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## Banished

*Acknowledgment: In Tijuana, students insistently drew my attention to men's isolation. Jasmin Divas, whose brother was deported, did outstanding work at the city's major soup kitchen, connecting with men caught deepest in limbo. Breanny Andrade and Nick Sabia helped flesh out the "reset mentality" on my office whiteboard. I am also in awe of the courage with which Camila Hernández Cruz and Ana López Ricoy engaged men struggling with mental illness, physical debility, and addiction, despite what I later realized were significant risks to themselves.*

Tijuana's flagship migrant shelter, the Casa del Migrante, sits a 35-minute drive from my front door in San Diego. It feels like a world away.

On the rutted road to the shelter, men line the sidewalks. Some sleep on the cement, their hair matted down with dirt. The Casa kicks out its "clients" during the day, so both guests and hopefuls linger nearby on the street. Their belongings mark them as migrants. Shoes worn thin. Ziploc bags stuffed with papers—the few remaining artifacts that tell the state who they are. The just-deported are especially easy to spot, with their ICE-issued sweats. Often, police beat up migrants nearby. Sometimes, deportees get recruited or kidnapped by border cartels.

The Casa del Migrante opened in 1987—with the encouragement of U.S. and Mexican NGOs—to help Mexico's labor migrants during their journeys north. It was the first of now more than 30 migrant shelters around Tijuana, most run by churches and NGOs, housing several thousand migrants per day. The Casa hosts up to 160 people a night, taking them for a few days at first and up to six weeks if they look for a job and don't cause trouble, drink, or use drugs. In the 1990s, the shelter served mostly those heading north; in the 2010s, 90 percent of its guests were deported men.<sup>1</sup> Compared to the average deportee, people who stayed there were poorer, older, and less socially connected—the ones with nowhere to turn.<sup>2</sup> From 2017 to 2020, the Casa del Migrante also served as the base for our Tijuana fieldwork and training ground for 35 students a year.

A metal grate guards the Casa's front door, echoing the bars of U.S. prisons and ICE detention. Just inside stands a wall-sized bulletin board. The right half

is pinned with snapshots of men who are banned from the shelter. Captured at intake, their dark eyes stare out from the wall: tired, sad, angry, grasping. Under each image, someone has scrawled a label in Sharpie: *borracho* (drunk), *drogadicto* (drug addict), *ratero* (thief), *violento* (violent), or *narco* (drug trafficker)—naming the men by their crimes. On the left, there is just one label: *Se busca* (seeking), for those who've gone missing. It feels as if the men are eternally lost.

Ostensibly, the wall is for staff: to keep out troublemakers and addicts and help find those who have vanished. Yet, its labels echo the stigmas that mark migrant men beginning in adolescence. Students in the Mexican Migration Field Research Program dubbed this the “wall of shame.” For me, it was the wall of the banished: people exiled not just from the United States or from the Casa but from humanity as a whole.

I think of Oscar, whom I met one night at the shelter while waiting for dinner. He was just 21 and seemed tender and vulnerable—a kid with a backward cap. When we talked, I learned the story that now features in chapter 2: he'd been taken away from his mother at 4 and left by his father at 12. He began selling drugs. When he was 18, the U.S. sent him to prison and then—a few weeks before we met—deported him to Tijuana. Oscar and I later spoke for more than two hours, under the florescent lights of an unused office. He insisted that he'd left drugs in his past. Casa, he said, was helping him find decent work. Yet when I returned a week later, Oscar was gone. I never saw him again. Rumor was he'd been tossed out for boozing. I hoped he'd made it back to LA or gone south to rejoin his mom. Maybe he ended up on the streets. Perhaps he joined up with the narcos or was taken by local police. As one shelter worker told me, “Every day, people just disappear.”

The eyes of those disappeared stayed with me on nights I returned from my Tijuana fieldwork, shaming me for the ease with which I could speed back over the border. What becomes, I wondered, of men the U.S. tries to erase?

Researchers know that deportation is devastating. Upon return to their countries of origin, deported men and women face stigma, criminalization, police abuse, and detention and imprisonment. They are vulnerable to criminal violence, especially at the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>3</sup> Most lack strong social networks or income. They face high rates of mental illness, homelessness, and drug abuse.<sup>4</sup> Often, they describe return to their homelands as exile.<sup>5</sup>

In scholars' terms, deportation is social death, marking people as disposable and subhuman.<sup>6</sup> Stripped of their deep interpersonal ties, people lose their sense of belonging to a group or a place; their roles in work, family, and community; their autonomy; and even their faith in themselves. As their physical and psychological condition deteriorates, some can no longer function as social beings. They become “disintegrated subjects,” pushed out of society and barely able to fight to belong.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars go so far as to suggest that life after deportation is “outright

inviably.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, analysts say less about how U.S. incarceration, Mexican police, and cartels intensify this rupture.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, erasure is not a foregone conclusion. As I explain in chapter 6, some people rebuild their lives and communities after deportation. Assuming social death is universal can reinforce fearmongering by U.S. (and Mexican) politicians, such as the claim that deportees will carry “their” crime from place to place.<sup>10</sup> The idea that men themselves are a threat also deflects attention from the ways *institutions* degrade their humanity, on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border.

In this chapter, I trace how institutions leave deportees feeling banished, not just from the U.S. but from society as a whole. I find that alienation is most acute when men have endured U.S. prison and/or long-term detention and when they are left in limbo at the U.S.-Mexico border. Those who spend the most time behind bars have the weakest social connections, feel most emasculated, and are most likely to face PTSD. Some survive violence by isolating themselves. Others struggle to function outside of prison at all. As detailed in chapter 4, such men tend to get trapped at the border when they have nowhere to go. Others also stay near the U.S. to prepare to recross. Focused on the U.S. and waiting (sometimes forever), both groups struggle to be present in Mexico.

At the border, Mexican cartels, police, and military agents reinforce deportees’ erasure.<sup>11</sup> These institutions make up the “Mexican side” of what is, in fact, a *binational* system of banishment. U.S. border militarization fuels cartel violence, creating a profit motive for smuggling drugs and people.<sup>12</sup> Under the mantle of the War on Drugs (and stopping migration), the U.S. also arms and trains Mexican military and police. Some cartels, such as the Zetas, now use U.S. military tactics as well, learned from members trained in the U.S. military and/or in special units of the Mexican military overseen by the United States.

Mexican authorities and cartels benefit from the vulnerability, isolation, and skills of men coming out of U.S. prison. After prison, deported men land in Mexico traumatized, disoriented, and visible. To cops and cartels, they’re walking dollar signs. They can also be easy scapegoats for border police to fill quotas and recruits for cartels in search of cheap labor. Criminal organizations also covet deported men for their English, familiarity with the border, and/or experience exercising violence (whether as members of gangs, or as past U.S. military).

