

Migrants Suffering Violence While in Transit Through Mexico: Factors Associated with the Decision to Continue or Turn Back

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Abstract To identify and analyze the factors associated with the decision of migrants suffering violence while in transit through Mexico, to continue on their trip or turn back. Cross-sectional study combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. Socio-demographic and health characteristics, as well as types of violence and factors associated with the decision to continue on the trip, were explored for 862 migrants. 35 migrants were interviewed to explore their perceptions of migration, socioeconomic and political situations in their countries of origin, risks, violence experienced, and the decision to continue on their trip. Of the 862 migrants, 21.1 % experienced violence during their transit through Mexico towards the USA. Of these, 88.5 % decided to continue on their journey. This decision was positively associated with age (OR = 1.075, $p < 0.05$), number of children (OR = 3.161, $p < 0.10$), homicide rate in the country of origin (OR = 1.043, $p < 0.10$) and proximity to the northern border. No differences were observed by sex, schooling, days in transit and the presence of health problems. The decision to continue the journey to the United States was related to structural factors in the countries of origin, rather than risks in transit. It is necessary to implement mechanisms to promote and protect the human rights of migrants during their whole journey (origin, transit and destination).

Keywords International migration · Structural violence · Human rights · Mexico

Introduction

Mexico is characterized by a triple migratory profile, since it is a country of origin, transit and destination for migrants [1]. In the last two decades, the violent context in Central America and Mexico has become more serious. This situation has affected, among other groups, migrants who are in transit through Mexico in search of better living conditions in the USA [2]. This is a heterogeneous group of people, mainly young men, from more than 55 countries. It has been estimated that migrant women in transit through Mexico are about 15–17 % of the total migratory flow [3, 4].

In spite of the number of countries of origin, most migrants in transit to the USA are from Central America and Mexico, countries where the violent context has contributed to worsening the living conditions and social relationships of their inhabitants [4]. These countries are characterized by high levels of poverty and unemployment, major income inequality, low levels of access to education, high homicide rates, among other factors that are included in the concept of “structural violence” [4–7].

Undocumented migrants, who enter Mexico through Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas at the border with Guatemala have to travel more than 3,000 km in order to reach the USA. This is the most transited and longest possible route. Across this route, they are exposed to different risky situations in conditions of social vulnerability. Stigmatization, discrimination, human rights violations and violence are constant problems that migrants face [8, 9].

Undocumented migrants are in a vulnerable condition due to their migratory status, lack of access to material and

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economic resources, as well as a lack of social networks to support them [9]. The violence perpetrated against migrants has become an important issue in the mass media and has been the motivation for broad social demonstrations to promote and defend migrants' rights [2].

This is the context where migrants have to transit in order to reach the USA, and for migrants who suffered some kind of violence, the decision to continue on their trip to the USA, or return to their communities of origin is a dilemma. If they continue with the transit through Mexico, they have to accept the possibility of suffering new violent events that may put their personal safety at a greater risk in order to accomplish their goals and reaching the "American dream". The decision to return, involves losses in the social and economic spheres, and the forced reinsertion into their communities of origin. However, the social, economic and health costs of these decisions are scarcely defined [8, 9]. Thus, suffering violence while in transit through Mexico may mean a kind of "payment" for the trip, without any assurance of arriving in the USA [2].

Most of these elements could work as a "regulating factor" of migration, contributing to the decision whether to continue or not on the journey, in view of the set of obstacles, risks and different kinds of violence they face [10]. The evaluation that migrants may carry out of: the violent conditions that exist in Mexico, their future expectations, and their reality and living conditions in their communities of origin, may represent the main elements involved in their decision.

The purpose of this work is to analyze the factors associated with migrants' decision to continue to the USA, or not, when suffering some kind of violence while they are in transit through Mexico.

Materials and Methods

The present analysis is part of a more general study carried out between February, 2009 and August, 2011, with the participation of seven *Casas de Migrantes* (Migrants' Shelters), one of which is located in Tapachula, Chiapas which is a community at the Mexican-Guatemalan border, and the others in different transit communities throughout Mexico, on the route to the USA. This route is characterized by the availability of a cargo train which travels from the southern, Mexican-Guatemalan border to the city of Tijuana, at the border between Mexico and the USA. The train is their main mean of transportation [11].

