. There were 18-year-old kids who had killed three, four people, and they tried them as adults. And when they got in, someone would show up and say, "You're going to be my bitch, because I want you to." Literally, it was rape him and rape him and rape him and rape, rape, rape, rape, day and night, day and night. I try to leave out those parts, but yes, it's—you can't sleep. When I would sleep, I slept with—I put magazines on my chest underneath my uniform because, well, if we had problems with another gang, well, the gates are open, and you didn't know who would come in [and stab you]. Even if you fell asleep, you kept one eye open, waiting for someone to come in.

In prison, gangs regularly overshadowed the violence (and role) of the carceral institutions themselves.

When men spoke of getting used to "how prison works," they usually meant the rules of the gangs, not the guards.⁴² One man who spent nine years in prison for robbing a bank explained, "The gangs have their regulations: get up early, clean your cell, bathe daily, cut your hair, don't let your mouth smell, be clean, make your bed, clean the bathroom, don't spit anywhere, things like that. And there are people that don't follow them, and the regulations of the institution don't interfere with those guys. What applies is the regulations of the gangs, and that's what sticks . . . The gangs are the ones who rule in there, and you have to obey." From this inmate's perspectives, what "stuck" were the rules of the gangs, not of the institutions.

Yet, institutions facilitated gangs' control by turning a blind eye (at best) or actively encouraging violence (at worst). Some guards enabled gang violence by staying out of the way. For instance, David explained that when fights erupted,

"They [guards] stay away from it. As long as you don't mess with one of the cops they stay away." Other times, prisons actively fueled gang affiliations. Teodoro, who grew up in Escondido, California, spent two years in prison for his participation in the Sureño gang. He explained, "You get to prison and they [guards] say, 'Are you Sureño, Paisa, or Other [gang affiliation]?' Basically, the police [prison officials] themselves classify you in which group to put you in." Since Teodoro was with the Sureños before being sent to prison, the guards sent him to live with them. Then, when Teodoro's gang insisted he assault other inmates, the guards did not intervene.

Many times, prison authorities compounded gang violence by punishing participants (including victims) or sending them to solitary confinement. For instance, Dylan was 17 when he got tried as an adult and sent to prison. He wanted to stay out of gangs, but a rival recognized him from the streets as Sureño. To punish Dylan for hiding his affiliation, the Sureños jumped him and beat him. He added, "After that, they pretty much told me like, 'You either get with the program or we're gonna kill you.' So, well, when those are your two options, you know—I'm going with the program." The "program" meant Dylan was made to fight. After five fights, the prison sent him to the gang unit—and isolation—for a year. Just as that year was ending, a fellow Sureño got jumped. Angry that Dylan had not defended the man, his gang arranged to stab him. Dylan remembered:

One day I went to lunch, and I'm standing in line to get my juice, and next thing I know I'm feeling like somebody punched me in my back . . . I see this guy I recognized, a little kid they called "Danger" . . . about 18 or 19. And I took a step back to see if he was gonna follow me, and he kept coming toward me. So, that's when I started fighting. And I knocked him out, and from there the police came up behind me, slammed me to the ground, and started cuffing me. . . . There was about two feet of space between two of the guards and another Sureño . . . He ran toward me, dove at me, and I felt like somebody had punched me in my face, until I see all the blood on the floor. That's when I realized that they stabbed me. They had stabbed me right across my eyelid . . . And then after that, administration decided to leave me in the hole for a[nother] year. I kept telling them to let me out, but they wouldn't let me because they were afraid that either [the Sureños] would do something or I would do something. So, they're like, "In order to avoid an issue, we're just gonna leave you in the hole" . . . They believed that I was going to be a "menace to society," you know, their favorite words to use with people.

Guards were complicit: they slammed Dylan down and cuffed him right as opponents stabbed him. They compounded the assault by throwing him in the hole for another year. Later, Dylan added, "The warden ended up sending out all the gang leaders . . . They ended up putting all those guys in the same camp [prison section] so that way, they could just do whatever they want to each other."

At the time, both Dylan and the men who assaulted him were teens. The brutality they faced behind bars compounded the policing they'd endured growing up.