These institutions re-mark deportees as criminals and targets of violent abuse. They add to the degradation wrought by U.S. state institutions, crippling men’s capacity to rebuild relationships, homes, and a sense of themselves. Under such conditions, men feel profoundly alienated.<sup>13</sup> They are cut off from people, place, and sanity. They struggle to rebuild connections and trust their own goodness. Time and again, they describe a deep loss of hope. Many are haunted by the visceral prospect of dying.

## THE MEXICAN SIDE OF CARCERAL DEPORTATION

U.S. border enforcement gives Mexican institutions a model for violence and an incentive to use it. In turn, Mexican police and cartels extend the erasure of deportees.

Respondents' experiences in Tijuana exemplify this convergence. The second largest city on the West Coast of North America (after LA), Tijuana is also a major commercial hub between the U.S. and Mexico, the busiest land border crossing in the world, and "one of the great control points between the affluent and developing worlds."<sup>14</sup> Its factories (*maquilas*), call centers, armed forces, and traffickers cater to the United States.<sup>15</sup> Despite this economic power, most of Tijuana's residents face deep precarity, economic and otherwise. No Mexican city has absorbed more deportees. In this space of limbo, people are conditioned to the rapid mobility (and disposability) of human beings. As political newcomers within Mexico, local government leaders are arguably more oriented to the United States than to Mexico City. Civil society remains weak, built mainly on charitable, Catholic organizations focused on basic needs.<sup>16</sup>

The context is ripe for cartels and cops to exploit men post-deportation.

*Cartel Assaults, Recruitment, and Exploitation*

At the border, U.S. demand, prohibition, and enforcement fuel a vast illicit traffic in drugs and migrants, among other things. By some estimates, the drug trade makes up as much as 5 percent of Mexico's GDP.<sup>17</sup> In this context, cartels (*narcos*) are both notorious and ubiquitous. While the U.S. frames cartels as external threats, in fact, the fortification of the U.S.-Mexico border *enables* organized crime, making it profitable to traffic drugs and people.<sup>18</sup> Mexican federal policies have also intensified violence among cartels. Since 2006, Mexico has waged a "war on cartels," debilitating the organizations' most powerful leaders but triggering intense and widespread fights for control. Today, as anthropologist Shaylih Muehlmann reports, it is hard to exist at the border without getting involved with or falling in debt to cartels.<sup>19</sup>

When deportees cross into Mexico, cartels often recruit them as foot soldiers, sentries (*halcones*), mules, and *burreros* (who smuggle cash on their bodies).<sup>20</sup> Organizations like the Zetas, the Sinaloa Cartel, the Knights Templar, and the New Generation Jalisco Cartel kidnap deportees for ransom (assuming U.S.-based loved ones will pay), force them to work, or recruit them to take drugs or people to the U.S. (exploiting their desire to get back across a difficult border). Loosely affiliated with U.S.-based gangs, cartels also stave off rivals by obliterating and sometimes absorbing deportees who have ties with opposing groups.<sup>21</sup> In our interviews, more than 50 of 171 men (especially at the border) brought up cartels without prompting. They spoke of being beaten; attacked; kidnapped; tortured; and robbed of their trucks, watches, wallets, and jewelry. Some had friends killed by cartels.

U.S. imprisonment and removal leave men vulnerable to such violence.<sup>22</sup> For one, ICE often uses “lateral deportation” to release deportees in cities they’ve never been to before. Men arrive in Mexico disoriented. Most have never been to the border, and many have not seen their home country in decades. Robbed of their social connections, they are easy to kidnap, extort, or coerce. If men are or were once affiliated with U.S. gangs, they can also be seen as rivals—a threat to local cartels unless they are killed or brought into the fold. Particularly at the northeastern border, which has been hotly contested since the early 2000s, cartels seek to neutralize possible enemies. Often, the U.S. deports men straight to the territory of opposing cartels, as if intending to have them killed.

At the same time, U.S. incarceration, military experience, and gangs (including prison gangs) *train* men to endure and exercise violence. Many deported men have withstood harsh conditions in prison. In addition, as Tijuana scholar and activist Victor Clark-Alfaro puts it, “The [deported] gang members know how to use weapons, speak English, have contact with gangs in the U.S., and show no fear.”<sup>23</sup> Cartels are especially interested in recruiting men with U.S. military training, for their insider knowledge of tactics of violence.

Most respondents said that on their release at the border, cartels immediately offered them guns and invited or forced them to join, especially if they’d been in prison. Cartel scouts know the U.S. release points and how to find new arrivals: disoriented, speaking English or “Chicano” accented Spanish, with certain tattoos and prison-issued or gang-affiliated clothing. These lookouts often pick men up on the street, strip searched them for tattoos, and interrogate them about their crimes, gang activity, and ties to other organizations.<sup>24</sup> Both military agents and cartel members also sit at the border bus stations, to trap men who look like they’re lost. If cartels think men are “suspicious,” they may torture them or offer a choice: join the local criminal rings or be killed.<sup>25</sup>

All this was common knowledge among our respondents. For instance, 28-year-old Gaspar, from chapter 2, had lived in the U.S. since he was six, joined a gang, and eventually served time in prison. When he got out in Mexico, he remembered:

We arrived in Tamaulipas, well, and you [deportees] are talking all in English. From only hearing my mom [speak Spanish], you lose the accent. You lose all the idioms and the way you had with words. So, when we arrived in Tamaulipas, there were two or three people waiting for us to see if we wanted to work with them. They were from Mexican cartels. [They asked], “Were you in prison (*la cárcel*)?” “Yes.” “Do you know how to do this and that?” “Yes.” And about 50 percent of the people from where we were [in prison] went with them, because it’s, “Either you come with me or—” Because here [in Mexico], no one is going to notice. They would threaten you with death. “Either you come with me to work, or what will we do?” . . . These people approached me, too, and they said, “Well, we’re offering you work, to go work in Tampico, Sinaloa, and Tijuana,” doing the same things, right? Selling drugs, selling drugs.

Once cartels confirmed that men had the desired experience, they gave a stark choice: join or die. By luck, a friend pulled Gaspar into his father's car, and they sped off to Mexico City. Had Gaspar not had such luck, he might have been recruited or murdered. By his estimation, half of men coming out of prison end up in cartels.