During this period, a strategy to promote human rights, facilitating access to health care and preventing sexual and reproductive health problems, was implemented in the

Migrants' Shelters. At the Migrants' Shelters, group activities were carried out with migrants in order to provide them with basic information on the subjects just mentioned. After the activities, migrants were invited to participate voluntarily, in a non-random and confidential manner, to answer a questionnaire that seeks information on their risks, socio-demographic characteristics, migratory background, issues of sexual and reproductive health, experience with different types of violence (physical, psychological, sexual), their perception of its seriousness, as well as access to services (healthcare, legal assistance and humanitarian aid) during their present transit through Mexico.

In May 2010, a new set of questions were included, related to the decision to continue the transit, for all of those who had been at least in one Migrants' Shelter prior to the interview. From May, 2010 to August 2011, a total of 2,714 migrants were interviewed. Out of this number, 31.7 % (n = 862) stayed over in at least one Migrants' Shelter.

The interviews were carried out in the following places: 50.2 % were interviewed in the southern area (*Tecún Umán, Tapachula* and *Arriaga, Chiapas; Ixtepec, Oaxaca*), 25.4 % in the central area (*San Luis Potosí*); and 24.4 % in the northern region of Mexico (*Saltillo* and *Tijuana*).

Odds ratios were figured based on the estimates of logistic regression models, in order to identify the factors related to the decision to continue or not towards the US. All the statistical analyses were done using the Stata/SE11.1 software.

As part of the study, with a complementarity intent, 35 in-depth interviews (80 % men and 20 % women) were carried out with migrants who had reported to Migrants' Shelters personnel, having suffered some kind of violence at some point during their transit through Mexico. 22 interviews were done in the southern region of Mexico and the rest in the central (*San Luis Potosí*) and northern regions (*Saltillo* and *Tijuana*). The objective of the qualitative analysis was to enrich the interpretation of the violence lived and experienced by migrants. In order to do so, the analysis focused on identifying migrants' perceptions of the seriousness and type of violence suffered, access to humanitarian aid, legal and medical assistance, and their decision whether to continue towards the USA or return to their community of origin.

The information gathered from the interviews was verified through content analysis and, in some cases, physical evidence or testimonies given at human rights offices available at some of the Migrants' Shelters.

In both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the study, procedures for obtaining, processing and disseminating information were approved by the Ethics Committee of the National Institute of Public Health of Mexico.

Results

Perception of Structural Violence in the Countries of Origin: Reason to Migrate

In 90 % of the cases, the main reason to migrate was the need to find better economic living conditions, since poverty and unemployment are common in their communities. The following testimony shows the complex situation in the country of origin of one of the participants:

Unemployment is high, the situation is very difficult and my children need education and a future... I opened a humble little shop and they extorted us; they are the gangs, ‘los 18, los Cholos, la Mara’. You work and they crush you (51 year old male from El Salvador).

In addition to this, there are testimonies about other forms of structural violence, including history of violence in the country of origin, community violence, domestic and gender-based violence, that are related to the decision to migrate (Table 1).

The Transit Through Mexico: Violence and the Decision to Continue or not to the USA

Of the total sample (n = 2,714), 22 % of migrants reported having suffered some kind of violence during the 2 weeks prior to the survey. Differences in the frequency of violence were not observed, between those who did stay, and those who did not stay at the Migrant’s Shelter (Table 2).

Comparing sociodemographic, migratory and health characteristics among migrants who stay and those who did not stay in a Migrant’s Shelter and who suffered some kind of violence, significant differences were observed according to: gender, having at least one child, days in transit and health problems (Table 2).

In analyzing socio-demographic, health and migration characteristics, in the group of migrants who suffered some violent event (n = 182) and their decision to continue or not on the journey to the USA, no statistically significant differences were found, except in the mean age. Of the migrants that suffered violence, 88.5 % decided to continue their transit to the USA (Table 3).