Though prisons *are* officially punitive, such beatings are well outside of the scope of punishment under the law.⁴³ Often, the U.S. government attributes prison brutality to uncontrolled, evil, “menacing” gangs (as Dylan insightfully put it). Yet, men’s stories made it clear that prison guards enabled and even *employed* such violence, so as to “sic the dogs on each other.”

“I AM NOT AN ANIMAL”: HOW INMATES ENDURE

Together, these techniques put men’s humanity on the line. Men often felt they were losing their minds—their selves. Many invoked the word “trauma” or said that detention and prison “ruined them.” Others insisted that these institutions “psychologically crush you,” make the world close in, or leave men “mentally bad, bad, bad, bad.” Some felt like the guys all around them had turned into monsters—as if demons had gotten inside them. Their survival in danger, many acquiesced in their own removal. In turn, they lost their jobs, children, families: all that had made them men.

Gaspar—raised in Compton—came to feel in prison like “less than an animal”—as if he were going insane. Ana met Gaspar in 2019, on a smoke break outside a call center in Mexico City. He was tall with a light moustache and single expander “plug” earring. He had spent four years in prison, replete with gang violence, mistreatment, and everyday deprivation. Staff turned the lights on at four in the morning and kept him locked up for 23 hours a day, with just an hour outside “in a cage.” The meals were disgusting: “Like they ground up the food a week before, and that’s what they give you. It’s just a gray, green, or red mass. You don’t even know what’s in it. Literally, it just barely keeps you alive.” Guards toyed with the men, saying things like “If you don’t stay standing right there for five minutes, I am going to add another day to your time for bad behavior.” He remembered:

They would come in to review the dormitory, and they would punish you if it wasn’t clean. Your bed had to be made, your clothes had to be folded, and everything had to be put away. There were times they would come in, and we had just fallen asleep or it was two or three in the morning. The police [COs] would come in and they would take apart your whole bed. They threw it down, and they would throw things at you. I had a photo of my mother, and various times they ripped it up because they said it was contraband, and I couldn’t have it there. So yes, it was just being in a room of white stone, with the lights on all day long, two or three hours to sleep . . . You get one blanket and your uniform, and if it’s cold, well, [they say], “You’re in jail and I’m not going to treat you like—” That is, we were animals. We weren’t people who made a mistake; we were animals. And I think that not even animals are treated like that in some places, right?

Literally and symbolically, guards “tore up” men’s ties to family, leaving them isolated and grieving. To call his parents, Gaspar needed special permission and \$50 to buy him a few minutes’ phone time: “It was literally, ‘Mom, I am OK, I’m sorry,’

and hearing her cry on the other end of the phone.” Meanwhile, his mother had been through the ringer, just to figure out if her son was still living. The gang members whom Gaspar had called “brothers” did not visit either; they were now on the run. The loneliness made Gaspar “leave my soul.”

How men endured and how they held onto humanity shifted with the time spent locked up, the extent of abuse, and the level of isolation. Deportees we interviewed fell into three approaches. Some were defiant, others resigned, and still others broken down to basic survival. Those whose lives had been saturated with police apprehensions and carceral control (often since childhood) fared the worst. At the extreme, men internalized the state’s dehumanization and resigned themselves to their banishment.

The Defiant

Men who spent a few months or less in detention were typically angry. Though they suffered less abuse than the other two groups, they resisted the most. Often, these were the same men who had felt shocked at their own arrests. Still rooted in their communities and a faith in their goodness, such men were far more likely to picture themselves as innocent and hold out for a hearing before a judge (behavior known as “fighting” their deportations). They insisted the U.S. should treat them as human.

For example, Berto, the 40-year-old chef and father of five introduced in chapter 1, was incensed after a month of detention in Orange County. The deprivation and disrespect made Berto feel like an “animal.” He believed that ICE put good people through hell intentionally, “to kill you psychologically”:

They humiliate you so much that, psychologically, they destroy your dignity. So, they put you in a cold room, and they turn up the cold air so that—and they got me with a T-shirt like this [a tank top] . . . like fucking animals. And the agents, if you even look at them or you look over there, they think you are doing something to them. They beat you, and even though there are cameras, it’s like a closed circuit and someone manipulates the cameras. And if you call your family, look, here they punish you too . . . I would understand if we were bad people, if we deserved it. I myself would say, “OK, I deserve it.” But for 25 years I was working hard, you could say, so I don’t have a record. But they treat you the same as any criminal—but we aren’t criminals.