Other respondents described arriving at *la línea* (the border) as the start of a hunt in which they were the prey. Edgardo, a 35-year-old man from Oaxaca, told us that the day after his release in Nogales, Sonora (bordering Arizona):

They [cartels] were picking up people to get them to carry drugs to the United States, and I told the guys [I got out with], "Dude, hide, because those guys are picking people up, and if they get you, they're going to use you as a mule, and you can't get out of that. There, they kill you because they kill you." So, when I passed them, we hid under a friggin' bus (*urbano*), and we were hiding there until those guys left. But they did get various people, and they took them as mules. In fact, most of them were the people who were trying to get back into the United States.

Men's desperation to get back to the U.S. compelled some to choose work as mules. Cartels exploited despair, then threatened torture or death if men did not comply.

Amid few, bad choices, some deportees did join cartels. The organizations offered one means to reclaim masculinity and refuse state control. At times, cartel abuse could seem like an invitation to reestablish their power as men. As one participant put it, "Get beaten down or join to reclaim your manhood." Several accepted this challenge. In chapter 6, I say more about how criminal organizations can give men a tenuous path into agency. Here, I address their role as constraint.

By targeting and integrating deported men, cartels extended the criminalization and violence of U.S. police and border enforcement. Reinforcing men's criminal histories enabled such organizations to use them as foot soldiers and fall guys. Men's histories in U.S. prison—and resulting isolation—made them exploitable and expendable.

### *Mexican Police and Military Abuse*

U.S. politicians often frame Mexican state brutality as a sign of corruption, ineffectual government, or failed rule of law. Yet the fortification of the U.S. side of the border has pushed a parallel Mexican border militarization.<sup>26</sup> For one, the U.S. Criminal History Information System (CHIS) enables the U.S. government to share information on "criminal aliens" (deportees) with the Mexican state.<sup>27</sup> The U.S. government also pours vast funding into the Mexican military to keep migration and drug trafficking down.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the Merida Initiative, begun in 2008, provided more than \$3 billion in military equipment and training for Mexican police and military agents.<sup>29</sup> U.S. funding and demand have encouraged Mexico to deploy tens of thousands of army, marines, national guard, and local and federal police to the border, to stop organized crime, drug trafficking, and

migrants who “threaten” to enter the United States. In some border states, soldiers have replaced local police, driving a radical increase in violence.<sup>30</sup>

Stigma and isolation make deportees easy targets for these officials. As long as the government marks repatriated men as criminals and narcos, it can beat and kill them with little scrutiny from the public.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, many Mexican police and military agents are secretly in the pay of cartels, up to the highest ranks of the state. Cartels often bribe or coerce police and soldiers to arrest and assault deportees or serve them up to criminal organizations. Often, the narcos dictate rules, patterns of migration, and targets of abuse.

Human rights reports show that Mexican soldiers and municipal police officers are among the primary perpetrators of violence against deportees.<sup>32</sup> Like U.S. police, Mexican police regularly stop migrants arbitrarily, ask for identification, take their money, beat them, arrest them, or throw them in jail without a clear charge.<sup>33</sup> Since deported men rarely have access to their Mexican birth certificates or IDs, such arrests are frequently made on the pretext of “no identification.” “Undocumented” in their country of their birth, deported men cannot access jobs, housing, or safety. Scholars and journalists have also reported kidnapping, torture, theft, verbal abuse, and other assaults by public officials in Tijuana and across the Mexican side of the border.<sup>34</sup>

Border politicians also deploy police to “clean up” their cities for tourists and investors from the United States. Blaming deportees for crime, economic burdens, and undermining Baja California’s relations with the United States, the state government pressures repatriated Mexicans to return to their places of origin. Sometimes, they do this via “soft” information campaigns at places like shelters. Other times, they literally beat them out of there. In one exemplary show of force in the 2010s, Tijuana’s municipal police “cleaned out” thousands of homeless men living in encampments in the canal near the U.S. Mexico border, most of them deportees.<sup>35</sup> The cops arrested 90 people, destroyed thousands of dwellings, and brutally beat up the residents—leading to several deaths. Branding deportees as criminals and outsiders gives border states a convenient scapegoat for urban problems.

Like cartels, state agents take advantage of deportees’ disorientation and single them out by their accents, haircuts, or U.S.-style clothing. One interviewee explained that coming from the U.S., you might be wearing a baseball cap, but to Mexican cops, “Oh, *es cholo* (he’s an Americanized gangster) . . . it is like gang affiliated, or you’re a *malandro* (a crook) or whatever, but *nada qué ver* (it has nothing to do with that), so you always have to give them something [a pay-off].” In other words, Mexican police sometimes *claimed* to see men as criminals, in order to make arrests and get bribes. Most people we interviewed had endured such shakedowns, which typically involved stops for minor offenses like improper driving, lack of identification, or being in the “wrong area” or a “conflict zone.” As one man put it, “They’ll pull you over for any tiny little reason; they don’t even try to give you a ticket, they just straight up ask you, ‘Give me a hundred pesos, and

I'll let you go.” Tijuana police also planted drugs on several respondents or falsely claimed they had drugs on them. If the deportee had no money to give, he could expect to get beaten, harassed, or thrown into jail, echoing U.S.-side traumas.

In many cases, interviewees described Mexican police as more violent than their U.S. counterparts. Diego, for instance, said in Spanglish, “They’ll throw you to the ground. They kick you. *Te dan con esa madre que* (they give you those beatings that)—they grab you, they handcuff you, and they throw you in the truck like that. They throw pure iron at you—it’s ugly.” Rogelio, likewise, remembered a series of incidents with police in Ciudad Juárez, including watching them shoot and kill a young girl and her dad on a bus in broad daylight. He recalled:

The marines and the army had arrived [at the border], and if you haven’t experienced the checkpoints or stops by the marines, you haven’t seen anything. They’re really ugly, *bien gachos* (really messed up), and they also take you out and they violate your rights. They pull you out of your car, they start to open everything, and they don’t care . . . I don’t have any respect for the police around here or the federal [police] because they don’t help us. They come to rob us, to beat us, to violate our rights.

In some cases, police even kidnapped respondents. Stefano recalled that when ICE let him out in Tijuana, police grabbed him, stole his telephone and identification, threw him into a local prison, and then used his cell phone to call his family in the United States and ask for \$5,000 dollars. The cops were clear: they were holding Stefano for ransom.