Table 1 Violence in the place of origin: reasons for migration

Structural violence		
A phenomenon resulting in greater levels of inequality	1. Poverty and inequality: Poverty, lack of opportunities and services in their communities are the main reasons given for migration. Poverty is experienced not only as lack of material resources, but also as a feeling of hopelessness for the future and a lack of minimum social security such as healthcare and education	Unemployment is high, the situation is very difficult and my children need an education and a future (51 years old male, El Salvador) I know that if I stay in my country I will die; so I’m going to fight for something [migration]” (41 years old male, Guatemala)
	2. History of violence: Violence exerted by the state during periods of war and guerrilla violence in Central America, the region from which most of the interviewees came from, is a central finding. These wars and violence resulted in broken families, divided communities and individual consequences that are difficult to heal.	I had to fight against the guerrillas [...] and then [...] my own country, the army, took me and tortured me for a long time (48 years old man, Honduras) I grew up without my parents, they died in the war in El Salvador [...] I abandoned my family; I traded it in for drugs and gangs, [I migrated] because when I left the gang they were trying to track me down (33 years old male, El Salvador)
	3. Current level of community violence: The majority of interviewees reported that, in their countries of origin, the level of community violence translated into homicides, extortion, threats and community insecurity. The violence is described as being perpetrated not only by civilians, but also by their own governments.	The police themselves go around killing people [...] there aren’t any rights there anymore (23 years old male, Guatemala) ... I opened a humble little shop and they extorted us; they are the gangs, ‘los 18, los Cholos, la Mara’. You are working and they exploit you (51 years old male, El Salvador)
	4. Domestic violence and gender-based violence: Domestic violence was also reported as a factor motivating the decision to migrate. Women experienced this violence more strongly. However, this violence is framed in the relationships that form the domestic unit and affects all of its members.	“My father hit us a lot. I decided to leave home when I was 12 years old. We were three young girls and the same person that helped us [to cross into Mexico], raped us” (22 years old woman, Guatemala) I lasted 7 years with my husband; he was really aggressive. He said to me, “the day you go, wherever I find you, I will kill you (22 years old woman, Honduras)

Table 2 Migrants sociodemographic characteristics, migratory experience, health and violence according to their stay (or not) in a migrant shelter

	Migrants who did not stay in a migrant shelter (n = 1,852)			Migrants who did not stay in a migrant shelter (n = 1,852)		
	Reported some kind of violence			Reported some kind of violence		
	No n = 1,435 (77.5 %)	Yes n = 417 (22.5 %)	p value	No n = 680 (78.8 %)	Yes n = 182 (21.1 %)	p value
<i>Sociodemographic characteristics</i>						
Gender						
Women	73.5	26.5*	0.023	65.5	34.5*	0.001
Men	78.7	21.3		80.5	19.5	
Transvestite, transgender or transexual	64.3	35.7*		42.9	57.1*	
Age (mean in years)	28.7	30.3	0.001	28.1	31.1	0.001
Schooling (mean in years)	6.7	6.7	0.718	6.7	7.2	0.126
Have at least 1 child	63.4	67.6*	0.124	36.8	46.2*	0.024
Country of origin						
Nicaragua	4.9	4.6	0.986	7.2	8.2	0.811
Honduras	30.2	36.2		44.4	45.1	
Guatemala	24	21.8		22.2	19.8	
El Salvador	26.7	20.1		24.9	24.2	
Mexico	14.3	17.3		1.3	2.8	
Days in transit (mean)	64.5	58.4*	0.338	165	126*	0.003
Health problems/accident during this journey ^a	12.8	23.7*	0.001	18.1	31.3*	0.001

^a Included: Injuries, accidents, respiratory disease, gastrointestinal disease, foot fungus, dehydration, etc

* $p < 0.05$ (comparing those who stayed or not in a migrant shelter)

Table 3 Sociodemographic and migratory characteristics, health risks and the decision to continue their transit through Mexico

	Not to continue in transit	Continue in transit	Mean differences and/or proportions
	N = 21 (15.54 %) % Mean (SD)	N = 161 (88.46 %) % Mean (SD)	p value
<i>Sociodemographic characteristics</i>			
Sex			
Women	14.29	10.56	0.851
Men	76.19	85.71	
Travesti, transgender or transsexual	9.520	3.730	
Age (in years)	25.71 (7.603)	31.77 (10.54)	0.004
Years of schooling	6.368 (3.419)	7.338 (3.555)	0.251
Has at least 1 child	33.33	47.82	0.204
Country of birth			
Nicaragua	4.760	8.700	0.523
Honduras	61.90	42.86	
Guatemala	19.05	19.88	
El Salvador	9.520	26.09	
Mexico	4.760	2.480	
Time in transit (days)	82.86 (110.2)	131.6 (155.0)	0.079
Health problems/accident on this journey ^a	33.33	31.06	0.836

^a Included: injuries, accidents, respiratory disease, gastrointestinal disease, foot fungus, dehydration, and others

Multivariate statistical analysis identified individual and contextual variables associated with the decision to continue or not the transit through Mexico (Table 4). We estimated four different models of statistical association, aiming to identify the most comprehensive and best fit model (model 2). The results suggest that migrants who decided to continue on the journey are those with at least one child and/or those who had travelled more than half-way to the USA. On the other hand, the decision to continue with the journey was not associated with the presence of health problems, age or sex. A high homicide rate in the country of origin increased the probability of continuing in transit through Mexico, for migrants who suffered some form of violence (OR = 1.043).

