

# A Picture of Central American Mobilities

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns  
Monterrey, Mexico

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**Cover photo:** Colonia Garza Nieto is a neighborhood with an important presence of migrants in Monterrey. Photo credit: Victoria Ríos Infante.

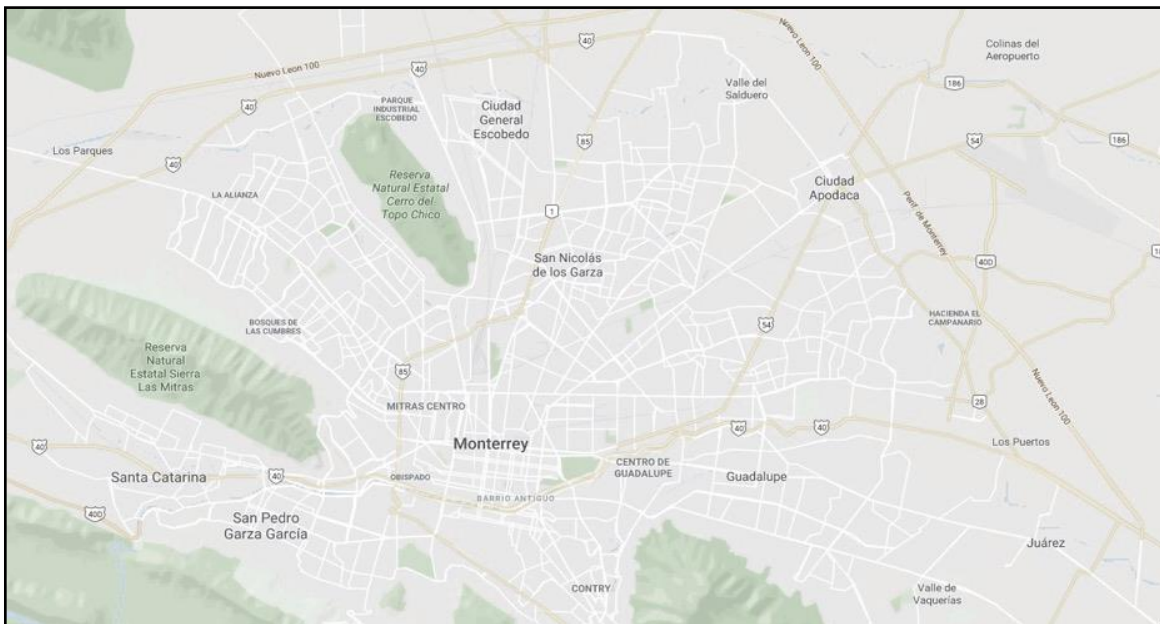


# Location

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*Figure 1. Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico.*



*Figure 2. The Monterrey metropolitan area.*

Base map imagery © Google 2019.

For more background on migration and refugees in Mexico and Monterrey, continue to the appendices.

# Introduction

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Portrayed as the land of the barbarians and “where culture goes to die” by the notable intellectual Jose Vasconcelos, Monterrey, Nuevo León<sup>1</sup> has a reputation of being a hard-working, no-nonsense, and sometimes harsh place. Even before the upsurge of violence during President Felipe Calderon’s national deployment of military troops to combat drug trade organizations in 2010–2011, the large metropolitan area (housing 4,689,601 inhabitants) was riddled with the machismo and melancholy of its once grand past as Mexico’s foremost industrial hub. Maps of the city showing the names of the streets and neighborhoods are proof that the 1950s steel, glass, and cement industries shaped the development and daily lives of the *regiomontanos/as*.<sup>2</sup> The legacy of this history is that today, *regiomontanos/as* continue to focus on the male boss/worker/provider as the central character of the city.

Although Monterrey is not a border town, it feels like one. The proximity to the border, quality of life, and the ethos of masculine-infused industrialism—which suggests widespread job availability—make Monterrey a desirable place to live. In addition, Mexico’s state apparatus is stopping migrants from approaching the U.S. border. It pushes them back into cities and towns several hours’ drive south, like Monterrey (which is a two and a half hours’ drive from the U.S. border town of Laredo, Texas). Monterrey is Mexico’s third-largest city and a buoyant industrial center. American goods, media, culture, and English language proficiency are all heavily valued here. For decades, it has been an important destination of internal indigenous migration. In recent years, Monterrey appears in the conversation as a transit city for Central American migrants, but the truth is that for more than a decade, migrants from Central America have arrived, settled in, and built a life in the city.

As women who grew up in Monterrey, we pursued this report because we were interested in the experiences of female workers/mothers, in their voices, problems, and contributions in our shared space of Monterrey. Though it is hard to de-center from the primacy of young male migrants in the data, our feminist lens brought to our attention the story of one particular female Honduran migrant, Mrs. Sánchez, who is an amalgamation of many female migrants we’ve come to know over the years.<sup>3</sup> She shared with us her migrant story and her day-to-day struggle to build a life for herself and her family in Monterrey. Victoria<sup>4</sup> met Mrs. Sánchez in the summer of 2016. *Casa del Migrante Casanicolás*<sup>5</sup> had received a phone call reporting the detention of a family by agents of the National Institute of Migration (INM). Victoria was volunteering in the shelter at the time and met Mrs. Sánchez and her granddaughter Serah (then 4 years old) that

<sup>1</sup> Monterrey is the capital of Nuevo León state in northeastern Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> *Regiomontano*, *regiomontana*, *regio*, and *regia* are terms use to refer inhabitants of Monterrey.

<sup>3</sup> Although Mrs. Sanchez is the leading voice in this report, the text is shaped by eighteen informal interviews with female and male migrants, and advocates from migrant shelters. See Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> One of the authors of this report.

<sup>5</sup> In Monterrey, there are five religious-based organizations, or *Casas del Migrante*/migrant shelters, that provide some type of humanitarian aid (provisional shelter, food, phone calls, Internet, legal, psychosocial, and medical aid). These organizations play an important role in the whole country. There are approximately a hundred *Casas del Migrante* in Mexico; nearly all of them are religious. See more about Monterrey’s migrant shelters in the following sections.

summer in an INM temporary detention center. Mrs. Sánchez's family was separated and almost all of them had been deported, except one daughter and her two sons, the youngest of whom was born in Monterrey.

In this report we describe, through Mrs. Sánchez's experiences, the challenges faced by migrants once they arrive in Monterrey. We zoom in on their everyday comings and goings, the impact of national policy of detention and deportation in the city, challenges and strategies they face regarding housing, the role of shelters, local neighborhoods, and the social perceptions of migrants in Monterrey and the surrounding metropolitan area. Mrs. Sánchez's experiences are vignettes that illustrate deeper themes that tell the story of many other female, male, and gender non-conforming migrants in Monterrey. These shared experiences shape the city in ways that have yet to be seriously addressed by the local and state governments.