To prove they were fighting “drug traffickers,” Mexican soldiers frequently beat up deportees whom they said “appeared” to have ties to prisons or gangs. Men’s prior dehumanization and dislocation facilitated such assaults. Upon his release in Tijuana, for instance, Milton remembered:

They [Mexican border guards] sent me to the soldiers, the marines, and they beat the crap out of me for a little bit. Because they thought I was with the bad guys, so I was like, “Look, I don’t do drugs, I don’t sell drugs, I just did something over there,” but they beat me for a bit, about fifteen, twenty minutes . . . Two soldiers were waiting for me at the gate [from the U.S.], and they just escorted me, they stripped me naked, searched my property, my shoes, my socks, everything, and then they put the handcuffs on me. They took me to a room, but there were no cameras, no lights, no nothing. It was just a little light in there, and they got this yellow phone book, and they started beating the crap out of me . . . They just told me, “You got an hour to get to the airport or to go to the bus station and get the fuck out of here.”

In such incidents, Mexican officials echoed the abuse and expulsions of U.S. police and prisons.

Mexican personnel also prefigured U.S. border agents’ brutality. In several cases, they physically stopped men approaching the border to recross or smuggle drugs.<sup>36</sup> Brayan, who worked as a mule, told Ana of one such experience. Now 27, Brayan was born in Veracruz and moved to Arizona at age 15. Shortly thereafter,

he landed in prison for trafficking drugs. Not only was Brayan incarcerated in the United States; he was also beaten by the *Mexican* army. One time, as he approached the border carrying a load, he described:

We got to the desert, we got everything ready, and we had to walk some. Let's say a day or two days still inside Mexico to be able to get to the border, and all that time we had to hide from the [Mexican] soldiers, so they wouldn't catch us, because *nos pegan unas chingas bien feo* (they give you horrible beatings). Yes, they leave our whole body bruised, black eyes, bruised ribs, everything, everything, and then they send us back . . . There are some that aren't corrupt (*manchados*), if they get you with all of that, they let you go. But there are others that if they catch you like that—that you're walking like that in the desert and you have things hidden in there, they beat you until they have taken it all out—and they keep it for themselves.

When Ana, confused between U.S. and Mexican agents, checked *who* Brayan was talking about, he repeated, "That's the *Mexican* army."

Thus, Mexican state agents extended the logic, tactics, and targets of U.S. border enforcement. In the process, they added to U.S. banishment.

#### LIVING THROUGH SOCIAL DEATH

What did it feel like to live under such conditions—and try not to disappear?

At the border, deported men felt banished. That is, they felt pushed out of four, key things that made them both humans and men: (1) love, (2) place, (3) mind, and (4) hope. Isolated and afraid to connect with other people, they were, as they put it, *solos* (alone/lonely): alienated from love. Their minds still on the United States, with little welcome from folks at the Mexican border, they also felt *desubicados* (disoriented): alienated from place. Some also suffered from mental illness and felt out of their minds, alienated from a sense of themselves. Finally, several spoke of the threat of death, capturing the *desesperación* (despair) of the Casa's wall of the missing. That is, they felt alienated from hope. Many considered themselves in limbo not only between the U.S. and Mexico but also between life and death.

#### *Out of Love*

At the border, interviewees often felt *solos*: expelled from the relationships that make people human. U.S. prisons and border enforcement had stripped them of their loved ones in *both* the U.S. and Mexico. Some hid from family, ashamed by the stigma of prison or deportation. Scared of police and cartels, others hid from the world. To protect themselves from more grief, some avoided making friends or rebuilding families. Others were uncertain whether they *could* ever start a family anew. Aching, the men we met in Baja believed they belonged to no one.

Rafael, a 33-year-old at the Casa, said that in Tijuana, he lived "like a dog." Born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Rafael was brought to California at two and raised

in Fresno, a “son of the system.” Though he finished middle school in the U.S. and spoke fluent English, he never learned how to read or write. For a while, he drove a forklift and worked in the fields. The first time Rafael went to prison, he was 18, a new father and a reluctant new husband. He got locked up for eight months for domestic abuse. After his 2004 deportation, Rafael returned to the U.S. within a week. He fathered three more children, and though he never stayed with the moms, his second son became, as he said, “my pride and joy.”

The next time, the U.S. deported Rafael for selling drugs. He paid thousands of dollars to crawl back through a sewer to Arizona, but “as soon as we walked out, the [U.S.] border patrol was there—like just smacked us down. Literally, they like, hit us and tazed us and everything.” He got six months in federal prison. When Fátima met Rafael at the Casa, he had just been deported a third time.

Now, Rafael was alone. He no longer spoke with his four “baby moms.” Raised in the U.S., he had no family in Mexico. He didn’t plan to build a family there, either. After prison, he said, he could “only handle” taking care of himself. Nevertheless, he longed for his son: “Fuck, you know, it hurts. I ain’t have nobody out here. *Aquí estoy como un perro, estoy solo aquí* (Here, I’m like a dog. I’m alone here). I go through that like weekly. I’mma put a smile on there, but it’s not really a smile.”

Rafael struggled to like Tijuana and stay out of harm. He remembered that when he was in U.S. prison, inmates called Tijuana “the worst place in the world” and described it as filled with murder and decapitation. To live there, he learned, you needed to keep your head down and stay out of people’s business. Though Rafael considered restarting his “hussle” (selling drugs) in Tijuana, he felt too afraid. After trying to do the same, a friend deported with Rafael got shot six times in the face. Cartels knew at a glance, he said, that you hadn’t lived here for long. So, Rafael concluded, “You gotta be streetwise . . . You gotta walk with your head up high out here. You can’t let your guard down for nothing because people will step all over you.” To survive, he kept to himself. A friendship with someone “stupid,” he figured, might get him killed.

Rafael had also been arrested by local police, whom he described as “assholes” who “treat you stupid.” One night, after washing dishes at the Casa, he put on his uniform and left for his job as a security guard. Outside the shelter, a cop pulled him over, handcuffed him, and threw him into the car. When Rafael asked, “Why are you treating me like a criminal, you fools?” they said they were just doing random searches. Rafael argued back, “Yeah but you shouldn’t be handcuffing me before anything. I got my security outfit on . . . let me see your badge number.” Rafael began taking photos, only to have his phone snatched away. The cop snapped, “You’re not supposed to be here, ’cause this is like real drug heavy right here, real risky.” Rafael got 36 hours in jail. Then, he realized he had to bribe his way out: “Everything has a price. Out here, the law will sell themselves [*sic*].” After that, he tried to blend in.

In prison and on the streets, Rafael had learned that he could trust no one. Suspicious and scared all the time, he avoided making new friends. When Fátima asked what it felt like to try to make friends in Tijuana, he simply said, “I don’t have friends. It’s hard to make friends here cause it’s really hard to trust people. Just me, myself—it’s hard for me to trust nobody . . . There’s really nobody out here to trust. There’s a lot of people burned out here. From my background [in prison], it’s hard to trust [mumbles] . . . It’s been me, myself, and I here. I think everybody’s like that . . . it’s everyone to themselves.” His fears ranged from fellow migrants stealing his cigarettes at the shelter to someone gunning him down in the streets.