In-depth -interviews with migrants who had suffered some form of violence (Table 5) allowed us to identify behaviors related to the decision whether to continue towards the USA, stay in Mexico or return to their communities of origin. The different behaviors were related to the type of violence, the perception of gravity, distance travelled and options available for staying in Mexico. The analysis highlighted that sexual violence, kidnappings and armed threats were grounds for not continuing on the journey —either staying in Mexico or returning to their country of origin.

I'm going back to my house. They kidnapped me. It was in Tenosique [a locality at the Mexican-Guatemalan border]. They took us beyond Palenque where they have safe houses [to avoid prosecution of their activities by authorities]. When someone puts a 9 mm gun in your face it is hard (Guatemalan man, victim of kidnapping in Mexico).

On the other hand, robbery, abuse, humiliation, discrimination and minor injuries were considered part of the 'normal' process of migration.

I am injured and as they say in Mexico 'don't run away because of your wound.

Why don't I go back to my country? The truth is that here in Saltillo we've already travelled a long way and I imagine we've already been through the worst and what's left will be the last leg of the trip to the United States (41 year old man from Guatemala, victim of robbery who had a right ankle fracture).

Discussion

This study explores why and under which circumstances migrants in transit through Mexico decide to continue their

Table 4 Factors associated with the decision to continue or turn back, among migrants suffering violence while in transit through Mexico

	Odds ratios reported	
	Model 1	Model 2
Sociodemographic characteristics		
Sex (Ref.: transvestite, transgender or transsexual)		
Women	2.006 (1.441)	1.550 (1.259)
Men	0.937 (1.010)	1.012 (1.252)
Age (in years)	1.075* (0.033)	1.044 (0.033)
Schooling (in years)	1.096 (0.082)	1.136 (0.095)
Has at least one child		3.161 + (2.006)
Homicide rates in the country of origin/100 000 inhab ^a		1.043 + (0.025)
Transit location (Ref.: Ixtepec) ^c		
Tecún Umán, Tapachula, Arriaga		3.982 + (2.906)
San Luis Potosí, Saltillo, Tijuana		7.768** (5.880)
Days in transit		1.000 (0.003)
Health problems or an accident on the way ^b		1.509 (0.917)
Observations	182	182
Log likelihood	-58.42	-52.41
Pseudo R2	0.102	0.195
AIC	128.8	130.8

Standard errors in brackets

^a Source: crime and violence in Central America: a development challenge. World Bank, 2011 (data correspond to 2009)

^b Included: Injuries, accidents, respiratory disease, gastrointestinal disease, foot fungus, dehydration, and others

^c Distance from the US border: Ixtepec-2,557.4 km; Tecún Umán, Tapachula, Arriaga-3,894 km.; San Luis Potosí, Saltillo, Tijuana-2,431.8 km

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.10$

Table 5 Situations of violence during the transit and migrants' decisions to continue their journey, stay in Mexico, or return to their country of origin

Violence during transit	Decisions	Cases of violence against migrants and their decisions
<p>1) Robbery, abuse, humiliation, discrimination, minor injuries (sprains, fractures) are the most frequently reported</p> <p>There are different perpetrators of robberies, from locals, police, army, the National Migration Institute (INM), to organized crime.</p>	<p>1) Continue their transit through Mexico</p> <p>The cases of robbery, humiliation, discrimination, minor injuries, and even in some cases sexual abuse, have been internalized or accepted as part of the process of migration. These situations, which are beyond the migrants' control, are seen as the "price to pay—for he who dares, wins." They report knowing the risks of the journey and are prepared to face them because of the desire to improve their living conditions and in some cases, consider these risks to be lower than those they face in their hometowns</p>	<p>1) Continue their transit</p> <p>I am injured and as they say in Mexico, don't run away because of your wound. Why don't I go back to my country? The truth is that here in Saltillo we've already travelled a long way and I imagine we've already been through the worst and what's left will be the last leg to the United States 41 years old male, Guatemala. Victim of a robbery with right ankle fracture</p>
<p>2) Sexual violence.</p> <p>Documented cases among men, women and sexual minorities such as transvestites, transgender and transsexual individuals</p>	<p>2) To stay in Mexico</p> <p>When the migrant obtains a permanent immigration document (FM2) through lodging a complaint in cases of amputations, rape or sexual exploitation, staying in Mexico is considered a good option. For those migrants who manage to get these documents, there are employment opportunities and support from the migrant homes</p> <p>Once migrants have documentation and the legal right to reside in Mexico, they value the opportunity to apply for residence for the rest of their family, especially when they have dependents.</p>	<p>2) To stay in Mexico</p> <p>What is your plan for the future, what will you do?</p> <p>I have applied for work. My plan is to stay for at least a year longer here, renew my visa, have a short visit to Guatemala, then return. They've said that the visa is temporary and it depends on my behavior and if it is renewable then I'll go and they'll renew it for me and I'll get my FM2 [residence permit]</p> <p>51 years old man, El Salvador. Victim of kidnapping and sexual violence.</p>
<p>3) Serious injuries and accidents (e.g. amputations)</p>		
<p>4) Kidnapping and threats with weapons; particularly kidnapping by organized crime.</p>	<p>3) Turn back/return to country of origin</p> <p>This occurs in cases of being threatened with guns or in cases of kidnapping. There is a perception that these are situations that are too severe and life threatening so as to outweigh the benefit of continuing in transit to the United States. In cases of rape and kidnappings, when there was no possibility of reporting the perpetrator, migrants also decide to return to their place of origin. They frequently re-enter Mexico hoping again to reach the US.</p>	<p>3) Turn back/return to country of origin</p> <p>I'm going back to my house. They kidnapped me. It was while going through Tenosique. They took us beyond Palenque where they have safe houses. When they put a 9 mm in your face, that's hard</p> <p>Male from Guatemala, interviewed at Tecún Umán, victim of kidnapping and armed threats.</p>