## The Authors' Positions in Monterrey and Experiences Researching This Case

Monterrey is our hometown. Most of our adult lives have happened against the backdrop of the city's male-centered and industrial ethos that is reluctant to integrate migrants into its workforce. We are both feminists and work with human rights organizations.

The candor of Mrs. Sánchez, her grandchildren, and the other kids we met at Casa Monarca's<sup>6</sup> facilities for migrants in transit probed our focus as researchers. While sitting at a café, Mrs. Sánchez's granddaughter asked: "Are we in a telenovela?" while her eyes panned the scene around us. It made us realize that the scenes we gaze upon and write about are the day-to-day lives of others. Observing others compelled us to reflect on our own grandmothers' stories of migration. Our abuelas<sup>7</sup> also had to uproot their lives and move to seek opportunities for family development.

As researchers and feminists, we value D. Soyini Madison's insights on critical ethnography as ethical guidelines. We are trained to observe the emergence of women's and children's voices, and we see ourselves as co-responsible in the reality that affects them. Our awareness is that each of us "...through dialogue and meeting with the Other [is] that I am most fully myself" (Madison, 2005, 9). We decided to focus our process to write something that we hope will raise consciousness of the multiple voices active in migration stories, never forgetting the particular challenges women face.

<sup>6</sup> Migrant shelters, also known in Spanish as *Casas del Migrante* or *Casas Migrante*, are places where humanitarian, psychosocial, medical, and legal aid are offered. Not all provide accommodation; some only offer meals. These places are managed by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), mainly religious ones. In Mexico, they are very representative spots of solidarity. There are at least 90 shelters through the country. A map of these places made by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) can be found at

[https://www.msf.mx/sites/mexico/files/albergues\\_comedores\\_organizaciones\\_de\\_ayuda\\_en\\_la\\_ruta\\_por\\_mexico.pdf](https://www.msf.mx/sites/mexico/files/albergues_comedores_organizaciones_de_ayuda_en_la_ruta_por_mexico.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Grandmothers.

# Mapping Migrant Integration

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One common obstacle to integration can be witnessed in Mrs. Sánchez's migratory story. Government officials were frequent obstacles for her. Civil society steps in to support cases like hers, but it is often overwhelmed by the number of persons in transit. Local, national, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and agencies have pointed out for years that about 450,000 undocumented migrants from Central American countries (mainly Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala) cross Mexico's southern border annually. According to Article 2 of Mexico's National Migration Law (2011), border crossing without documents is not a crime.<sup>8</sup>

Mexico's state apparatus operates through a policy of "externalization of borders," which affords expanded liberty to the armed forces in carrying out detentions through physical and bureaucratic restraints. An overt deportation policy completes the mechanism. All this violence occurs in a context of generalized human rights violations and criminality in Mexico. Robbery, illegal detentions, kidnappings, and disappearances affect women, men, and gender non-conforming individuals alike. Various kinds of forced labor are well-documented threats along the migrant path. Forced sexual exploitation besets mostly women. Multiple aggressors such as individuals, organized crime, and authorities enact this violence. Forced labor and sexual exploitation clearly showcase the complicity of state and criminal organizations.

Yet Monterrey remains at once a destination and a transit city along an ever-changing route of migration. Human mobility in Monterrey is complex and diverse: people pass through, extend their transit, look for opportunities, try to go north to the United States, and come back from the United States. All these occurrences pose challenges for basic human rights demands. Central American migrants at the beginning of their journey tend to specify that their goal is to reach the United States, more specifically cities where they have family members. Mexico as a possible endpoint of their journey emerges when they arrive in northern Mexico; activists infer that in an effort to compromise with their original aim, migrants think of making a home in spaces close to the northern border of Mexico, like Monterrey (REDODEM, 2018).

## Status

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Documentation is the first barrier. Central American migrants must request a visa from the Mexican authorities to cross the border "legally." To obtain a visa, they must provide proof of work and of savings. Migrants who cross irregularly often come from difficult economic conditions or are fleeing extreme violence suddenly and so cannot obtain a visa. Amelia Frank-Vitale, an expert on the reasons Hondurans migrate, notes that the driving force of the 2018 Central American Caravan was the hope to breathe and escape death and hunger. She quotes someone from the caravan: "César's words: *in Honduras, life isn't worth anything*. It's a common refrain, yet a clumsy translation. It's not that life is *not* valued; rather, it is that violent death is

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<sup>8</sup> In that sense, according to the law, foreigners may be in regular immigration status (with a permit or visa) or irregular (without permission or visa). When we talk about regularization, we are referring to the bureaucratic process to obtain a document that validates your migratory status in Mexico.

too familiar.” This paints a portrait of a structural impossibility to obtain a visa through the “proper” channels. Once these undocumented migrants arrive, there are options for attaining legal status. The most prominent one is to seek refuge<sup>9</sup> or a “humanitarian visa.”<sup>10</sup> However, the clear majority of migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador are “candidates for nothing” in terms of normalizing their status, as mentioned by a lawyer interviewed for this report.

Mrs. Sánchez and her family fit into different categories of migrant statuses: some family members are subjects of international protection, like her; others remain undocumented; and one of them secured a work permit that will expire soon. Mrs. Sánchez is a mother of six; her eldest son was murdered in Honduras when she was already living in Monterrey. Her other son lives in the United States, and a daughter—Serah’s mother—currently lives in Honduras. Two sons and one daughter live in Monterrey. Her daughter in Monterrey has three kids. The first one was born in Honduras and is undocumented. The other children of this daughter, a son and a daughter, were born in Monterrey. Even though this daughter is the mother of two Mexican children, she has struggled to secure documents for her and her eldest son. The variety of migratory statuses in the Sánchez family affects family dynamics, as well as their levels of integration to the city.

A couple of months after being deported to Honduras in 2016, Mrs. Sánchez and her granddaughter Serah went back north to Tapachula, Chiapas, in the south of Mexico. Since Mrs. Sánchez was able to prove she had escaped threats to her life in Honduras, she successfully obtained subsidiary protection status for her and her granddaughter. They waited months the status, experiencing intense frustration due to the length of the bureaucratic process.<sup>11</sup> After being granted protection, they were able to return to Monterrey and settle with their permanent residency cards. Two of her sons—who were also deported in that 2016 incident—did not wait for this procedure and irregularly crossed Mexico and returned to Monterrey in the summer of 2016.

It is important to highlight that nothing is set in stone once migrants acquire papers in Mexico. A regularized migratory status does not necessarily result in access to rights and services. Lack of knowledge of national migration and refugee law exposes migrants to discriminatory behavior from civil servants, as well as exclusionary practices from society, as will be illustrated in the next sections.