In Tijuana, Rafael admitted, he was “doing bad.” Often, he could hardly function at all. He went on in mixed Spanish and English:

Sometimes I stay in bed for like two or three days. I don’t wanna work, I don’t wanna do nothing . . . Here no one is going to give you [tell you], “Hey, dude, get up, *ánimo* (cheer up).” No one! . . . Two or three days being a bum. Just no shaving or nothing, just like, fuck. It’s like—I don’t know, *como una depresión o algo* (like a depression or something). I think about it, is this depression? What the hell is this? I don’t know what it is, but . . . it happens to me a lot. And it never happened to me out there. It’s hard out here. Super hard.

Compared with this life at the border, Rafael felt, U.S. prison looked almost good. He went on, “Sometimes, I feel like, ‘Fu- I’mma just go.’ And if I get caught, I’ll be better off in jail than here [in Tijuana], you know. I ain’t gonna have to worry about my rent, I ain’t have to worry about nothing. I just eat, rest, and eat, you know. ‘Cause I’ve been institutionalized like all my life.” Rafael felt he was losing his mind—so much that returning to prison sounded like respite.

Facing similar fear and distrust, almost two-thirds of men we met in Tijuana said they were lonely. Occasionally, they, too, wondered if life might be better if they got locked up in the U.S. again.

For Gaspar, the experience of losing family and getting attacked in prison made it hard to engage with people. He felt socially awkward. When he got deported, he explained:

It was starting all over from zero, because I had to get used to [people saying], “Well, what do you . . . feel like doing?” [I’d answer], “I don’t know. Stay in this room because I’m afraid to be outside. I don’t know what to do.” . . . It was really hard for me to incorporate into society. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know where to go, and I felt discriminated against here in Mexico because even though I was Mexican I didn’t speak Spanish, or it was *pochó* (Americanized) Spanish . . . All those friends I had, it was all gone.

Gaspar wasn’t alone. Men routinely told us that U.S. prison made them isolated, insecure, and shy, leaving them “alone in this world.” One explained that after removal, “my life was a cage. I didn’t want to see anyone. I felt like everyone looked

at me with contempt.” The feeling of being locked up traveled with them, embodied in their mindsets of self-protection.

Assaults, beatings, and theft in Mexico reinforced such men’s instincts to keep to themselves. A respondent who’d been beaten within an inch of his life by cartels said bluntly, “I like to keep my distance because they can do things to you. They can kill you. They can kidnap you. There are a lot of crazy people—and more in the community [of deportees] I belong to.” After a pause, he corrected himself: he “had no community.” Crying, another man told me that in Tijuana, “friends don’t exist.”

### *Out of Place*

Men in Tijuana also felt *desubicados* (disoriented, placeless), as if they belonged to nowhere. Almost no one we interviewed grew up in the border region, so they lacked the social ties of earlier migrants returning to loved ones back “home.” Many also stayed at the border “in waiting.” Even when their U.S. spouses or children were long-since estranged, they fixated on getting back. Often, they thought of themselves as “American.” Their focus on return kept them attuned to the U.S., making it hard to adapt in Mexico. Many felt like strangers in their own land.

Violence at the border reinforced their distaste for Mexico. Respondents often said that they thought Mexico was corrupt or that they “hated” the Mexican government. Others were cynical about the prospect of legitimate politics in either country—given the chains of debasement and violence they faced across place. They linked the racism and abuse they endured in the U.S. with the beatings, corruption, and disfunction they now faced south of the border.

Enrique, the father who’d lived 40 years in LA and tried to get back 12 times, said frankly, “To be sincere, my adaptation in Tijuana—no. I have not been able to adapt in Tijuana.”

Enrique traced his unease to his multiple apprehensions by U.S. border patrol—and the abuse he faced at the border from both cartels and police. The twelfth time Enrique tried to rejoin his family, the U.S. government sent him to prison in Pecos, Texas. As Enrique’s release date approached, he heard rumors the Gulf Cartel was killing people from his home state of Michoacán. He remembered, “The news there was crazy, running, that it was really dangerous out where they [ICE] were throwing people out, which was Reynosa and Matamoros . . . They were killing us mercilessly.” A few days later ICE released Enrique in Tamaulipas, the most violent state on the border. As Enrique got into a Grupo Beta (government) van, armed men surrounded the car, asking the deportees for their “password” and shaking them down for dollars. Enrique remembered, “They put like three rifles in my chest. They stopped me, and they put rifles in my face. People were walking behind us, guarding us, and I told them not to hurt me, that I’d give them my money. I gave them my envelope of money, and they threw me over there and said,

‘We don’t want your money. We want to know where you’re from and what you are doing here.’”

The van driver (who may have been in the pay of cartels, delivering migrants), eventually talked their way out. Enrique was spooked. He went on, “I’m a man, and I swear to you that I am not a fearful person, but there are moments we all get stuck. I couldn’t even swallow my own saliva . . . They came with weapons, and a really young little guy [deportee] there started to yell, to cry, to double over because he thought they would gun us down.” Later, Enrique heard that cartels had chopped others to death. Many people from Michoacán disappeared. The murders set the stage for Enrique’s “reintegration.” As soon as he could, Enrique left for Tijuana.

In Tijuana, Enrique was constantly harassed by police, making him feel even more out of place. Between recrossing attempts, he often slept or came for a meal at the Casa del Migrante. He explained to Fátima that though he found work in a lightbulb factory (*maquila*):

It’s really hard. Why is it so hard to adapt? A lot of things. For example, over there in the United States, the police respect people a little bit more. Here, no. Here the police from the moment you get out of the—from the time they tell you to stop, they get there and start disrespecting you, swearing . . . How I suffered! I want you to know that [when I arrived], I would go out of here from the Casa del Migrante. I would walk down those train tracks without knowing where I was, without a path or direction, crying my tears, just crying. It’s really dangerous here—down below, they kill people on those stairs—and at that time I watched my first shootout on television [news] . . . 30, 40 dead appeared on all sides, with *narcomantas* (a message or threat left by a cartel) . . . [The Casa] would kick you out at 8:00 in the morning, and . . . the police would come and say, “Hey, at nine if you don’t have work, get out of here, because at nine I’m coming back, and I’m going to take you all.” There were times I thought it was better if they just took me. I’d sit there, the police would come, and [they’d say], “Hey, I told you, get in.” And boom, I’d do 24 hours there [in jail], in the nothing, in the 20—20 de Noviembre [jail]—and it would be freezing in there . . . because you came out of here [the Casa] not knowing where to go, not knowing anything or knowing Tijuana. And there was a lot of danger from people who wanted to carve out tunnels, to plant *mota* (marijuana), to do this—*sicarios* (hitmen), they [cartels] went around hiring *sicarios*.

