



# The Relationship between the Migratory Experience in the United States and Criminal Activity in Mexico: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

*Crime in Mexico is seen as the result of complex social processes in which migration –especially return migration– carries greater weight than it has traditionally been assigned. The dynamics of organized crime in the case of Michoacán, Mexico and, other parts of the country, have been significantly influenced by the migratory experience of criminal leaders in the USA, including the formation of social networks, the construction of transnational criminal nuclei, the visualization of market opportunities, the knowledge of the basic operation of justice and law enforcement systems in the United States, and understanding of the logistics of transporting goods to that country. This paper analyzes the migratory experience in the United States as a substantial social learning process of the formation of numerous criminal leaders in Mexico.*

Keywords: Crime, Migration, Mexico, Michoacán, United States

## Introduction

The anti-drug strategy pursued by Mexico and the U.S. has been based on a visualization that sees the problem as a matter that must be solved essentially through an approach that involves the police and army. Very little effort has been made to reduce drug use in the United States or to understand the complex political and social context in which drug-trafficking occurs in Mexico. This lack of understanding of the phenomenon has contributed to generating inefficient public policies. In 2016, Mexico reached record levels in the number of homicides due to criminal activity (Kimberly, 2016), while in the U.S., drug use and deaths resulting from it remain at high levels (Christensen, 2016; Katz, 2015).

These facts signal the need to comprehensively understand the criminal process that surrounds drugs in Mexico and the U.S. Broadly-speaking, in this specific case drug-trafficking can be viewed as a byproduct of a deep social and historical interrelationship between the two countries. To explain the dynamics of drug-trafficking in Mexico, it is

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important to consider the flow of people that has historically existed between these two nations. The dynamics of organized crime in Michoacán, and probably other parts of Mexico, have been significantly influenced by the migratory experience of criminal leaders in the U.S., where they have had the opportunity to form social networks, construct transnational criminal nuclei, and visualize market opportunities, while also accumulating knowledge of the basic operation of justice and law enforcement systems there and gaining a better understanding of the logistics of transporting goods to that country.

For many years, the transit of people from Mexico to the U.S. for motivations either legal or criminal was quite common and frequent. In the 1970s, before the escalation of violence in drug-trafficking in Mexico, murderers and thieves often fled north to elude the police or the families of their victims. Indeed, “Flee north” was a catch phrase for Mexicans who had committed some crime that was voiced frequently in regions of Michoacán with long migratory traditions where the existence of family or neighborhood networks facilitated migration. This phenomenon is especially evident in cases of homicide, given the existence of a culture that permits open use of firearms, legitimizes revenge killings, and lacks effective law enforcement agencies (Nuñez, 2016). This fact, combined with the possibility to hide their identity as illegal migrants, made flight to the U.S. or large cities in Mexico an even more attractive option.

The Mexican press has reported many such processes involving individuals who have committed some crime (Gardenia, 2015; Marquesina, 2016; Mimorelia, 2017; El Demócrata, 2017). However, the most notorious cases are those of individuals with long histories of violent criminal activity, including, for example:

- Alfredo Ríos Galeana, considered for a time Public Enemy Number One in Mexico, who lived in Los Angeles, California, for many years before being captured there (Calderon, 2015);
- Sidronio Casarrubias Salgado, leader of the *Guerreros Unidos*, a gang involved in the deaths of 43 students in the state of Guerrero in 2015, who served an eight-year sentence in a U.S. jail and was then deported to Mexico in 2014 (Mauleon, 2016);
- Nazario Moreno, called *the Crazy Man*, leader of the *Templar Knights* in 1994, who was detained temporarily in McAllen, Texas, for introducing marijuana into the U.S., and was wanted there in 2003 for drug-trafficking;
- Enrique Plancarte Solís, alias *the Kike*, another leader of the *Templar Knights*, had a large family in the U.S. and resided there for many years;
- Carlos Rosales Mendoza, alias *Tisico*, leader of the *Michoacán Family* organized crime group, who also lived in the U.S.;
- The Arellano Felix family in Tijuana had important connections in the U.S. and were considered residents of that largely binational city;
- Bonifacio Flores Méndez was born in the U.S. and led a prostitution network between the states of Tlaxcala, Mexico, and New York (Michel, 2013);
- Raul Escobar Poblete, alias *Commander Emilio*, is a Chilean citizen and one of the most notorious kidnappers in Mexico. He has lived in Guanajuato clandestinely since his kidnapping ring was discovered in Chile.