## **The Geography of Monterrey and its Metropolitan Area**

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Monterrey has been at the center of the Mexican government’s policy of “externalization of the borders,” which is in some ways a softer and more diffuse version of the U.S. border wall that

<sup>9</sup> Mexico has signed the Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees as well as the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees.

<sup>10</sup> Humanitarian visas are granted to victims of a crime or when the federal government, in emergency or humanitarian situations, considers it necessary. They are a temporary permit.

<sup>11</sup> National law requests refugee seekers to remain within the limits of the state where they started the procedure. Although petitions can be made in any state, those who advance to the north without a permit or a visa run the risk of detention and deportation despite their legitimate right to ask for refuge.



certain American politicians are advocating for. Monterrey's metropolitan area is composed of several municipalities, as can be seen in Figure 3. Areas numbered 1 to 5 (and in red) are the municipalities with the most arrests in 2017. Detention implies deprivation of liberty, being transferred to a detention center, and, in more than a 90% of the cases, deportation to the origin country (SEGOB, 2018). This map also shows the municipalities where we identified migrant settlements (from number 6 to 10, in yellow). Other municipalities of the Monterrey metropolitan area are in blue.

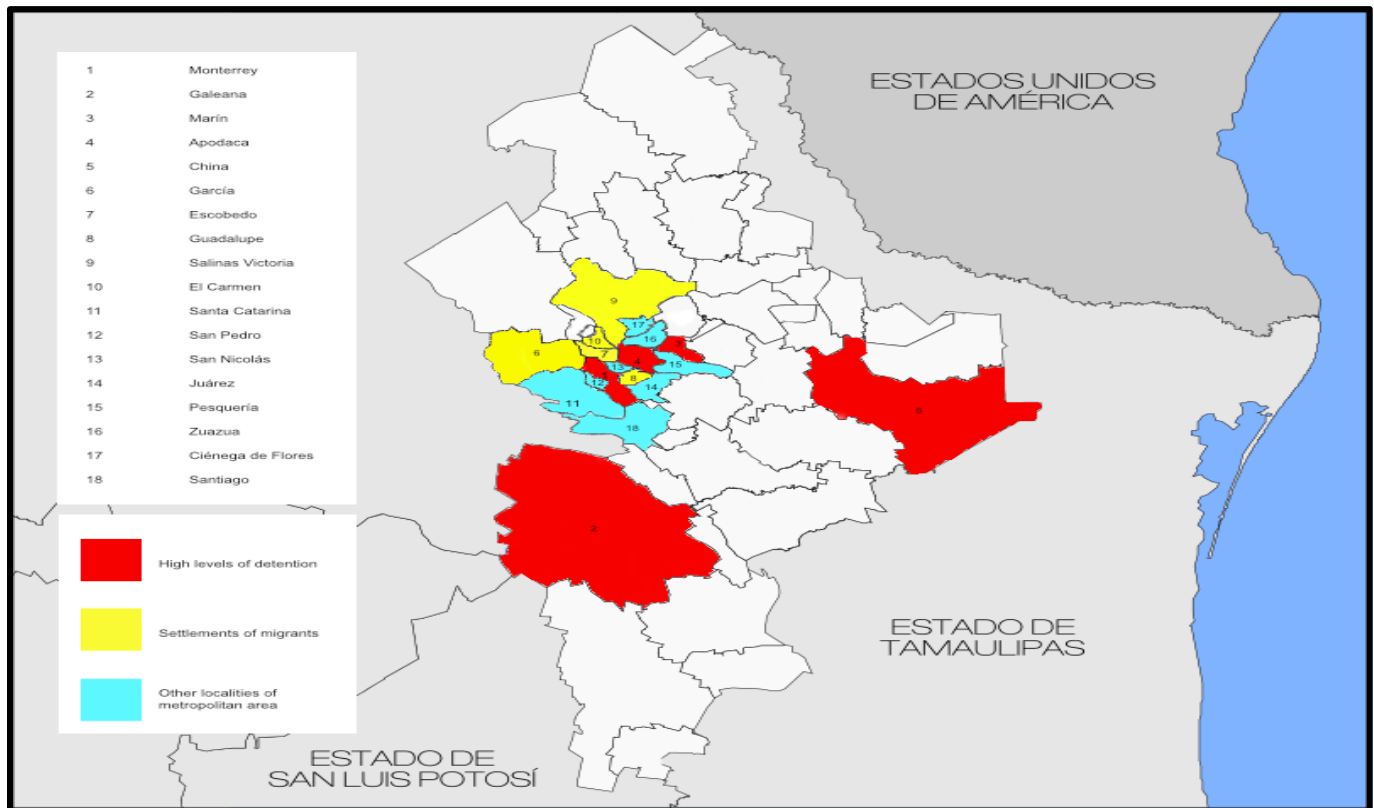


Figure 3. Metropolitan area, detention and settlement.

Source: Own development with statistics of *Unidad de Política Migratoria*, SEGOB, 2017.

Figure 3 shows that the efforts to stop migrant groups carried out by migration authorities are concentrated towards the southeast (China, 5) and southwest (Galeana, 2) entryways to the state. Checkpoints enforce these efforts. Closer to the city, detention practices continue and become more focused in Monterrey's center and Apodaca (4). Raids happen often in these densely populated areas. Detentions and deportations of persons with irregular migratory statuses, according to the law, are exclusively under the purview of migration authorities (INM). Other security corporations become involved only when required by the INM. Mrs. Sánchez's home is intentionally not near these areas of dense population and high risk of deportation.

Migrants and refugees may search for a safe place to live and consider settling near migrant shelters or as far as possible from the spots where most detentions occur. In Monterrey, there are five religious-based organizations, or *Casas del Migrante*, that provide humanitarian aid. See Figure 4. According to national migration law, the areas around humanitarian aid organizations



are protected and/or free from checkpoints and raids. Detention spots and settlements may be concentrated in certain parts of the city, but risk of being deported spans the entire metropolitan area.