Enrique was not just lonely; he was also afraid. He knew that police would come looking for dollars—as well as for migrants they could arrest. He explained, “If they have a little reason to take you, they’re going to take you—you’re in a prohibited zone, they ask for your identification, or they don’t care.” Once, when Enrique tried to escape arrest by acting like he was mute, the officer told him, “I am going to make you talk by beating it out of you.” Right in front of the Casa del Migrante, they beat him, breaking his ribs. Later, they loaded him into their truck and kept beating: “It was like two hours of beat me and beat me. They beat me with a bottle, until I finally started swearing.” For Enrique it all felt senseless: “I wasn’t doing

anything wrong. I don't take drugs. I was going to look for work." At one point, police harassment got so bad that Enrique chose to risk more time in U.S. detention, rather than stay in Tijuana.

Enrique was not alone. Bernardo, another Michoacano, had no family left in Mexico and missed his loved ones in California. Targeted by Tijuana police, he struggled to feel at home. In Spanglish, he told Zianía:

All my family is back there, all of it. I'm out here solo, I'm ridin' solo. I'm just trying to be optimistic. Getting used to (*acostumbrando*) something is very hard. Here, the Latino that comes from up there, we are money, we are easy prey (*una presa fácil*). We don't know the streets. We don't know a lot of people. If they see me talking in English, that's money right there . . . I try my best. But sometimes just—I just go to my room, hide, and stay there, think about it, and cry alone you know? 'Cause I got family over there, you know? *Esta vida no era mi vida, esta vida* (this was not my life, this life) is different, a different life . . . I imagine that I'm over there [in California], but it's hard. It's complicated because I just want to run and scream and kick and do stuff. The point is I just want to run, go home, and tell my daughter, "I love you, *m'ija*. Daddy is back." I wish I could get that opportunity, but I don't see it . . . I'm crying, I'm crying in the inside. I just gotta be a man.

In Tijuana, Bernardo felt he was "prey." Depressed and longing for California, he hid in his room, just wishing to be somewhere else. Though he had no choice but to "be a man," he continued crying inside.

#### *Out of Mind*

Deported men often felt they had lost not just families and homes but also their minds.<sup>37</sup> They spoke of struggling to stay sane, especially in Tijuana: of fighting depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation, and psychosis (among other disorders). Without prompting, 51 of 171 men we interviewed described themselves as depressed, 25 talked about trauma, and 18 told us they'd tried to kill themselves (leaving aside those who spoke of their mental health in less searchable terms).<sup>38</sup> Some men we met were so disoriented that their stories were incoherent or unintelligible.<sup>39</sup>

These interviewees bore the embodied and affective scars of U.S. incarceration, the grief of losing their families and prior lives, and the terror of Mexican police and cartels. Depressed, psychotic, or agoraphobic after living in U.S. prisons, many found it hard to root in reality, let alone settle in Mexico. Some dissociated. Others self-medicated with drugs and alcohol. Several spoke of friends who took their own lives. In short, these men no longer trusted *themselves*. As one participant put it, they no longer "had an identity."

Roberto, who'd lived in Watts (LA) for four decades, had been in Tijuana for 23 months when he met Pamela at the Casa. In LA, Roberto sold drugs, got beaten by cops, and went to prison until his deportation in 2017. Roberto was one of three brothers, all three "sons of the system," and all three locked up and deported. Both

of his brothers had died in Tijuana: one from drinking (he didn't specify how) and the other from choking on crystal meth. The specter hung over Roberto, who was beaten up by Tijuana police and often recruited by gangs. He admitted then when he arrived in Baja, "I wanted to take my life. I never told nobody this because I don't know nobody here. I don't have no family here. I don't have friends here, family, so you feel alone. I feel alone sometimes, and I get depressed, you know?" Having used "dope" since he was 14, Roberto relapsed on drugs.

Other men, too, said they barely had reason to live. Stuck in shelters, without work and struggling to stay sane since their deportations, numerous interviewees tried suicide (some more than once). Thus, when Nick (a student) asked 38-year-old Álvaro what kept him going, Álvaro told him, "For me? Nothing really. I don't have a reason. To be honest, I try to find a reason to live and keep going, but I really don't have one. So, my life is more like a real 'make it or break it.' All it takes is a couple bad thoughts and a drink." Alfredo, 32, felt hopeless as well. After foster care, gangs, and prison, Alfredo was deeply alone. In Tijuana, he shared, "I attempted once to commit suicide. I swallowed a razor blade. I guess I was very depressed."

Under such conditions, it was hard for men to take care of themselves. Several showed signs of physical degradation. Some were on crutches or used canes. Often, based on respondents' worn faces and unkempt appearance, students guessed they were decades older than their actual age.

For relief, some turned to drugs or alcohol. In his interview with Camila, Timoteo did not hide his addiction to crystal meth. A 33-year-old from Guadalajara, Timoteo rode up on a motorcycle to his interview, in black pants and dress shoes. His eyes were unusually red, but Camila persisted. Timoteo had moved to Santa Ana, California, when he was 15. A few years later, the U.S. sent him to prison for gang violence and armed robbery. In prison, Timoteo lost touch with his parents, his siblings, and his now 15-year-old daughter. Stigmatized back in his hometown, Timoteo had nowhere to go. In his mind, he was "like an American citizen . . . even though I'm Mexican, and I was born in Mexico." Though Timoteo had been in rehab in the U.S., his deportation triggered a relapse with drugs:

I guess that's my way of like coping with things or, like, I wanna forget it. But then I start using, and then I start doing worse. And then I get this moral feeling like, "Oh my God, I shouldn't have done it. I'm fucking up again." So, it's a cycle . . . I would tell my parents, "It's because I don't like how I feel. I feel like everybody is attacking me. I feel like everybody is looking down on me, like they don't even know me, and they don't even—" They say, "Well, it's the drugs. If you don't like how you feel, then why do you do it?" But it's because . . . the feeling is like, "I don't wanna feel anything." And that's my way of coping . . . I guess I see it as: the opposite of addiction is—it would be like, *connection* [my italics]. If I don't feel connected to somebody or to someone or to something, I feel like I have no purpose, and I feel like I just go and get into drugs. . . . I feel like, *Ya valió verga todo* (It was all worth shit)—Everything's fucked up, so why am I even trying? Fuck it.