Beginning in the early 20th century, the geographical proximity between Mexico and the U.S. propitiated a form of circular migration between the two nations in which Mexican migrants came and went from the U.S. for months at a time, but conserved their

principle residence in Mexico (Lopez-Sala, 2016; Agunias, 2007). This process, however, also facilitated processes of flight and/or return to Mexico for legal or criminal reasons.

This migratory cycle was broken in the 1990s when U.S. authorities implemented measures that made it more difficult for migrants to move back-and-forth between home and migrant destination; for example, by intensifying vigilance along the border. As a result, many migrants found themselves unable to return to Mexico, so they stayed in the U.S. definitively (Montoya, 2015). The end of this migratory cycle meant that some criminals were left anchored in Mexico and others in the U.S., but that those who had obtained legal residency papers could travel freely across the border to carry out transnational criminal activities.

For many migrants, their experience in the U.S. represented the opportunity to learn in the lucrative U.S. drug market about the legal and police environment in relation to trafficking, and to acquire precise information on drug distribution channels that could have been useful upon returning to Mexico. The existence of gangs in the U.S. that include many migrants might also have facilitated this process of criminal learning (Palmer, 2015; Howell, 1999; Valdez, 2006; Goldschein, 2012).

In addition, the existence of binational communities facilitates interaction and the development of communication networks between the two countries (Avila, 2015). Many families on both sides of the border maintain close relationships. Some members of these families reside in Mexico, others live in the U.S., but they maintain close ties through modern means of communication and social, economic and political interaction, facilitated by current advances in technology. The existence of these binational communities has contributed to fostering various social processes that include criminal activity.

Michoacán can be considered a transnational state. According to the Mexican census, this state has a population of approximately 4.2 million inhabitants. In the U.S., there are approximately 2.5 million people who were born there but later moved north (Aguilar, 2011). The offspring of these inhabitants plus the descendants of residents from Michoacán born in the U.S. and those living there today would form a larger population than the *michoacanos* currently residing in Mexico. The migratory tradition and flows between this state and the U.S. date back more than a century to the massive emigration of agricultural workers during the agrarian uprisings in Mexico in the 1930s.

At the same time, organized crime activity has always been present, but has been exacerbated over the last 30 years in Michoacán mainly due to the production of drugs destined for the U.S. market. Historically, Michoacán has been a major producer of marijuana thanks to its geographical conditions and the chronic absence of the rule of law that has allowed the permanence of core groups of people engaged in organized crime (Valdez, 2013). The existence of a large transnational community from Michoacán in the U.S. could contribute to facilitating the logistics of shipping narcotics to the U.S.

It is important to mention that some municipalities with intense migratory histories were also large marijuana producers, and this contributed to the flourishing of this illegal activity there. The existence of nuclei of transnational populations and the existence of long-established criminal groups in Michoacán carry a weight that has not been considered previously in the dynamics of criminal processes in the state and country. A greater understanding of the interaction of environmental factors is needed to explain the dynamics of organized crime, especially of such unique phenomena as the tacit acceptance

of criminal activity by society and the role of legitimate social mediators that organized crime groups play in many regions of Mexico.

A common and under-researched characteristic of most of the major Mexican criminals is that they have had some migratory and criminal experience in the U.S. This paper examines, from a qualitative approach, the effects of migration on criminal activity in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. It seeks to analyze the role played by the migratory experience in the U.S. of many Mexican criminal leaders by examining the cases of certain criminal leaders from Michoacán.