Since Berto still saw himself as an upstanding person, the treatment made him indignant. Enraged, he hired a lawyer (unsuccessfully) to fight his case.

Jesús, a 57-year-old contractor who had lived in Phoenix for nearly two decades, was also in disbelief. Jesús had gentle, dark eyes and a thick, salt-and-pepper moustache. Though his three eldest children were in their twenties, his youngest daughter, “the love of my life,” was only 13. Jesús had been deported before, in 1998, after drinking and driving. He returned to Phoenix the following day. This time, things were not so simple. When a friend’s neighbor called the cops on Jesús for drinking, he spent 109 days in detention, predominantly in Florence, a notorious

Arizona facility. Like Berto, Jesús was livid. He saw the United States as a mess, and he wanted his family out. He tried to fight his case. Yet, he faced barriers. ICE unexpectedly relocated him to California, sowing confusion as his family and lawyer frantically tried to find him.

Jesús insisted that the U.S. government was breaking its very own laws:

They took me to four or five courts there, tied up like an animal. It's a violation of human rights! . . . The only thing left is for them to put a chain in your mouth, because they take you around like a horse. Because you go shackled at your feet, your waist, and your hands—you go like that [shows hands chained to waist], and a little box that goes here like this [over the hands]. . . . You can't even scratch. There is no bathroom on the bus from Florence to Phoenix. You don't have a seatbelt. And when the bus would brake, we almost broke our noses there [on the seat backs]. They treat us worse than swine! Pigs get a protective box; human beings don't.

For Jesús, detention felt like a cage. Men were housed in 15-foot rooms that the guards referred to as “chicken coops,” ten or more at a time. “And they lie to you,” Jesús insisted. “I’m going to give you five months’ . . . that’s a lot of time! . . . If they paid me for the time I was in there unjustly, how much would it be? They didn’t just do psychological damage, they hurt me on all sides, all sides.”

When I asked Jesús what kind of damage they did, he replied:

Emotional. Lost money, lost time, distrust in the “law,” in quotes, when you start realizing that they themselves are breaking it. So, I go to Arizona, to the federal detention center, and they put up a bond of \$250,000 dollars. Well, who did I kill? . . . With \$250,000, I would stay in my country with a house in a neighborhood on the beach—on one of those beautiful beaches where American tourists go to have fun. \$250,000! I don’t know who set that amount of money and who approved those laws.

A religious man, Jesús began quoting biblical prophesies of evil and doom, saying that the United States was about to “go down in flames” for its treatment of human beings—many of whom, like him, had committed no crime.

Defiant respondents often denounced the U.S. immigration system for being driven by profit. They criticized the “business” of detention, questioning how much the U.S. paid private detention centers per inmate and the mismatch between such earnings and the toxic bologna sandwiches these facilities fed to inmates. One man reasoned, “We’re nothing but dollar signs, you know?” Leo, a 29-year-old from Oaxaca, was raised in the U.S. and spent a year in prison and three months in ICE detention before his removal. He described being “tied up like a dog,” stripped of all his belongings, and made to sit in a hot bus for hours. He called the detention system “some bullshit,” protesting to Camila:

The [officers] in immigration are fucking assholes. They look at you like you’re a fucking cockroach. You ask them for something—and that’s why I never asked for shit because they would come all pissed off. . . . Those niggas get paid enough money to attend people, you know. Like what the fuck? Personally, I feel like this is a business

for them. If niggas [migrants] don't continue to flow into America or keep getting deported, those fools won't make any money. And put that on the record! Those motherfuckers get paid some money, for every head they get paid some money. All they give us in there is a sandwich with ham and a water.

Like Fernando, Leo felt reduced to an animal: a dog or a cockroach. And like those shocked by policing in chapter 1, he saw a disparity between his good behavior and the brutality of the authorities. Yet he was still mad—and still critical of the system. Such men's anger revealed they had not yet been broken.

The Resigned

After more time locked up, most men grew resigned to removal. They spoke of humiliation and degradation—of feeling desperate and scared, of weeping, of wondering if they'd begun to go nuts. Many believed officials *wanted* to break them emotionally, as a form of deterrence. Disorientation, despair, and the threat of indefinite confinement eroded their will to continue pursuing their cases. They felt powerless to protest injustice. It was better to give up everything than lose their sanity. Almost universally, they wept as they spoke of all they had suffered, all they had lost.

