

Mexico's Michoacán state: mixed migration flows and transnational links

Xóchitl Bada and Andreas E Feldmann

Against a backdrop of unremitting violence in Mexico, traditional migration patterns in the North American corridor are being reconfigured.

The long-established stream of migrants trying to reach the United States (US) in order to improve their economic security has been broadened by thousands of forcibly displaced persons fleeing violence and insecurity in Mexico.¹ Rigid distinctions between voluntary and forced migration are becoming blurred as people threatened by violence, lack of economic prospects and/or environmental degradation leave their homelands to protect their fundamental rights. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, has reported a significant rise in asylum petitions by Mexican nationals in the US, from 3,669 in 2000 to 14,643 in 2016, despite low acceptance rates in the US.²

A critical question for the understanding of contemporary configurations of movement in Mexico concerns how violence is influencing people's decisions to move and how they are selecting their destinations. In addition to seeking shelter within Mexico or applying for asylum abroad, vast and long-established migration networks offer a third possibility to those affected by violence: crossing into the US, with or without documentation. In order to study

this transnational movement, we explored the case of the Mexican state of Michoacán.

Violence and displacement in Michoacán

Michoacán has been severely impacted by narcotics-related violence, with the rise of several prominent criminal organisations. Enabled by their vast wealth and coercive capacity, drug cartels have permeated the economy, and the country's rather weak government is incapable of stopping the process. Michoacán has also witnessed the rapid expansion of self-defence militias that emerged as a reaction to organised crime. Thousands of Michoacanos (people from Michoacán) have been forced to flee to makeshift camps on the outskirts of towns and cities, while the State – undermined by powerful non-state actors – has been unable and/or unwilling to provide assistance and protection to these internally displaced people (IDPs).

Michoacán faces the additional challenge of attempting to assist and reintegrate thousands of migrants who return from the US because of unemployment or who are deported from the US due to criminal convictions or lack of documentation. Under the current presidential administration, the US Department of Homeland Security has successfully implemented a policy based on fear tactics to encourage thousands of undocumented immigrants to return voluntarily rather than risk mandatory custodial sentences if caught by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. These returnees sometimes attempt to settle in larger cities in Michoacán where they have social networks, in search of better employment opportunities. Others return to their home towns to live with relatives, where they frequently face scarce employment opportunities, an absence of



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Migrants in transit, Mexico.

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integration policies, and violent conditions, prompting the need to move yet again.³

Choosing a destination

Michoacán has a long tradition of international migration. The presence of Michoacanos in the US dates back to the early 20th century when thousands of men migrated north to work in agriculture. In the 1960s women and children joined this migration flow. The presence of these migrants was instrumental in creating a transnational community with robust economic, cultural and political ties, and there is a constant stream of movement between Michoacán and several cities in the US, including Chicago, Dallas and Los Angeles. In 2014, the state of Michoacán received US\$2.2 billion in family remittances, the largest amount received by any Mexican state. This represents 10% of the state's annual gross domestic product (GDP) and is twice the value of state exports.

Politically, Michoacán identifies itself as a bi-national state. The governor of Michoacán and other authorities regularly travel to the US in order to maintain and deepen their ties with the Michoacán diaspora. For their part, Michoacanos in the US return often to Michoacán and actively engage in lobbying and interaction with regional authorities and communities concerning the migratory status and living conditions for Mexicans in the US. The state organises every year a bi-national migration forum (Foro Binacional del Migrante) at which regional authorities and a plethora of organisations from Mexico and the US come together to discuss problems and challenges including governmental help to returnees, support for job creation, health and education programmes, the development of infrastructure projects, and measures to enhance migrants' security. These issues are relevant to both economic migrants and forced migrants.

The unlikelihood of receiving assistance and protection in Mexico, the fear of being targeted even when they move internally, the existence of long-standing transnational networks and the prospect of finding better opportunities in the north all seem to inform

the decision to seek protection by crossing the Mexico-US border, despite migrants' lack of documentation. In order to study this phenomenon, we conducted interviews and surveys with authorities, representatives of civil society, academics and migrants.⁴

As we learned in visits to Michoacán and interviews with migrants in Chicago, people leave their communities as discreetly as possible, trying to avoid detection by violent actors, and relying on existing networks – social capital – for their protection. Those fortunate enough to have relatives and close friends in the US often receive critical support (money, visa sponsorship, information, shelter) that allows them to travel and reach the US and, once there, find a job and adjust to their new lives.

While conditions in the US for Mexican migrants – both economic migrants and asylum seekers – have deteriorated significantly since the 2008 economic crisis and the recent policies implemented by the current Trump administration, our interviewees pointed out that many of those who fear for their lives in Mexico prefer to face uncertainty and danger in the US rather than stay put in Michoacán. A long-standing culture of migration plays a huge role in facilitating this movement because for many Michoacanos migrating is an integral part of their upbringing.

Current circumstances pose enormous challenges to information gathering, rendering the task of tracing migrants' journeys difficult. Not only are fleeing migrants reluctant to speak but government officials in Mexico and the US are similarly reluctant, all fearing being targeted by narcotics-related criminal organisations. The difficulty of obtaining information is exacerbated because Mexican authorities cannot be seen to provide information that confirms the scale of the exodus of their citizens to the US, as doing so would signify capitulation to drug cartels.

Federal and Michoacán state authorities, including the Federal Executive Commission of Victim Services and the Migrant Affairs Secretariat in Michoacán, recognise forced migration as a problem but lack a thorough

awareness of its dimensions and transnational connections, and lack the policies needed to coordinate assistance to those affected. Even in the current context of violence in Mexico, there are almost no government programmes in place to assist and protect IDPs.⁵ Civil society has also been slow to react. Similarly, migrant civil society representatives in Michoacán can only offer scant evidence documenting those who have migrated north, with their ability to investigate impeded by lack of resources and fear of retaliation.

Given the predicament faced by thousands of uprooted Michoacanos, it is incumbent upon the Mexican authorities, both at the Federal and State level, to implement concrete measures to assist and protect this population, especially the most vulnerable. At the very least, measures should include: opening shelters where victims could receive vital aid and medical assistance and be protected from harm; strengthening existing mechanisms to report human rights violations and other crimes; developing a national register of displaced people; and, as far as possible, devising mechanisms to help victims to return to their communities

and to promote other durable solutions. The international community, for its part, should provide financial and technical support to increase the capacity of the Mexican state to confront this mounting humanitarian crisis.

Xóchitl Bada xbada@uic.edu

Associate Professor

Andreas E Feldmann feldmana@uic.edu

Associate Professor

Latin American and Latino Studies Program,
University of Illinois at Chicago www.uic.edu

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2. UNHCR Population Statistics 2017
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3. Personal interview with a staff member of the Migrant Affairs Secretariat in Michoacán. Morelia, December 2016.

4. This information was complemented by secondary sources including governmental, intergovernmental and NGO reports, asylum seeker affidavits and academic works.

5. Rubio Diaz-Leal L (2016) 'Internal displacement in Mexico: a debate on concepts, statistics and State responsibility' in Cantor D J and Rodriguez-Serna N (Eds) *The New Refugees: Crime and Displacement in Latin America*, London: Institute of Latin American Studies.