In Mexico, Timoteo felt like *everyone* saw him as less than human. Stripped of his family, his home and his sanity, he stopped wanting to feel at all. Drugs let him numb the pain.

In Tijuana, drugs and the drug trade permeated deported men's lives. Addiction then reinforced their vulnerability to cartels and the drug trade in general.<sup>40</sup> As one man put it, "In Tijuana, . . . there is drugs everywhere, everywhere you go there is drugs, there is alcohol, there is trouble." Indeed, 82 percent of the men we interviewed in Tijuana mentioned using, selling, or being around or threatened by drugs and addiction.<sup>41</sup> Some sold drugs to get out of financial problems. Others used or encountered drugs in the call centers where they worked.

Men often said they "took refuge" in alcohol, especially when they'd lost any sense of fairness—or even reality. During our interviews, some men drank; appeared to be high, fidgeting, or avoiding eye contact; or looked frantic or red in the eyes. By their own admission, once men began using drugs, a cascade of problems ensued. Landlords and shelters expelled them. Some ended up in rehab, Mexican jails, or the streets.<sup>42</sup> At Tijuana's main soup kitchen, we met deported men who'd started selling drugs in the U.S. at 13, gone in and out of U.S. prisons, and grown hooked on meth once again when they landed back in Tijuana. Such men ping-ponged between shelters and life on the streets. Few had contact with loved ones at all. Addicts were also more vulnerable to homicide and more likely to see addiction as their own fault. Some admitted that thanks to alcohol and/or drugs, they saw no future at all. One self-described alcoholic who'd been sent to a mental asylum after an abusive childhood, foster care, and then prison, said that the doctors told him he'd die before he reached 35. As for his plans, "I don't see any future. I really don't."

### *Out of Hope*

When our team asked how men felt in Tijuana, more than half said "desesperados": hopeless, in despair. It was hard for men to contend with the degradation of their self-worth. They spoke of feeling they had fallen apart or reached the end of the world—as if they had no agency left. When asked of their plans, one said, "To tell you the truth, right now I don't have any dreams." Many grew jaded. Some felt like shells of their former selves, unable to reclaim their lives or their status as men. Struggling to stay sane, they found it hard to contest their criminalization.

Men's despair manifested itself in their stories of disappearance or death.<sup>43</sup> Many were haunted by friends who vanished from shelters or videos they'd seen of bodies rotting in the Sonoran desert or Tijuana ditches.

Teodoro, a chubby 26-year-old man with an earring and hair shaved close at the sides of his head, associated his two-year stay in Tijuana with loneliness and drug use so deep it started to "kill him." Teodoro had lived most of his life in Escondido, California (near San Diego), raised by his drug-addict mother and sometimes his grandma. He got into gangs and was deported at 21. In Tijuana, he found work at a

taco shop. Police in Tijuana often harassed Teodoro for his tattoos, so he started to wear his apron to work—as a sign to leave him alone. Constantly anxious, he also began to use drugs. Then his friend Blacky was murdered.

Chatting in a disordered mix of English and Spanish, Teodoro remembered that one day Blacky asked to borrow his apron—to get through a zone the police marked off limits. A few days later, the cops found a body, bloody and beaten to death, wearing Teodoro's blue apron. Sitting in a coffee shop in Mexico City (where he'd moved to escape the border), Teodoro told Ana:

I have a lot of friends here [in Mexico] who—they deport them, and they get into drugs, and they feel alone. And because of that—aside from the fact that they're already used to consuming drugs—they start to use more. They're alone, they feel worse, and think about it, loneliness and drugs is [*sic*] killing them little by little. That's the bad thing, I think—that when you get here you feel so alone and without support. And for many people, their relief is to say, "Let's go smoke." Or "Let's go use drugs to forget." . . . I've had friends that arrive here and get into drugs or get into things they shouldn't, and soon they wake up dead or things like that. Like my friend Blacky. He used to rob houses, and we'd always tell him to go get some work. I'd tell him, "Go work in the call center," and no. Then one day—because I worked in a *taquería* in Tijuana, too, and I would always keep my [work] aprons on so the police wouldn't stop me. You walk in Tijuana, they see you with a shaved head, and they stop you, [saying], "You're in a conflict zone; get in [the police car]." And that's why I said, "No," and I would keep my work aprons on. And Blacky said, "Lend me an apron." I lent him an apron, and then a girl they used to call *la guera* (the white girl) who's like the neighborhood reporter, you could say, she came one day and told me, "They found Blacky dead." And I said "What?" "In a wasteland (*baldío*), where they found him with a blue apron." And yes, it was the same apron . . . so he could go and walk, and if the police stopped him [he could say], "Well no, I'm going to work, I have my work apron." And they found him dead.

For Teodoro, the story portended his *own* death of drugs and loneliness, should he fail to get out of Tijuana. "It was like a wakeup call, you could say, . . . like 'get with it' or if not, you're going down."

Of course, we could not find "disappeared" men themselves. But their traces threaded through other men's stories of barely escaping death. As one man in Oaxaca remembered, when he got let out at the border, "I was hearing a lot of shit of people who go in the wrong spot or in the wrong taxi, and they make you disappear . . . I was actually going to stay in TJ [Tijuana] but then I was like, nah. I'm gonna wanna—temptation is going to be right there, I'm gonna wanna—I'm going to end up getting into shit over here for sure."

Disappearance loomed on the Casa's wall of the missing and in tales of friends who were killed, addicted, kidnapped, or working as low-level smugglers. Of men who landed back in U.S. or Mexican prison, found themselves on the street, or died in the borderland desert. Friends warned men that if they stayed at the

border, “You’re going to die here. You’re not going to be able to do anything here. You’re going to get into more of that stuff, and then you’re going to have to pay. The Mexican police are going to put you in prison.”

It’s hard to estimate how many got so unlucky or to determine if these stories were “true.” But clearly, disposability seeped into men’s *emotions*, as a symbol of social death.

#### A SECOND CHANCE?

Sometimes, men in Tijuana hoped that return would give them a “second chance”—an opportunity to reinvent themselves not as “criminals” but as “good people” and “men.”

When our team began interviewing deported men in Tijuana in 2019, students pointed out that several adopted this “reset” mentality. The men talked about wanting an “opportunity to be someone,” “be good,” get in shape, or find God. The students were often surprised that people seemed so optimistic amid lockup, isolation, and border assaults. But we realized that like the redemption narrative common in prison, this “second chance” framework gave some men meaning and hope—and a promise of release from gangs or addiction. It also helped deportees make sense of their “criminality,” by framing arrest and prison as part of the “past.”