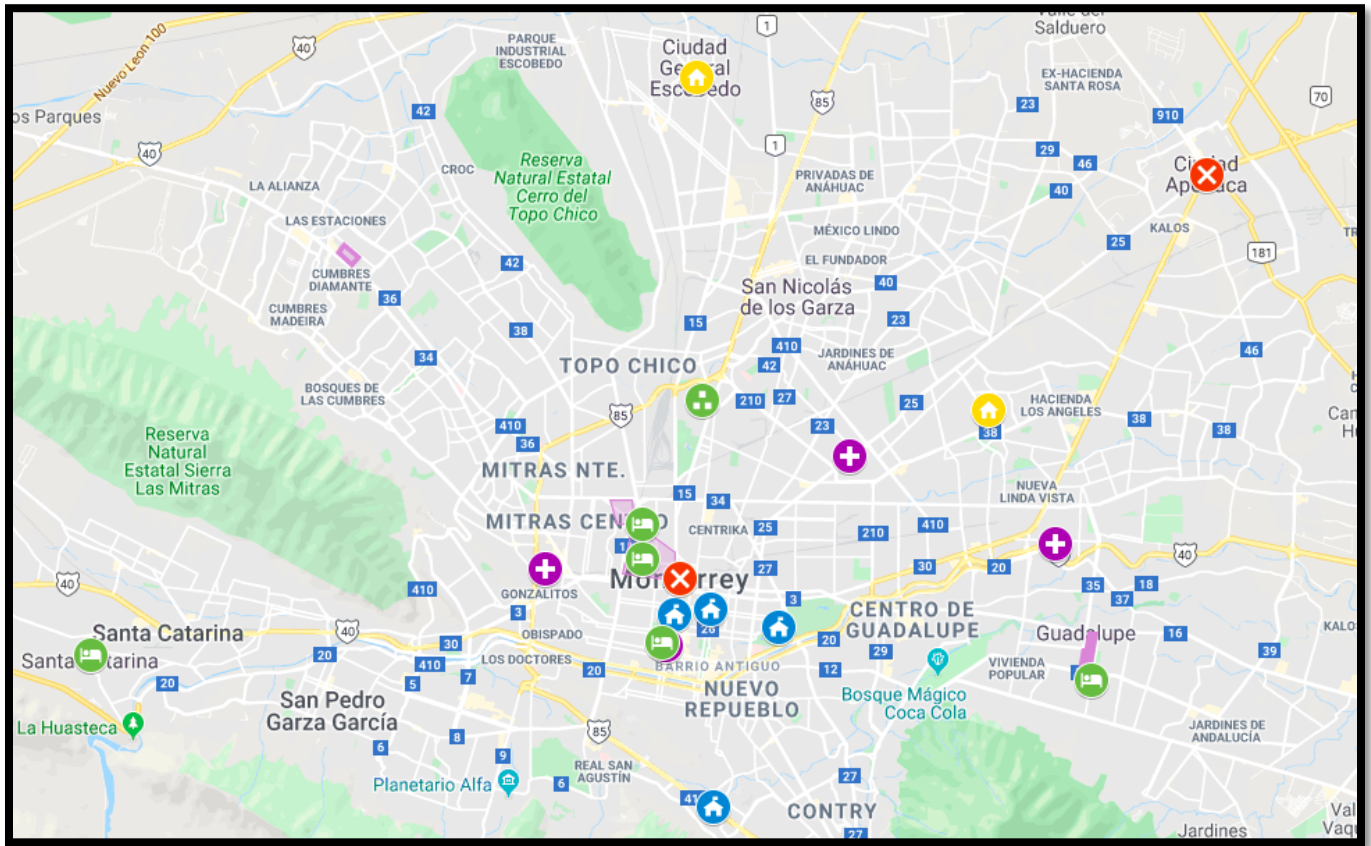


Figure 4. Casas del Migrante are shown with green bed icons.

Mrs. Sánchez and her family used to live in the outskirts of the metropolitan area, in Zuazua (Figure 3, 16), before their 2016 deportation. Nowadays her family is split between Zuazua and another remote area, Pesquería (Figure 3, 15).<sup>12</sup> These two localities are not known as places where migrants settle or as localities with high levels of detention. That did not shelter them from deportation, though. Before Mrs. Sánchez’s family’s 2016 deportation, she was neighbors with a local policeman. This officer blamed one of Mrs. Sánchez’s sons for a nearby robbery, so he reported their location to migration authorities, which is an illegal practice. A petty crime was therefore the catalyst for the traumatic deportation of the whole family.

## Shelters or *Casas del Migrante*

As mentioned before, there are five religious-based *Casas del Migrante* in the Monterrey metropolitan area. They provide humanitarian aid such as provisional shelter, food, phone and Internet access, and legal, psychosocial, and medical aid. *Casa del Forastero Santa Martha*

<sup>12</sup> For more information on the metropolitan area of Monterrey, please see Figure 2 and Appendix C.

opened in 1999 and hosts only males. *Casa del Migrante Casanicolás* opened in 2008 for men, women, and children. See Figure 5. In 2014, *Casa Indi* opened its doors. This shelter was built in a parish's dining hall for homeless people and migrants living in precarious conditions. In the same year, *Casa Monarca* opened and began as a neighborhood initiative for distribution of food in strategic spots in the municipality of Santa Catarina. This initiative became institutionalized as a civil society organization years later. At the beginning of 2018, the organization *Lamentos Escuchados* opened a shelter in response to a need for places focusing on migrant women.



Figure 5. *Casa del Migrante Casanicolás*. Photo credit: Alma Lara Ramírez

It is important to remember that many migrants from Central America don't have any sort of "legal" documentation and so are invisible. Determining the location of mobile populations—namely migrants and refugees—therefore becomes complicated. Governments have no official record of these elusive populations, complicating policy making. *Casas del Migrante* often compile valuable data and insights that afford us a picture of the flows of migration. In addition to the support they provide, *Casas del Migrante* are meeting points for locals and migrants. They are the easiest way to approach, and aid, these populations. The day-to-day operation of the houses and the constant interaction with migrants gives those who work and volunteer in these spaces (as Victoria does) a unique point of view. Victoria directly hears testimonies of the challenges and experiences of access to health, work, and violence faced by those who arrive in Monterrey. Data that come from this grassroots approach are rarely addressed in formal reports or academic work.

Shelters play an important role as spaces where migrants establish networks and share information on how to find jobs and access services. Access to state and local services often requires local intermediaries. In that sense, collaborations between a *Casa del Migrante* volunteer and a migrant are common. Local *regiomontanos/as* who get involved with the work that migrant shelters do are often crucial facilitators of a migrant's first experiences of the city.

Mrs. Sánchez, however, has never set foot in *Casa del Migrante Casanicolás*. It was a phone call from Mrs. Sánchez's neighbor to *Casanicolás* asking for help and intervention that sparked the relationship between Mrs. Sánchez and Victoria, which has gone much beyond that specific need. Today, Victoria and Mrs. Sánchez stay in regular touch. In particular, they communicate when Mrs. Sánchez has trouble exercising her basic human rights, which should be easy for her as a refugee but in practice is a frequent struggle. Their relationship is an example of how local intermediaries aid in the process of integration to the city.

"Many migrants rent and have as a reference point the shelter to not to get lost. But you realize in the supermarket, in the little market of the neighborhood, in the street, in the church that there are many Central American people that passed by the shelter before or that you saw them outside, but there are many people already renting and living around."

- Female shelter operator, Mexican, 2018.