Take Ismael, the earnest Chicago debate star who gave up on studying when he learned that he was unauthorized. At 21, Ismael got 18 months in jail for driving under the influence without a license. When ICE agents came to the jail, he thought, “Shit! Whatever, you know? I'm gonna play the best U.S. citizenship shit I have in my deck.” In answer, ICE held Ismael in a tiny “reception” cell for more than two months. They also threatened to give him five more years behind bars. Ismael believed they were trying to upend his grip on reality and on justice:

I felt like slowly they were mentally breaking me down, they were trying to break me, because I wasn't supposed to be there for that long, like in that cell . . . It's like they knew everything, my favorite color even, you know? So, I'm like, “Whoa, shit! If you guys have all that, why are you asking me [for a social security number]?” Everything that says there, whatever, you know? They gave me a thing to sign, and I read it all, basically signing my deportation papers, and I'm like, “No, I'm not gonna sign this. I'm not going to sign this.” And they're like, “You can appeal this later.”

Ismael felt they were messing with him, asking questions they already knew the answers to and misleadingly saying he could “appeal” his deportation after he signed it.

Meanwhile, Ismael did his time for the DUI. The day he was slated for release, he got a letter saying he would be picked up by Homeland Security. The guards hadn't told him. They let Ismael grow hopeful that he might not be deported, acting like they knew nothing. But when Ismael walked out of prison, approaching his uncle's waiting car, “The officers stepped in between us . . . they basically put me in a truck, and we drove probably like four hours to a different state.” On the way, ICE picked up other migrants, whose English wasn't so good. Ismael recalled:

They were ignorant of the fact that you didn't have to sign anything if you didn't want to. They were getting kinda punked around by the officers. And I didn't like that. I remember we were . . . it was just a picnic table with laptops and a fingerprint machine and cameras. And we were sitting next to each other, all of us. And I told everybody, "Do not sign anything, don't sign anything." I'm kind of advocating for them. And obviously the officers didn't like that at all. They didn't like that, and I pretty much got a cell by myself, and they waited until everybody else got processed in and everything and finally I was let out.

Ismael saw guards mislead other migrants. Then, as soon as the guards realized Ismael was trying to inform fellow prisoners about their rights, they cut off his human contact—isolating Ismael and blocking others from learning their options.

Ismael sat in Wisconsin detention for almost two months, inside a federal prison with an area roped off for immigrants. His mother hired a lawyer, who pulled all the documents and witnesses they could think of to help his case—his schoolwork, his therapist, his high school teachers:

They spoke and everything, but it wasn't enough. Just because I got caught up with a little bit of weed and a DUI, I was—my "moral integrity" wasn't intact for me to perform as a U.S. citizen in America. So, it didn't matter that I volunteered a lot, 'cause I mean, I did, you know? Even though I was a little rowdy when I was a child, I was involved in a lot of things because of the school I was in. But that wasn't enough. The state—the county's attorney or whatever, he just basically kept painting a horrible version of me: "He doesn't care for the law. He was driving while drunk. He didn't have a license. He didn't care. He could have killed somebody." He was just painting it hard. I was just like, I spoke with him, and I told the man, "You know what? I understand that I messed up, but we all mess up. I've been here since I was three years old. My native tongue is English. I know everything you want me to tell you about the Constitution. I know—I passed my Constitution test. I went to school; I have my high school diploma. I was in community college. I was doing something. And I wasn't just—it wasn't just a history of mess ups. Everybody messes up; everybody makes mistakes. But that's not me anymore. That was in the past." But they ended up—just, they didn't care, and I got like a five-month continuance for my next court date. And at that point I'm just like, "Man, you know what? No. I can't do this anymore, I've been incarcerated way too long." And I finally just broke, and I said, "You know what? Fuck it. Just give me the papers." And I signed them. I put my fingerprint on both of them, and probably like two weeks later they shipped me out.

As Ismael pointed out, the system had little space for immigrants to be human or make mistakes. Compared to U.S. citizens, Ismael was held to extraordinary moral standards. Just for driving under the influence, U.S. police framed him as a broken man. He grappled with the disconnect between his self-image and the ways state agents described him. The discrepancy messed with his sense of fairness. Israel had no one in Mexico; even his grandparents had moved to the United States. But, as he put it, "Finally I just broke." After all that fighting, all that money on lawyers, he agreed to his deportation.