Typically, men’s “reset mentality” was tied to belief in God or rebirth. Most encountered such thinking in U.S. prisons. Sometimes, Catholic shelters or evangelical groups in Tijuana reinforced their Christian worldview. For example, Santino, mentioned in chapter 2, was sent to U.S. prison for selling meth. There, he started to read the Bible and turn to God. Now back in Tijuana, Santino claimed he was no longer looking for fun, booze, women, or money. Instead, he said, “I know that I can remake my life, and I know there are a lot of things I could do here . . . I hit rock bottom [in a disgusted tone]. The drug business is easy money . . . But in reality, that is not happiness. At my age right now . . . What I’m looking for and what I pray to God for is just to behave myself well and help my daughters.” This mindset help Santino feel that all was not lost in Tijuana. Like others, he thanked God for setting him “free.”

Deportees who believed in a “second chance” had more hope than their peers in Tijuana. For instance, Emilio remembered U.S. prison as the worst experience of his life. While locked up, he wanted to be deported just to escape the misery. When Emilio got to Tijuana, he felt he could start again “clean.” Now, he was working and no longer using drugs. Alfredo, who grew up in U.S. foster care and had diagnosed PTSD, also tried to frame Tijuana as a new start. For the future, he said, “I have to be brave and stand tall and deal with the consequences instead of me just whining or just feeling bad about myself, that life hasn’t treated me fair, that I never really had a family or a home. Instead of me just being—like feeling depressed . . . you have to forget about the past and move forward and start all over here and face

reality, this place. Right now, I try to better myself, try to survive here in Mexico.” Alfredo used the “reset mentality” to convince himself he could survive. He exercised, he played sports, and he tried to forget. It was his only alternative to getting lost in depression.

In practice, however, individual-level redemption was often an empty promise. For one, it emerged out of deprivation. Men who adopted this story tended to be the most isolated, traumatized deportees—the same men whose lives were so degraded by U.S. prison that they felt happy to just get “out.” Thus, while Alfredo hoped to begin again, his chances were slim. In reality, he had diagnosed PTSD and no close family or friends. Likewise, Valentín was drunk when Camila entered his shop in Oaxaca. Covered in motor oil, he slunk out from under a faded Volkswagen to tell Camila his vision of starting anew. Despite his second chance story, he was widely known to be using drugs.

The redemption narrative also invited self-blame. While the idea of a second chance helped some deportees find hope, it also suggested that deportation—and the feeling of alienation afterward—were an individual’s fault. Sometimes, men who adopted this mentality implied that when others died in Tijuana or crossing the desert, it was due to their “personal” choices. Others blamed themselves for their pain. As mentioned in chapter 2, men who had “found religion” in prison often deflected blame from the system onto themselves, taking the stance that “I was with the devil, and now I have come to God.” Some even expressed appreciation for the United States. In turn, self-blame may have decreased men’s interest in connecting with others who were also excluded or in challenging structural forces that reinforced violence against them.

## CONCLUSION

The photos on the Casa del Migrante’s “wall of shame” hint at how violence and isolation threaten men’s lives in Tijuana. Interviewing people in shelters—often the most desperate and vulnerable after removal—our team saw the heavy emotional weight of such threats. Many men we met had nowhere to turn. Coming from prison, several had lost their families and homes. At the border, they faced cartels, police, and military personnel.<sup>44</sup> By extending the criminalization and erasure begun by U.S. police and prisons, cartels made money, drug customers, and recruits. Police proved their legitimacy, efficacy, and ability to meet monthly quotas. As they did, these institutions extended the impacts of U.S. prisons onto the Mexican side.

Because cartels and Mexican military and police were concentrated at the border—as were the most anomic of deportees—the feeling of banishment was especially acute in this site.<sup>45</sup> Interviewees in Oaxaca and Mexico City echoed some elements of these emotions, but few felt so close to death. Sometimes it was a matter of timing: men arrived in Tijuana alienated then left to find friendlier

settings as they settled back into Mexico. Those in other sites had often been in Mexico longer (a median of 24 months, versus 3 at the border), giving them time to adjust. The men who stayed at the border the longest were often people in waiting. Instead of *reintegrating* to Mexico, they felt *disintegrated* as people: cut off from their families, homes, sanity, and sense of hope. They had not just been exiled from a nation (the U.S.) but from human value. For them, the border was a hot spot of alienation.

Publicly, such alienation has often stoked fear that “angry young men” (of color) are poised to become the foot soldiers of terror and organized crime (see, e.g., work by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman). On the Mexican side, politicians have also blamed deportees for destabilizing local political life. Thus, such figures pander to—and reinforce—the U.S. story of a Latino male “threat.”<sup>46</sup> While some deportees, indeed, turn to violence (as addressed in the coming chapter), these media and political stories frame men *themselves* as sources of violence—a looming crisis in need of still deeper control.

In contrast, I highlight how in both the U.S. and Mexico, police, ICE, prisons, and cartels create the conditions that leave men emasculated, scared, and untethered. Combining imprisonment and deportation not only dehumanizes men and weaponizes family separation; it also enables violence by Mexican police and cartels. This radioactive combination has left some parts of the U.S.-Mexico border so wracked by violence that NGOs and state agents no longer dare to help, especially in the east. In turn, their fears feed demand for even *more* punishment and exclusion.

Rather than stemming violence, adding more U.S. or Mexican military, police, or prisons would likely intensify deportees’ alienation.<sup>47</sup> The resulting conditions could also fuel more migration. At its extreme, the binational carceral system may push deported men to return to the U.S. despite the risk to their lives or the threat of prison. Indeed, in our work, some men felt such despair at the border (thanks to aftereffects of U.S. imprisonment and ongoing threats of policing) that they *preferred* going back into U.S. prison. This system is also unjust.

Instead, U.S. and Mexican institutions must open space for migrant men to belong. This is not a fool’s errand. Displacement, suffering, and disengagement coexist with *agency*. In our research, deported men’s sense of alienation varied with urban context, as well as with time. In some border sites, where cartel violence was most intense, men felt subject to imminent death. But with less acute policing and cartel recruitment, and lighter U.S. prison or detention, deported men faced fewer abuses, especially in Mexico’s interior.<sup>48</sup> In places like Mexico City, they challenged erasure by moving away from the border, building community, and enlivening new, binational ways of being. Examining the alternatives that *already exist*—as I do in chapter 6—can light the path toward more humane support.