## Housing

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Normally, migrants rent rooms shared by several people that cost around 300 Mexican pesos (USD 16) a week. Alas, they are not always safe spaces. It is common knowledge that migrant and refugee populations face a constant risk of being robbed of their belongings, oftentimes at the hands of their landlords/landladies. Safer spots have a cost. In the case of Mrs. Sánchez's family, their homes are quite far from access to services and the livelier urban centers. Zuazua (Figure 3, 16) and Pesquería (Figure 3, 15) are suburbs filled with ill-planned housing. In a city built for cars, where public transport is deficient, these municipalities are at least one hour away from most major institutions using a combination of cab, bus, and the subway. See Figure 6 for the location of Mrs. Sánchez's home.

According to activists and the local media, migrants might settle in localities where local Mexican families have abandoned their houses in remote municipalities such as El Carmen (Figure 3, 10), Villa de García (Figure 3, 6), and Escobedo (Figure 3, 7). With recent population expansion, all of these sites now border or are considered part of the Monterrey metropolitan area. This housing opportunity for migrants stems from a national-level housing policy that built housing for workers of low economic strata. This policy ultimately failed, and the dwellings were abandoned by their Mexican residents because they were far away from jobs and urban services or were in zones at high risk for natural disaster and/or street crime/violence. The housing was also of poor quality, lacked nearby public transportation, and the original Mexican owners lacked the resources to pay off the mortgages (INFONAVIT, 2015).



Neighborhoods such as Industrial, Garza Nieto, Guadalupe Victoria, and Centro are neighborhoods in Monterrey and the nearby Guadalupe municipality (Figure 3, 8) where migrants rent houses or rooms. These are located near migrant shelters. While El Carmen (Figure 3, 10), Villa de García (Figure 3, 6), and Escobedo (Figure 3, 7) aren't municipalities with high detention rates, those who live in the downtown areas of these places are in grave risk of migration raids. The areas where migrants settle change depending on the occurrence of raids and changes in the availability of rooms or houses to rent.

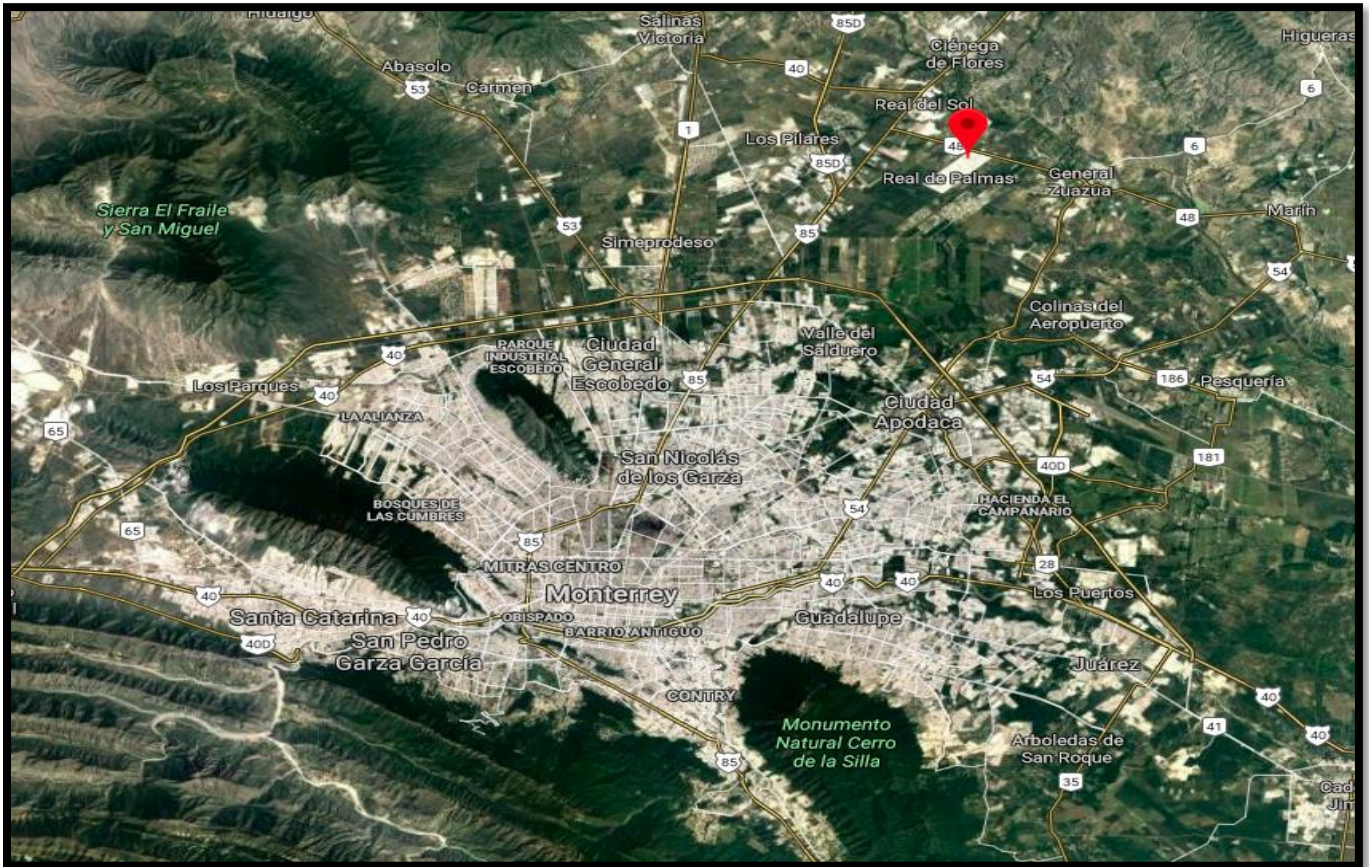


Figure 6. Location of Mrs. Sánchez's house. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

Mrs. Sánchez and her family, for example, are far from the spaces where she accesses medical, civil, and legal aid services. The only things that are within reach are grocery stores, convenience stores, and Serah's school, which is a 30-minute walk away. See Figure 7 for a view of Mrs. Sánchez house's location and distances to access services. Mrs. Sánchez's house is marked with an "@"." This isolation is a problem for both the local residents and the migrants living there. Unless Mrs. Sánchez's family needs legal or medical aid, or has a bureaucratic meeting that is important for their migratory status, they do not leave the neighborhood where they live, except for trips between Zuazua (Figure 3, 16) and Pesquería (Figure 3, 15) for family visits, and her son's daily trips to work in Apodaca (Figure 3, 4).