Misinformation, abuse, and intimidation left men emotionally battered. They talked of sobbing, depression, and suicidal thoughts. One described how immigration agents kept him awake for days, mocking him and showing their belts as if they would beat him. Then he started having anxiety attacks: “They get into your head. You can’t focus your brain after not sleeping for so long . . . and they treated me like a crazy person.” Julián, detained in Fresno, California, after a DUI, underscored how even the manliest men broke down. Though Julián thought of himself as mentally and physically strong, he said, “Nothing can prepare you, no one can prepare you for an experience like that. I saw guys—almost all of us cried, everyone cried. Gangsters, people who are there for drugs or for serious crimes, crying, crying, as manly as they think they are (*por más hombres que se creen*).” The state seemed determined to strip them not just of their sanity but also of their masculine pride.

Alone and degraded, men felt impotent. Julián went on, “You can do almost nothing. That’s why I say ‘I *tried* to defend myself’ but well, how can you defend yourself? What can you do? They have you locked up . . . My parents don’t know how to drive. They don’t know English; they don’t understand the system. What can they do? . . . Who is going to defend me? No one.” Emasculation was entangled with isolation, separation from loved ones, and symbolic ejection from humanity. Often, men could not talk to family for weeks. During those long stretches, ICE agents dangled deportation as a way out: “You want to go, you want to get out quicker? Sign here, and as soon as we can, you can go to Mexico.” Ultimately, the only choice left was to go. Feeling powerless, Julián gave up and signed.

Twenty-seven-year-old Memo got to the point at which one more moment detained felt like throwing his life away. He explained to Ana:

They put us like in a room with like 300 people sleeping on the floor. There was no toilet paper . . . Like that, without bathing, without talking to your family for weeks . . . Then, they took me from Kentucky to Louisiana, and from Louisiana to different states . . . Various places. I lost all the things I had—my toothbrush, my food, my pencil. It was like a desert, like, “You don’t have nothing, you ain’t worth nothing.” . . . The court dates came to fight your case, and they would give you another six months. So, I told my mom, “Look, mom, the truth is that I am—at this age, I am 25 years old. Mom, look, the truth is that it’s not worth it to have them humiliate me like this, just to have documents or, I don’t know, to stay with you guys and be happy.”

Memo expressed a common ambivalence: while he did not think he had done anything “bad,” ICE took away his belongings, human contact, and ultimately, his worth. Others, likewise, calculated that detention was like “years of my life thrown in the trash.” As one put it, “They already detained you anyway; you’re not going to get free of them. They have you in their hands and it’s better to just go voluntarily.” It was a Faustian bargain: to gain a future, they had to leave their whole lives in the past.

The Broken

If men responded to the degradation of detention by accepting removal, how did they cope in prison, when they could not get out and had to struggle to stay alive? How did they hold onto a thread of their own humanity?

The third group of men, who felt broken, endured more systemic violence. They were sons of the system, often locked up as young men. In prison, they endured years of the emotional and physical abuse that drove those detained to the brink. They spoke of being stalked from one prison into another, being stabbed and beaten by gangs, or being stuck for years in “the hole.” Several became suicidal. As one said, “A lot of people can’t even take it. I’ve seen people hang themselves because they can’t take the situation and they—and, ugh, yeah, it’s ugly. It’s ugly.” Prison threatened both their survival and their will to survive.

In a common trauma response, some hung on by giving in to the brutality. Gangs’ dominance and sheer violence made guards seem almost humane. Many lost sight of legitimate human treatment. Instead, they came to see prison violence as “normal” or even fair.

In search of agency, other men practiced self-discipline. Unable to change the institution, they turned to changing themselves. Prison staff and the nonstate actors I call “redeemers” encouraged such practices. If men performed as “good” prison subjects, they could avoid solitary confinement (“the hole”) and even get early release. Thus, prisons framed both getting out and “getting time” as upshots of individual actions, instead of as the caprice of an unjust state.