### **Theoretical framework**

No research has yet examined return migration in relation to the situation of organized crime that diverse regions of Mexico are currently experiencing. Some studies have analyzed the crimes committed against migrants during their transit from, or back to, Mexico. Criminal groups in Mexico take advantage of the movement of migrants from Central America to extort and rob them as part of the diversification of their criminal activities (Correa, 2014; Benitez, 2011). Research on crimes committed by migrants in host countries shows that those visitors generally have significantly lower rates than the native population (Kubrin, 2009; Adelman, 2016), but there is virtually no literature on the connection between criminal activity and the process of return migration. Other studies have discussed specific aspects of behavioral modification and patterns of behavior related to drug and alcohol consumption that result from migratory experiences in the U.S. (Borges, 2012; Caetano, 2013).

This paper argues that for the Mexican case, the historical experience of migration has had a decisive influence on subsequent criminal activity. Criminal leaders gain significant knowledge about criminal activity and, more specifically, the ins-and-outs of drug-trafficking in the U.S. Theories of social learning may provide an effective theoretical reference to explain this phenomenon (Acker, 1998, 2009; Burgess, 1966). This theoretical approach suggests that people learn from the community around them through differential association which holds that people may learn values and behaviors associated with crime, while differential reinforcement refers to the fact that rewards and punishments can shape behavior (Sutherland, 1947). This has been applied to various criminal contexts in attempts to explain poor police performance (Chapell, 2004), family violence (Wareham, 2009), and white-collar crime (Ackers, 2007).

According to Ackers, there are four major concepts or sets of variables that operate in the social learning process: (1) differential association; (2) differential reinforcement; (3) favorable and unfavorable definitions; and (4) imitation or modeling (Akers, 1998). In the context discussed herein, aspects of differential association include the fact that Mexican migrants in the U.S. have learned about the low value of the law that exists at home and the low level of compliance with formal rules in Mexican communities in the U.S. Upon entering a society based on a culture that prizes effort and hard work, but that also places great value on money and material goods, migrants have the opportunity to learn criminal behavior and may not necessarily perceive criminal activities as something negative. According to social learning theory, people become involved in crime through associations with others who are already active in criminal activities.

Thus, their criminal behavior is reinforced, and they learn beliefs that are conducive to crime. Obviously, not all migrants are involved in criminal activities, but some of them are, especially those who live in areas with high crime rates. Differential reinforcement of

criminal attitudes learned in the U.S. refers to the low probability of Mexican offenders being punished in Mexico. Unlike the U.S., the analysis of careers in crime based on public information includes detentions and imprisonment of many notorious Mexican criminals in the U.S. When those ex-convicts return to Mexico, they are unlikely to be apprehended, since criminals have more or less long-lasting, bloody careers there before they are captured by the authorities (take the cases of Nazario, *The Crazy Man*, Carlos Rosales, or Raul Escobar Poblete).

The third category that can be applied is the existence of a culture that is conducive to crime in some regions of Michoacán. This favorable environment could be explained by the existence of a tacit acceptance of crime and the predominance of criminal groups (Aguirre, 2013; Aranda, 2013). Belonging to a criminal group gives status and prestige in some areas of this state, where young people tend to idealize criminal behavior and emulate it as a way of life and a means of self-improvement (Cardona, 2007). This would seem to work quite well with Ackers' modeling explanation.

When they return from the U.S. after this process of social learning to face an environment with scarce economic possibilities, few jobs and low wages, but with ample opportunities to participate in criminal activities, the logical result is that some of them become criminal leaders with previous experience in the U.S.