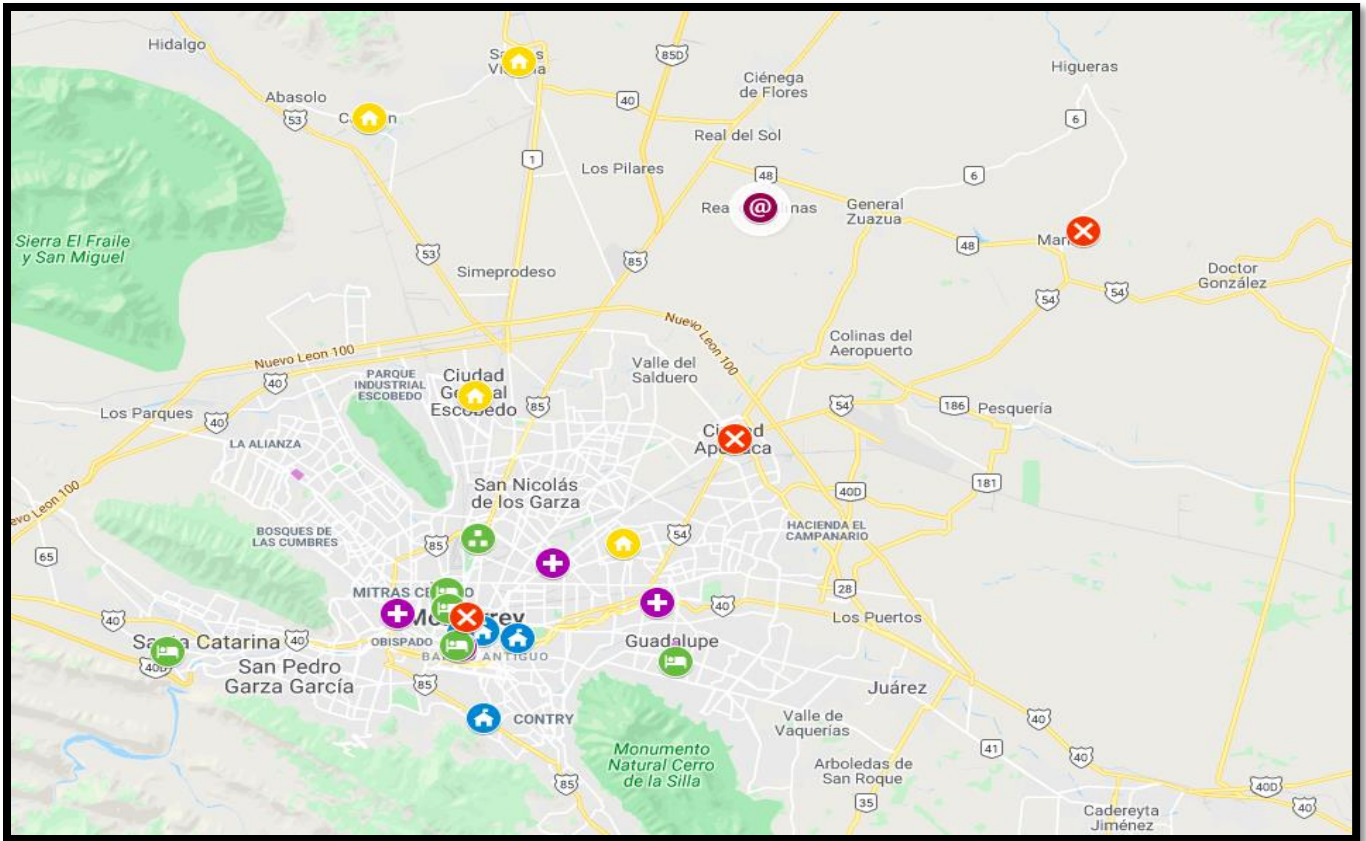


Figure 7. Mrs. Sánchez's location and the location of services in the city. Orange icons indicate detention facilities; Purple are medical services for migrants; Blue are government offices; Green are migrant shelters. Base map imagery © Google 2019.

## Health Services

Mexico's national migration law states that the Ministry of Public Health is obligated to grant access to health services to migrants. Universal access to health is a constitutional matter in Mexico. Despite this widely lauded victory of the worker's revolution, public healthcare is not always as accessible as is required by national law. Bureaucratic delays in accessing healthcare are commonly joked about in conversation. This problem of healthcare accessibility applies to most people in Mexico, but migrants are especially vulnerable. A major bridge to accessing health services are the networks shelters develop that liaise between migrants and healthcare providers. A shelter operator referred to the shelter's relationship with a public health center:

If a person who requires an operation comes, we channel it to the *Insurgentes Center*. They manage all the papers and referrals to the hospitals that they are linked with [and have] managed Caesarean births, and major or minor surgeries free of charge. (Female shelter operator, Mexican, 2018)

Another fix to unmet healthcare demands are health brigades<sup>13</sup> that are often organized by universities and civil society organizations at fixed points, such as shelters. *Casas del Migrante* also have begun accumulating healthcare equipment and assigning staff specifically to help migrants with health issues.

Getting access to these services is even more complicated when there is an emergency like the accident Mrs. Sánchez's son suffered at his job or the medical needs of her daughter's pregnancy. Mrs. Sánchez herself fell in the street in 2018 and broke her arm. Her doctor's appointments and other medical follow-ups required long trips. And in the first months of 2019, she underwent surgery for kidney stones. Although the state recognizes her as a refugee, her family faced problems claiming her right to receive medical care due to the reluctance and lack of knowledge of national migration laws of the healthcare provider, which significantly delayed the surgery. She finally received treatment after calling the Migration Ombudsman Office and through pressure from *Casa Monarca's* lawyers. Accessing healthcare for migrants often is achieved through the agency of local intermediaries, whether it is a person volunteering, an advocate, the shelter, or the local migration ombudsman office.

## Work

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Nuevo León is known in the transit migrants' imagination as a place with a lot of job opportunities, like the United States. Monterrey is also widely recognized as the most modern city close to the border.

Migrants' and refugees' personal networks are important when they are in need of a job. If they know someone who has been living in the city, it greatly eases the search. Also, shelters are the go-to places for tips about possible jobs. Contractors know this dynamic and arrive at shelters in search of workers (Peña García-Rojas and Stoesslé, 2017; 80). According to our interviewees, jobs are usually informal, temporary, and found especially among the manufacturing, construction, private security, and cleaning sectors where migrants may earn in pesos or in U.S. dollars. Dollars are a perk because of the stability of their value.

"[Monterrey] is a very beautiful city, there is a lot of employment, you earn better and I could send money to my family. There is work here, but there is a very low salary."

- Honduran man, about Monterrey, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Health brigades are teams of health professionals or students who, through interventions in strategic areas, provide medical care to populations that have difficulties accessing health services.

“Monterrey is *the* city but it has its advantages and disadvantages. The work is good, you earn in pesos or dollars. And we don't want to earn pesos, we want to earn dollars. But, as you earn, you spend.”

-Salvadoran man, about Monterrey, 2018.

Among the obstacles faced by migrants when they manage to enter the labor force are acts of discrimination by employers, less pay for the same type of labor as fellow Mexican workers, risky jobs without access to any type of social security, and threats to hand them over to migration authorities if they push back against bad practices by their bosses (Peña García-Rojas and Stoesslé, 2017).