As men used their minds and bodies to *practice* “personal responsibility,” many internalized the government’s story that they were “bad.” They blamed themselves for imprisonment or started to think they were sinners in need of reform. These narratives helped them make sense of state violence and find hope for their future, after release. The idea of redemption also reframed deportation as a relief, a second chance, and even a form of “rebirth,” rather than as the punitive loss of their families and homes.

Normalizing Violence. In prison, inmates grew habituated to violence. Officials were “just doing their jobs,” said some. According to other interviewees, “You’re in jail, and a jail is a jail . . . You’re in jail, and jail is ugly.” When Camila asked Pascual, a 30-year-old man from Oaxaca, if he saw abuses in prison, he replied:

Listen, I didn’t see abuse—almost none. And if maybe I saw [violence], it was because, well, obviously you’re a prisoner, but you’re under their rules because you’re a prisoner . . . But there are people who don’t obey. Obviously, I think they have to take their—get everyone to follow the rules. And when someone opposes them—but I think that’s all normal, like anything, right? I think that they are authorities. And you might not want to obey them, but, well, they’re authorities for a reason, and, well, I think that was normal.

Pascual's description flip-flopped. First, he said did *not* see abuse. Then he admitted he *did* see abuse but called it all "normal."

Others used the word "normal," too. When Taviero was 20, he drunkenly crashed a car, and cops beat him up. When Lorena asked Taviero how officers acted in jail, he said, "Normal, that's what I would call it, you know? I don't know what's normal, what's not normal. I was only used to mistreatment with officers. I never had a good experience with officers. I don't think nobody has a good experience with officers—I guess that's normal." Having grown up under police mistreatment, men like Taviero just expected abuse.

Similarly, Humberto came to see beatings meted out by the guards as his fault. Arrested for shooting a rival gang member, Humberto spent ten years in prison before his removal. The prison system moved him from California to Oklahoma, hundreds of miles from family. On three occasions, guards threw him into a room with no cameras and beat him. At one point, after fighting on gang leaders' orders, Humberto did a year and a half in solitary confinement: "24 hours a day in a tiny cell, like 3 meters long or less . . . always hungry because that plate of food didn't last me [the day]." Nevertheless, he told Camila, "There were some [officers] that treat you well, but others really were a bit mean, because you're inside and sometimes you behave badly. If you behave well, they almost don't mess with you, but if you act like someone who likes problems, there are times when they yell at you . . . and there they beat you." When Camila expressed surprise that Humberto was beaten for answering back to guards, he pushed back: "I think they were right. Because the truth is that *I* acted badly [my emphasis]."

Humberto internalized the prison's perspective that questioning guards was "bad" and warranted further abuse. While the treatment jarred him at first, Humberto got used to it. Over the years in prison, he said, "my mentality was changing." Before his arrest, Humberto thought he had a good life. In prison, he came to believe that "everything I lived is worthless, and it's like I hadn't lived at all." After getting out, he promised that he would live differently.

When prisons enabled the gangs to take over, men's sense of the law also shifted. Compared with gang brutality, guards' violence struck them as tame and even "acceptable."

For example, Brayan, a 27-year-old who had worked as a mule (carrying drugs across the U.S.-Mexico border), suggested that in *contrast* to gangs, when guards used violence, they were "just doing their work." Brayan had been deported multiple times, most recently spending two years in prison and seven months detained. He underscored to Ana, "Inside we hit each other among us. Sometimes people have even fought in prison for a Maruchan ramen soup, because in there if you owe something you have to pay it . . . for five dollars, even for a dollar, for a lack of respect. If you look at a person the wrong way." Each time something like that happened, he added, the prison sent COs with pepper spray and batons and "a lot

of people get hurt.” In such incidents, Brayan felt, “they’re just doing their work, and everything’s fine.”

Instead of blaming the prison for COs’ brutality, Brayan welcomed the lesson in discipline. The last time he was locked up, he embraced it: “I started exercising, I started working, I started doing my thing from the first day ’til the last. And it helped me a lot.”

Self-Discipline and Self-Blame. To cope with the violence of prison, many respondents turned to exercise, books, work, or God. Offers of early release, as well as religious groups and other “redeemers,” encouraged men to discipline *themselves*. Respondents talked about studying, learning languages, getting their GEDs, and reading hundreds of books. Others worked outside the prison, in places like farms or factories, making chairs for judges or putting up light posts. Still others devoted themselves to physical fitness. Through such practices, men exercised a circumscribed form of agency. But they also reinforced a story in which their suffering was no one’s fault but their own.