Another interesting focus is suggested by Glaser's (1978) ideas and his attempt to reconcile the theory of social control with the basic concepts of differential association. Glaser posits that the decision to commit delinquent acts is guided by expectations that determine an individual's future behavior. People may turn to crime if they perceive that it yields them more advantages than disadvantages in the context of their linkages of a social order, relations with others, and earlier life-experiences. These expectations will depend on each person's contact with criminal models; that is, on learning or differential association. Return migrants in states like Michoacán or Sinaloa, which are characterized by the presence of organized crime groups, not only come face-to-face with criminal cultures and environments that have propitiated the spread of crime into their communities of origin, but can also observe firsthand cases of "successful" local criminals. Moreover, they may well return to find that their local culture now not only tolerates, but even celebrates, the values of criminality.

## Methodology

There is very little documented research on the relation between migratory flows and the phenomena of organized crime. The ideal methodological perspective would be to approach criminals directly and ask about their migratory experience and the role that it played in developing their criminal activity. Given that this is hardly feasible because many of the criminals are dead or imprisoned in maximum security penitentiaries, and the threat it would present to the researcher's own security, we opted to analyze criminal careers based on available public information, and to conduct in-depth interviews in communities with high rates of migration in regions known to have a substantial criminal presence. Our interviews lasted an average of one hour and were held in social gatherings, cafes, restaurants, public places, and the interviewees' own homes. The purpose of the interviews was not revealed in an effort to achieve the highest possible sincerity in responses. For this study, 52 in-depth interviews with returning migrants were conducted during the first semester of 2017. All interviewees had returned to Mexico after stays of more than 5 years

in the U.S., and were living in the so-called *Tierra Caliente* of Michoacán in the municipalities of Apatzingán, Nueva Italia and La Huacana, areas characterized by both large migratory movements and substantive criminal activity.

The four theoretical aspects of social learning theory outlined above were analyzed during interviews based on questions inquired into criminal learning in the U.S., involvement in crime there U.S. –specifically with criminals– attitudes towards migrants, and legal experiences in both countries, among other key topics. The interviews were carried out using the snowball technique. Notes were taken subsequent to each interview.

## Findings

The interviews clearly reveal that these individuals learned various social processes during their time in the U.S., including criminal activities. The interviewees indicated that they had learned aspects related to work discipline, the value of doing things well, time as an economic factor, and the value of material aspects to which they had previously had no access, such as cars, appliances, clothing, and better housing. They also pointed out that when back in Mexico they strove to replicate the accumulation of material goods available in the U.S.

There it is easier to get a car or buy clothes. Here it's more difficult to force people to look at other things. When you return to Mexico, it's a lot more difficult to buy the same things as you could there.

Most of the interviewees pointed out the laxity of the Mexican authorities in enforcing the rule of law and sanctioning crimes.

It's really easy here to commit crimes without anything happening. In the north, it's more likely that the police will get you and punish you if you do something wrong.

The tolerance that exists in Mexico toward criminal activity seems to play an important role in starting out along this path:

Everybody steals here and does illegal business, people who have stalls, people who get permission for gardens, those who grow marijuana.

This phrase is particularly important. The low probability of being punished plays a substantive role in taking up a life of crime. Interviewees pointed out substantive differences in the application of the law between the two countries that make it easier to commit crimes in Mexico without fear of legal retribution.

Many of the interviewees reported knowing individuals or having friends who are currently serving sentences in prisons in the U.S. In their opinion, it is highly unlikely that people who are imprisoned will ever be rehabilitated. Rather, they will get out and return to Mexico to practice their newly-learned skills. However, at the same time, many interviewees indicated that they know people living in Mexico who work in legal activities despite having spent years in prison. Many pointed out that the criminal experiences they had, or witnessed, in the U.S. were repeated when they arrived back in Michoacán.

A cousin lived with some drug dealers in the U.S. and when he returned home, he got in contact with some crystal meth producers hereabouts and they started looking into the possibility of sending drugs back there; I also realized that although he didn't say so, he was doing crystal and marijuana, not to mention his heavy drinking.

Many of the interviewees' responses suggested that the migratory experience contributed significantly to addictions that facilitated their entry into criminal activity.