journey to the USA, despite suffering from different manifestations of the structural violence that contextualizes Mexico.

International evidence suggests that the decision to migrate is related to the search for better living conditions and to escape from the structural violence at their countries of origin [4, 12]. Nevertheless, the migratory process, specifically the transit, has become a risk to migrants since it involves exposure to different types of violence which migrants face in a context of marginalization and inequality, scarce economic resources and limited access to social and legal support [2, 4, 8, 9, 12].

This study contributes to the generation of evidence of the individual and contextual factors that influence migrants' decisions to continue or not with their journey, after suffering a violent event. It was expected that elements such as gender, age, health problems and time spent travelling would influence the decision to continue or not with the journey, but these factors were not statistically significant. The decision to continue their transit despite having suffered from violence was positively related to having at least one child, the distance already travelled towards the USA, and the homicide rate in the countries of origin.

Violence experienced by migrants is perpetrated by local inhabitants, authorities and criminals alike, whilst indirect violence derives from the constraining social capabilities of migrants. It is important to highlight that many migrants are trying to escape from the adverse social, economic and political conditions in their countries of origin. Thus, the condition at the origin is important in order to understand how violence is experienced and assimilated by migrants, as a necessary payment (“the toll for migrating”) and as motivation to continue the journey. Also, the proximity to the border with the USA helps to strengthen the expectation of success in reaching the destination, which favors the decision to continue the journey.

The migrants’ evaluation of the way in which they face different forms of violence, insecurity, physical exhaustion, social support, among other factors related to their transit through Mexico, build the scenarios in which the decision is made. The dynamics of the migratory process are characterized by the way in which these factors interact and how they may function as “regulators” (positive or negative) of the transit process towards the USA, or the return to the communities of origin.

Currently, the need to develop social policies and protect the human rights of migrants is a recurrent discourse in different international forums; without doubt, the frequency and severity of violence and violations of these rights is increasing [2, 4, 5, 8, 13–15]. In this sense, Migrant’s Shelters represent one of the places where this population can find social support and ameliorate some of the negative consequences associated with the migration process [4, 9]. However, these places do not alter the conditions that determine the magnitude and type of violence experienced by migrants in transit through Mexico. Therefore, we must reiterate the importance of the need to implement effective mechanisms for enforcement of the right to social protection. It is necessary to implement mechanisms to promote and protect the human rights of migrants during the whole journey, including the origin, during transit and at their destination [4, 9].

The results of this paper show that violence stands as one of the main obstacles and disincentives to continue the transit to the USA. In order to understand how violence works, we need to grasp its complex dimensions and the social structures perpetuating it.

This study presents limitations related to its cross-sectional design, which limits the inference to a statistical rather than a causal association. Another limitation is the difficulty in capturing migrants’ experiences and the risks faced by the population that does not use the Migrant’s Shelters. This may bias the results and is attributable to a process of self-selection of the population using these facilities, which could affect the estimated parameters and

their level of statistical significance. Despite its limitations, we believe this study contributes important information and analyses that help us understand the decisions that are made as part of undocumented migration in situations of high social vulnerability.

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