For some men, self-discipline offered something to focus on other than loneliness, pain, or the time that stretched out before them. Milton, a self-described former gangster, found purpose in reading 1,000 books. For Gaspar, reading and drawing became an anchor that “kept him sane”:

The only relaxation you have, or the only chance to breathe fresh air is to read, right? To take your mind off that [prison]. I didn’t used to like reading. But when I was in there, I got some books by Stephen King. I remember *The Shining* was the first book I read, and I remember that unleashed my imagination, my ability to draw, and I would do it all day, every day, right? Ten hours of my life were just drawing and pages and pages and pencils and pencils . . . and my papers—that was—I think that’s what kept me sane was that “I want to make something out of this, that I know how to do.”

As Gaspar got used to deprivations, violence, arbitrary rules, and retaliations, like the guards tearing up his mother’s photo, creativity helped him keep a sense of himself.

Christianity also promised a narrative of salvation. Christian organizations proliferated in prisons. Groups ranging from Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous to evangelical churches offered baptisms, *limpias del pecado* (cleansing from sin), and printed “certificates of rebirth.” According to interviewees, such “redeemers” constantly pushed the Bible. In turn, Gaspar recalled, “I saw a lot of people become real fanatics about that and get [Jesus] tattoos and things.” As Reuben Miller suggests, charitable groups in prison “can’t change the reality these people face, so they try to change how the people who face those realities see, understand, and respond to them.”⁴⁴ While U.S. penal institutions are not officially

religious, several respondents believed that going to church earned them better treatment, like access to snacks, time outside, or even early release.⁴⁵

Turning to God (whether for the first time, or to reinforce past beliefs) pushed men to “take responsibility” for their suffering. Converted men said in serious tones, “I was with the devil, but now I am coming to God.” Such beliefs often went hand in hand with self-blame. While religion helped many respondents endure imprisonment, it let the system off the hook for their trauma. In this view, men’s pain wasn’t the fault of police, violent prison officials, or gangs. Rather, *men themselves* had been in the wrong.

For instance, Santino, now 32, was first sent to prison at age 17 for selling meth. He got locked up on and off after that. In prison, he found religion:

I start to read the Bible, and when I started to ask God for things, he would respond to me in my dreams. Even now he responds to me in dreams. But I started to have a lot of faith, to believe a lot in the word of God . . . I started to read . . . books about God, about my bad behavior . . . And it made me understand a lot of things. It made me understand that I was bad/doing wrong (*yo estaba mal*). It made me understand that I was a selfish, arrogant, proud person. It made me understand that if I . . . continued that kind of life, only two things could be waiting for me: prison again, or death.

Santino’s conversion reframed his life story. “Before I went to jail,” he said, touching his heart, “I was really broken inside, here.” He went on, “I learned that I have hurt many people. I hurt my wife, and I hurt my kids. And believe me that if I don’t try to remedy this with them, they are going to believe the same as I [did when I] grew up . . . Maybe they’ll be drug sellers too, because someone is going to come and tell them that this is easy money, and they are going to say, ‘Well, my dad did it.’” Religion made Santino feel *he* was bad. He said nothing of the obstacles or abuses that he had endured. Instead, he channeled his energy into changing his *own* life. By moralizing, men could make sense of the beatings they’d faced (physically and metaphorically) and feel they had some control.

Interestingly, men who felt defiant and resigned also spoke of God. Yet those men asked God to save them from the violence of detention. By contrast, men in prison tended to expect religion to save them from *themselves*.

Where the defiant group questioned the state’s dehumanizing treatment and insisted on their core humanity, broken men accepted dehumanization as justified. For instance, Goyo, who in chapter 1 described his transit in and out of foster care and prison, came to feel that “I deserve it, you know. Whatever happened, happened because it was the choices I made. So, I accept it. I wasn’t very smart; I wasn’t dedicated, and I wasn’t putting in the effort to my life and to being successful.” His path, he believed, reflected his personal choices and failures. After Alcoholics Anonymous and Bible classes, Romeo, likewise, said, “I was being ignorant, and I didn’t want to be ignorant anymore . . . I wanted to know God.” As Oscar put it: in the past he “made bad decisions,” but in jail he “had to become a man.”