There are no official data, but according to activists and shelter operators, there are a significant number of people who have been able to establish themselves in the city, get a job, and make enough income to send money to their families. And, while our key informants referred to themselves as success stories, they also highlighted that most of them live in the city without immigration documents.

Another family conundrum happened in the summer of 2018. Mrs. Sánchez's son needs temporary work permits to maintain good standing with migration authorities. He saw that one of his permits was nearing expiration. Bureaucratic requirements forced him to travel to Mexico City (10 hours away in bus) in order to renew it. The trip itself jeopardized his work because he was away. As we have shown, Mrs. Sánchez is her family's caretaker, but this son is Mrs. Sánchez's and Serah's main economic provider. Hence, the thought of the family's main income source losing his job seriously destabilizes the family's livelihood. As we can see, immigration processes, health processes, and work processes are constantly impacting each other, making the integration to the city a very tense experience.

## The Challenges of Mental Health, Drugs, and Conflict

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Residents living near shelters tend to harbor concerns about the migrants who stay on the streets there while activists have also highlighted the challenges of mental health, alcohol, and drug abuse that impact residents' perceptions of migrants, generating a “conflict zone.”

“Monterrey is better than Mexico City, because it is a big city, but everything happens to you, if it is not the authorities, it is *Migración*—immigration authorities—if it is not *Migración* there are drug cartels and they begin to see who are those who want to work for the narco.”

-Salvadoran man, about Monterrey, 2018.

Although there are important practices of solidarity, Monterrey is a rough city. Discrimination and criminalization are obstacles that refugees and migrants from Central America have to deal with on a regular basis. For example, seven out of ten people in the metropolitan area describe seeing discriminatory behavior directed towards migrants based on their physical appearance or place of origin (Salazar et al., 2017; 34). There is also a perceived association between migrants' presence and social problems such as

theft and violence (Salazar et al., 2017; 34). As in other places in the world, migrants function as scapegoats of larger systemic issues.

To illustrate these issues, we can look at Mrs. Sánchez and her daughter Celia. Mrs. Sánchez tried for months to register the birth of Celia's first Mexican-born son. Authorities of the Government Civil Registry refused to process and deliver the birth certificate, leaving the boy in a stateless condition. Newborns are at severe risk of deportation without birth certificates. Mrs. Sánchez called Victoria, and, with *Casa Monarca* lawyer's help, they were able to register the first grandson born in Monterrey when he was more than 2 years old. It must be noted that Civil Registry authorities didn't refuse to perform the registration once the family arrived with local activists.

## Conclusion

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Mrs. Sánchez chose Monterrey as a destination because one of her sons settled in the city in 2013. She chose to follow her son's advice about the city: "You would like it here." So far, Monterrey is a place she likes to live in, despite the bittersweet experiences she has had there. Her and her sons' decision to come back after deportation in 2016 shows us that despite obstacles, Monterrey is a home to them.

As information on detentions, bureaucratic absurdity, stagnation, and neglect tell us, Monterrey is a difficult town. While it has many resources to offer migrants, the greatest brokers to access them are local people who frequently offer their aid from the platform of an organization that fights the Mexican state's exceptionalism. Those who succeed in crafting a sense of home and futurity in the town still have to grapple with constant attacks. Mrs. Sánchez's journey illustrates that a keen drive, help, luck, and the will to hold it together for the next generation forge the migrant's path. Mrs. Sánchez's journey evinces the story of female cleverness, force, astuteness, and love. Though she is not the main breadwinner in her family, she certainly provides much of the labor of care that her children and grandchildren need to continue fighting the odds.

Although the city's development projects of the 1950s desired male migrant labor to power industrial growth and general wellbeing, at present Central American migrants—even with jobs—are alienated and excluded, essentially because they come from "the unfamiliar outside." Monterrey is attractive to migrants for its industrial energies and its proximity to the U.S. border. Migration policies and programs do not seem to consider that migrants are making Monterrey their home, either temporarily or permanently. There is an urgent need to approach the reality of migration in Monterrey more as a place of complex integration with a diversity of needs where local neighborhoods and migrants are already adapting to changes in national and international border policies.



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# Appendix A: Methods

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As we planned the report, we knew we wanted to explore what it means to be a woman who migrates. We followed the lingering intuitions of our experiences of relocation with a feminist lens, and female migrants from Honduras gave us the pieces to put together this story. We chose to use feminist methods of inquiry to learn not only from their words, but also from their approaches to doing women's work: embroidering, caring, and keeping a family together.

We know that so much of the struggle to attain refugee status is predicated upon precise retelling of experiences of violence. To learn more about Mrs. Sánchez, but decidedly not pressuring her to repeat these hardships, we chose to frame our conversations around what feels right about the city to her. We followed our feminist instinct to integrate a policy of care, one that was so absent in the way she has been abused by Mexican authorities and is definitely not part of Monterrey's ethos. As a medium of reparatory storytelling, which is proven to be effective to spark conversation, we decided to bring needles, cloth, scissors, and pencil and paper in order to craft embroideries. The idea was that the craft project spoke about what brings us hope. We followed in the steps of the Embroidering for Peace Collectives in Mexico and abroad that see the craft of embroidery as an instrument of care.

## Embroidering migration: A reflection on what methods of inquiry showed

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Two women we met at *Casa Monarca* were like Mrs. Sánchez in that they escaped similar threats in their home countries and transited to Monterrey with young kids. But both of them had irregular migratory status. One of them was harassed by a male migrant in transit while waiting to see when she could be on the road again with her child. *Casa Monarca* has improved its shelter, which is now more of a secured house, providing housing for women and children and supported by other ally migrant organizations. In that house, which happens to not have a lot of windows to the street, we met and embroidered with these women.

Like embroidery, much planning, strategy, labor, and care is put into migrations. Keeping the child, or children, close, and hence the family together, is vital. In embroidery, when a thread gets entangled, more effort needs to be invested to undo it. Mrs. Sánchez had to cunningly work through her deportation. For the woman at *Casa Monarca*, Monterrey was a space to untangle a big stretch of the journey.

We conversed with women who work to keep their families together, to instruct their children on how to deal with the dire stretches of their journey, and to keep hope and joy alive. Many embroidery projects were left unfinished like the journey of some of our interviewees; one woman decided to embroider "God bless you in your journey" with a train, which gives a sense of the pause in her own journey and the constant risks people in mobility face.

Another woman decided to embroider a strong tree, which we associate with the roots she recalled, but also her courage, strength, and bravery. A girl at *Casa Monarca* embroidered a self-portrait—just like Serah did—beside a house: we interpret her stitches as a desire to settle down. Mrs. Sánchez sketched herself and Serah walking hand in hand on a sunny day along a path to somewhere, in which we can see her sense of care especially regarding her granddaughter, and her continued struggle to feel arrived and settled. We read these embroideries as the constant comings and goings in these women's experiences. See Figure 8 for examples of the embroidery done by the women and girls at *Casa Monarca*.