Recently we hear talk about drugs. When I was young, people would drink alcohol and beer and get drunk; there were also some who smoked marijuana, but just a few. Now, there are strange drugs that people take, like crystal meth, these things were not heard of here before, and that comes from the people who have gone to the north to work and arrive here with that shit.

These responses are consistent with Burgess and Acker's approach in their differential theory, which suggests that criminal behavior may be due to non-social factors such as the influence of drugs on the psychological and physiological condition of individuals. On the other hand, some interviewees displayed pride in engaging in criminal activities.

He was a poor bastard working as a peon in lemon groves until he joined a criminal group and you saw him with his long gun and a chestful of cartridges. We all knew that he barely had enough to eat but now he was with the bad guys and many people began to respect that.

Another interesting aspect observed in the interviews was the young age of most of the people who engage in criminal activity. The interviewees commented that:

Most of the guys that join the organized crime groups are very young; they dropped out of school and got into drugs. They're all really young. The young guys hang out on street corners and bars with older kids who have often been in the U.S.... everyone knows they do drugs. The younger kids look up to them with respect and follow them. There's not much else to do except work in orchards and fields, and not many people like to do that.

These responses are congruent with observations from other sources concerning the young age of criminals, especially those who become involved in gangs. These responses also suggest that criminal behaviors are learned by following the premises posited by Ackers. Finally, it should be noted that many of the interviewees mentioned the lack of employment opportunities in Mexico for those who return from the U.S.

Many people go down the path of evil because they have no other choice while living here in Mexico if they want to buy the same essential things as in the U.S.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

There is a relationship between the migratory experience in the U.S. and criminal activity in Mexico. The existence of Mexican communities in both countries that maintain affective social, and fluid economic, relations is a factor that contributes to

explaining the dynamics of criminal processes in Mexico. The existence of transnational population migration flows between Mexico and the U.S. is a relevant factor in explaining the criminal dynamics in Mexico, especially in the case of drug-trafficking. The results obtained in this study indicate the existence of a transnational criminal culture in many of the communities where our interviews took place.

Based on such principles as differential association and differential identification, social learning theory constitutes an interesting approach to the analysis of the role of migratory flows in existing circuits of violence in Mexico. Although there are substantial critiques of this theory that question its precision as a tool for explaining criminal processes, it does offer a theoretical paradigm that intuitively explains much of the social behavior of Mexican criminals with earlier life experiences in the U.S.

Our interviews reflect a deep interaction between communities on each side of the border that has largely been ignored in reconstructions of criminal strategies. It is not an isolated fact that most Mexican criminal kingpins had migratory experiences and criminal records in the U.S. This becomes even more relevant considering the plans of the current U.S. administration to deport Mexican offenders and people subjected to legal process in the north.

The circumstances described above may somehow be repeated in the case of Mexican *narcos*, most of who were exposed to significant criminal influences while in the U.S. Most were involved with gangs related in some way to drug-trafficking. Thus, prior association with other criminals would seem to be a critical factor. The influence of migration was crucial in the formative process of at least some criminal activity. Upon their return to Michoacán, the environmental conditions that favor continuing such activities set the stage for criminal careers.

Without doubt, migratory flows between Mexico and the U.S. will continue. The existence of large Mexican communities in the north populated largely by legal migrants, together with the continuity of communication flows between Mexican-Americans and Mexicans thanks to modern technology, virtually ensures the continuity of criminal learning processes in the U.S. that are later used to commit crimes in Mexico. If circumstances continue in their present state with the absence of any comprehensive strategy, the expectation is that criminal kingpins with transnational experiences will continue to appear and operate in North America.

There are limitations to the results of this study due to the quality of the information obtained. In an ideal research design, applying data-gathering instruments directly to criminals would have provided valuable information and data. Given the impossibility of carrying out this type of research, the use of indirect sources such as those mentioned herein, does provide significant details, but does not produce information of the same quality that interviews with criminals could. Given the current context of violence in Mexico, it is not possible to do more precise research based on interviews with the primary objects of study, but additional studies are needed that apply primary research designs aimed directly at criminals.

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