At the extreme, some men expressed appreciation for the “opportunity” to “learn discipline” from prisons, religious groups, classes, or even gangs. Sentenced to three and a half years in prison for selling drugs, Ulises endured constant hunger and months in the hold for lewd gestures. Yet when Natalia asked if he’d faced abuse, he said “no.” He insisted that he valued following rules: “The guards, the prisoners themselves, they teach you what respect is. [They might say], ‘If I have a uniform, you have to obey me. I’m not interested in who you were on the outside, I am here. ‘You see this black wall? I say it’s black, so it’s black.’ There are rules here, order. This is not a hotel.” In Ulises’s description, guards demanded he alter his own reality: see the world as they told him to see it. These were not shared rules, but arbitrary control.

It is important to be clear that men’s gratitude did not reflect true opportunities for rehabilitation. Reams of evidence demonstrate that incarceration does not reform inmates but rather makes their lives more difficult. Educational programming is in desperately short supply.⁴⁶ Yet such programming plays a symbolic role, marking the supposed “beneficence” of prisons and the individual responsibility of inmates to seize opportunities for their salvation.

The idea of redemption also encouraged men to reframe deportation not as a punishment but as a “second chance,” a rebirth, or an opportunity to “become men.” Sometimes, accepting removal allowed people to commute their prison sentences or avoid immigration detention post-prison. Carlos, for instance, told Itzel that when he was deported, he felt “really good, actually, happy and content.” The U.S. had sentenced Carlos to life but reduced his time to eight years when he agreed to go back to Mexico. So, it seemed to Carlos, “I’m getting out free!”

Emilio, who spent years in Theo Lacey Jail in California, where he was beaten and had to work to keep basic hygiene, felt that in the U.S., “You always have a criminal record,” but in Mexico, you can “become a man.” He went on, “You know everything that you did, all that life that you lived on the other side [the U.S.], that’s gotta stay there and bury it. And uh, I had a really bad life. Because of my fault, you know? I lived a bad life over there, you know, doing stupid stuff . . . But right here [in Mexico] I’m free.” By agreeing to start anew, men could hope for a certain (deeply limited) “freedom.”

In practice, as detailed in chapter 3, men’s mental degradation came with them, undermining their ability to reconnect with people and start over in Mexico.

CONCLUSION

U.S. detention and prison erode men’s mental welfare and moral core. The deeper people get in this system, the more of themselves they lose. Perhaps counterintuitively, those who spend the least time in detention, jail, and prison are most enraged and resistant. A few short months can leave them resigned to injustice—as well as to their removal. Not surprisingly, more than half of immigrants in

detention survive by getting the hell out, signing off on their own deportations. Meanwhile, those who stay in prison for years grow inured to abuse, and some of them blame themselves for their fates. Under such conditions, men can see deportation as a chance at redemption, even though imprisonment has disrupted their lives, eroded their family connections, and scarred their moral, emotional, and mental well-being.

Anti-immigrant policymakers might argue that these group-level differences prove that imprisonment “works.” Men go to prison, come to see themselves as responsible for their plights, and excuse the system of violence because they have committed worse crimes than those who are only detained. Yet, this logic does not explain why men who spend years in immigration detention show similar patterns of thought, when they have committed no crimes. Rather, the stories in this chapter reveal how the carceral system debases men regardless of their criminal histories. Insanity and self-blame are also forged *inside* the system itself.

Very few of the people the U.S. deports are the “hardened criminals” of media and political rhetoric. Yet, a logic of deterrence legitimates terrifically brutal treatment.⁴⁷ Across the deportation system, men felt reduced to animals and robbed of their loved ones and lives. Some became habituated to violence and deprivation or so disoriented that they no longer knew what was “normal.” Many felt powerless. Only the most racist and inhumane observers would argue that such techniques are worth it, simply to drive people out of the United States.

There is a longer-term toll as well, as the trauma of imprisonment follows men back to Mexico. In the chapters to come, I explore how U.S. prisons break men’s connections to people and remain lodged in their hearts.⁴⁸ Men often come out of detention and prison with mental illness, diagnosed or not. They are stigmatized as “crazy” and “criminal”—even in Mexico. They arrive in their “homeland” cut off from society, justice, and their humanity.