Figure 8. Embroidery at Casa Monarca.

## A Note on Maps

The data for the construction of these maps were obtained through four sources: 1) official information from the federal government from which we extracted statistics on detentions by municipality in the state of Nuevo León; 2) semi-structured interviews with staff members from four migrant shelters in Monterrey and the metropolitan area; 3) unstructured interviews and embroidery with ten migrant women and children in the summer of 2018 aiming to understand their experience of the city; 4) participation of the authors in workshops on migration in Monterrey and the metropolitan area during the spring of 2018, one organized by the Office of Human Development of the Government of Nuevo León and Paso de Esperanza in March, and the other one “Trayectorias Migrantes Interrumpidas” by the The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in April.

## A Note on the Data from Interactions

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Eighteen informal interviews shaped this report. See Table 1. We also carried out group interviews to learn more about familiar tropes of women migrants (vulnerability, gender violence, memory, mother-child pairs). We decided to make these exercises conversations about where they were going physically and emotionally. We shared food and the craft of embroidery, through which we inquired about the affective dimension of their quests. Food and embroidery also served as an anchor and frame to get data about what Monterrey offers as a place for them to live.

*Table 1. Interview/interaction chart*

Sector	Organization	No.
Civil society/journalist		5
Refugees and migrants		13
Gender (all categories)		F = 9; M = 9
Age range (all categories)		6–54

## Appendix B: Migrants and Refugees in Mexico

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Located between two oceans and in the middle of the American continent, Mexico is an interstice of mobility. The history of vulnerability for migrants in transit can be traced to before the 1980s, when Central American migration to the country was mostly due to the need for agricultural laborers. More recently, civil wars in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador produced a large number of refugees who joined those already habitually transiting to work in the United States. With this upsurge, during 1980 Mexico created the Commission for the Aid of Refugees (COMAR). COMAR signed an agreement with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Mexico is a permanent member of this Commission.

El Salvador's peace agreements were signed at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City in 1992. Peace processes like this one activated a return of refugees to their countries of origin. This



created a circuit of undocumented migration constituted by new and experienced migrants (Martínez, Cobo, and Narvaez, 2015: 131). Migrant shelters led by civil society and local parishes appeared in Chiapas and Tabasco between 1991 and 1997. At the turn of the century, this pattern of migrant trajectories continued. Mexico's INM began to record migrations statistically and called attention to children and women migrating.

The circuit of migration established in the 1990s increased and continues up to the present. Public policy, both from the U.S. and from Mexico, focuses solely on a national security approach (see Central American detentions and deportations in Mexico in Table 2). When strategizing migration, seeking refugee status is a resource because a great number of migrants flee their countries because of gang violence, state violence, and structural violence, which are all grounds for attaining asylum. Nonetheless, even when flagrant violence and human rights violations are verifiable and well documented by international organizations, asylum is not easily achieved.

*Table 2. Central American detentions and deportations in Mexico*

Detentions/year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 Jan–May	Total
Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans	118,446	177,949	152,231	79,760	121,528	63,133	713,047
Deportations/year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019 Jan–May	Total
Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Hondurans	104,269	175,136	141,990	77,539	107,819	50,045	656,798

*Source: Own table based on statistics of Unidad de Política Migratoria, SEGOB, del 2014–2019.*

While in Mexico the number of asylum seekers is increasing, the selectivity of the state is reflected in statistics when contrasting rates of refugees recognized from different nationalities. Venezuelan citizens are granted asylum more frequently than Central American migrants, i.e., 24.4% of Hondurans received negative decisions regarding their refugee status, while only 0.71% of Venezuelan did (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, 2017).

# Appendix C: Migrants and Refugees in Monterrey

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As a large and industrialized city, Monterrey is a historical destination of internal migration. Large industries needed to preserve their workforce in the early to mid-twentieth century. In order to avoid a high turnover rate of workers, industries offered very competitive living conditions to all factory workers. This opportunity contributed to high internal migration from Zacatecas, San Luis, and Tamaulipas. In the 1950s, neighborhoods like Colonia Vidriera, Colonia Obrera, and housing projects like Condominios Constitución were designed for workers and their families, alongside community centers, schools, and nearby hospitals.

The Sultanate of the North, as Monterrey is often called because of its relative political autonomy, is still growing industrially, though it has distanced itself from the Fordism ethos of the 1950s. In 2016, a new influx of Korean citizens arrived in Pesquería due to the opening of a Kia assembly plant. Locals now note that there is visible diversity. Near Pesquería, there are panoramic ads in both Spanish and Korean. Korean is commonly heard throughout the city. A more present, but less discussed visibility pertains to indigenous communities. Indigenous people usually work as domestic workers or sell artwork or products from their communities in the city center, or at commercial fairs. They are grouped in certain neighborhoods, where they still face major challenges to their cultural and economic integration.

# About the RIT Project

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The **Refugees in Towns (RIT)** project promotes understanding of the migrant/refugee experience in urban settings. Our goal is to understand and promote refugee integration by drawing on the knowledge and perspective of refugees and locals to develop deeper understanding of the towns in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen. It is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University and funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

## Our goals are twofold

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Our first long-term goal is to build a theory of integration from the ground up by compiling a global database of case studies and reports to help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant/refugee integration. These cases provide a range of local insights about the many different factors that enable or obstruct integration, and the ways in which migrants and hosts co-exist, adapt, and struggle in urban spaces. We draw our cases from towns in resettlement countries, transit countries, and countries of first asylum around the world.

Our second more immediate goal is to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy, practice, and interventions. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

## Why now?

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The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policy through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. are responding in different ways: some resist national policy changes by declaring themselves “sanctuary cities,” while others support travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we seek to deepen our understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, migrants, and their hosts interact. Our RIT project draws on and gives voice to both refugees and hosts in their experiences with integration around the world.

## For more on RIT

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On our website, there are many more case studies and reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world, and we regularly release more reports as our project develops.

[www.refugeesintowns.org](http://www.refugeesintowns.org)

# About the Authors

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**Cordelia Rizzo** is a feminist activist-scholar. She holds a Master of Arts in Philosophy from the University of Leuven and a Master of Arts in Performance Studies from Northwestern University. Currently she is pursuing a PhD in Performance Studies at Northwestern University. Cordelia has taught college-level courses on Latin American thought and cultural studies, as well as more experimental embroidering workshops geared towards understanding how collectives of women protest. Her current research addresses the impact of the recent wave of violence in several populations in Mexico and the performative strategies wielded to face its effects. Her work as an activist tackles the subject of reparations and capacity building in collectives affected by this violence, namely relatives of the forcefully disappeared.

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at

<https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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