



## Abstract

**Introduction:** Documentation status is a social determinant of migrants' health with limited exploration in Public Health research. Mexican men are particularly affected by increased surveillance, detention and deportation. Studies that explore in-depth how the everyday living undocumented affects the mental and physical health are needed. **Methods:** We conducted a qualitative transnational study in North Carolina (NC), in the United States (USA), and Guanajuato and Hidalgo, in Mexico. We interviewed Mexican men that were living undocumented or had lived undocumented in the US, but had returned to Mexico (n=26). For triangulation purposes, men's family members were interviewed (n=14). Community leaders and mental health providers in the US were also interviewed (n=8). We conducted thematic analysis for data interpretation. **Results:** Men reported continuous stress, experiences with negative feelings, worry, and recurring thoughts about detention and deportation, and psychosomatic symptoms, such as headaches, insomnia, and facial paralysis, and depression and anxiety. Mental health providers reported men experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation related to their documentation status. In terms of physical health, although men in the US said they were healthy, returned men were living with chronic conditions and disabilities, associated with their documentation status. **Discussion:** Restrictive migration policies lead to forms of every day social suffering for Mexican men, which men coped with by enacting avoidance. Men had little resources to cope with their embodied documentation status -psychosomatic symptoms and experiences of illness and disability-. Public Health needs to advocate for migration integration and policy change to improve the lives and health of undocumented migrants.

## Background

Migration policies are health policies. Documentation status, recognized as a social determinant of health (Willen, 2012), is one of the byproducts of these policies. The implementation of these policies has been transferred from the border territories to the interior of the country, affecting the daily lives of millions of people (Coleman, 2012).

In the USA only, there is an estimated 11.3 million people living undocumented, and nearly half of them are from Mexico (Passel, 2011). Federal, state and local policies targeting undocumented migrants have resulted in an increased number of people detained, held in detention centers and removed from the USA (Christi, 2017). Men, particularly Mexican, are at higher risk of being detained and deported (TRAC, 2014). Moreover, these men are at higher risk of adverse physical and mental health outcomes. Health providers have talked about "illegal syndrome" (Castañeda, 2009) characterized by psychosomatic symptoms among migrants.

**This study aims to identify the mechanisms through which living undocumented affect Mexican men's mental and physical health, and their coping mechanisms.** The present report is part of a larger study that aimed to describe the phenomenon of "undocumentedness" as lived by Mexican men, and its health impacts.

## Methods

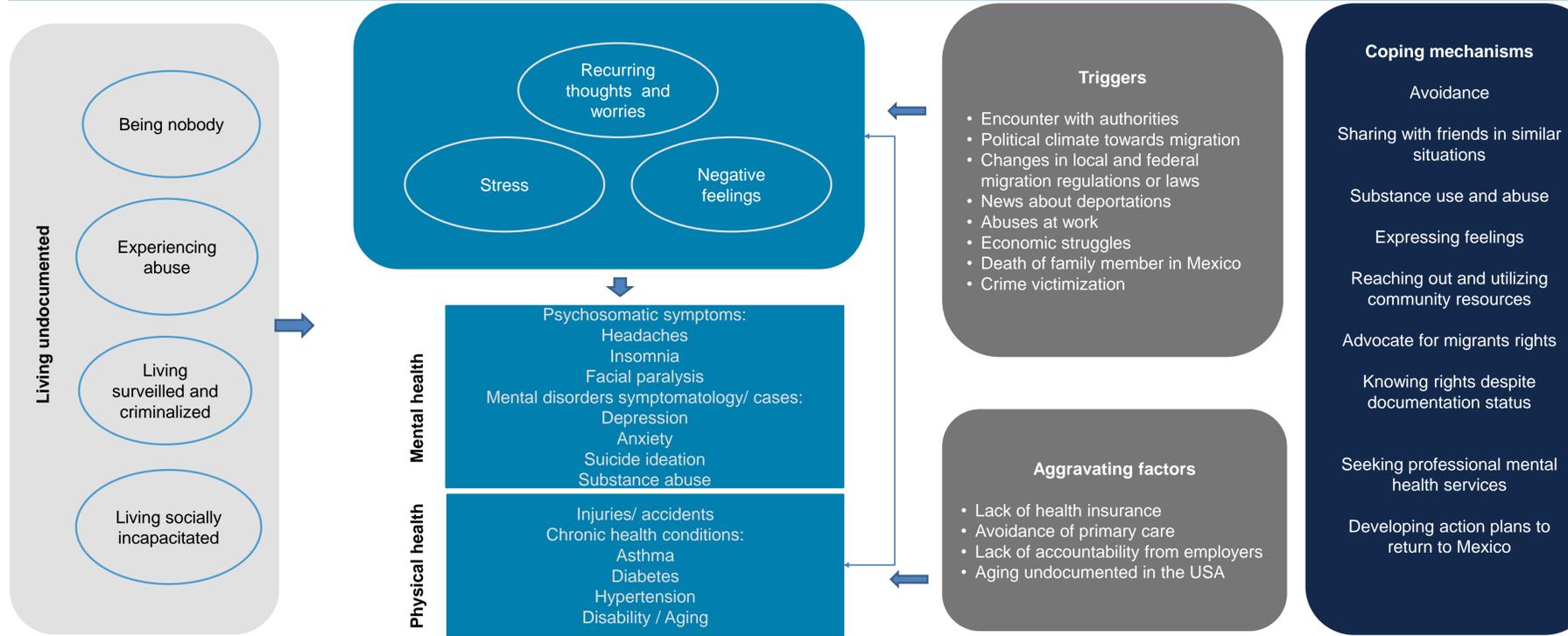
We conducted a **qualitative transnational study** based in NC, in the USA, and Guanajuato and Hidalgo, in Mexico, between June 2016 and April 2017. We conducted in-depth interviews with:

- Mexican **men living undocumented in NC** (n=8) and Mexican men that lived undocumented in the USA that had returned to Mexico (n=18).
- Men's family members (n=14), and community leaders and mental health providers in NC (n=8).

Our analytical strategy was informed by **Thematic Analysis** (Nowell, 2017), which included:

- Comprehensive reading of interviews' transcripts and development of analytical summaries.
- Creation of codebook and coding transcripts in Atlas.ti8.
- Generating matrices to condense data.
- Memo writing throughout the process.

## Results



General characteristics of men interviewed:

### Men in NC (n=8)

- Age range 32 – 47
- 5 married, 2 divorced, 1 single.
- 7 had children (between 1 – 5)
- Had lived in NC an average of 15 years, 2 had never been back since they first came
- 4 worked in construction, 2 in factories, 1 in restaurant kitchen, and 1 in a school
- Average monthly income: USD\$2,800

**Family members interviewed (n=5):** 4 wives, 1 sister

### Men in Mexico (n=18)

- Age range 28-57
- 15 married, 3 divorced, 16 had children (between 1 – 10)
- All had engaged in circular migration (from 1979 - 2013)
- Jobs held in the US: construction, gardening, farming, factories, services (restaurants, laundry mats), carpentry.
- Average monthly income: USD\$260

**Family members interviewed (n=9, all women):** wives, aunt, cousins, daughters

*"For me it is thinking about, for example, in my case, that I crossed as an illegal person, I think about that all the time. That is because since I am illegal, 'this can happen to me' or 'I cannot do these things', so I constantly think about that. So, for me, it is not something physical, but it is what most... there are times that this affects me the most, that by not being well focused, things happen that one would not like to occur"* (Rogelio, NC, 35 years old, construction worker, 3 children)

*"You get that depression sitting here, seeing the same. You see the same, you see the couch, your TV, every day, the weekends; you feel trapped. For me, depression is when you feel hopeless, like you get hopeless because you want to go out somewhere with your kids and you cannot, and then you think 'What did I come here to do?'"* (Leonardo, NC, 38 years old, factory worker, 5 children)

*"What affected my health were the sleepless nights, when I would go there, to the other side, walking. That used to affect me a lot, because there were nights where we did not sleep, we did not eat well. In those times, you were not affected because one was younger, but now at this age, it is showing, it is what results with time, all the difficult times, the sleepless nights. When one is young, you don't feel it."* (Arturo, Guanajuato, 10 children)



*I have been a victim of seven assaults, with a gun, armed robbery [...] because the number of these events, I am insecure; I cannot freely walk the street. It is like, I have moments like, 'ugh!'. [...] the emotional part, because with one [assault] it was the worst, it was with a gun, I went like a month without sleeping, I had to sleep with the light on, but I tell you, I was the target of some people that think that we have money, or for being a minority, or an immigrant, they take advantage.* (Pablo, NC, no children)

*"I try to forget [that I live undocumented] to focus on other things, I try not to think about it. Although I cannot do it, it is not going away, it remains there, but at least it has not bothered me all the time. It will bother me when the topic comes, but not all the time, I just try to forget."* (Elias, NC, 32 years old, 2 children)

*"Part of the work in therapy is creating a sense of safety again. I actually see, there's no ideal way to cope with the fear of deportation. Most parents that I've talked have said that having a plan has actually been really helpful. That way, you don't feel maybe completely out of control. It's hard for me to talk about this topic of deportation with clients who have already been through so much, but I know that it's constantly on their minds, and so I think it's important to bring it up and check in with people about how they're doing"* (Mental Health Provider, NC)

## Discussion

- Living undocumented affected men's mental health in multiple ways. Certain situations they went through on a regular basis, such as traffic check points, triggered feelings of sadness or anger, which in their own words, generated an emotional toll. In other cases, the accumulation of stressful experiences, such as crime and the impossibility to travel back to Mexico, facilitated the onset of depression, anxiety, or even suicide ideation. The multiple dimensions of their lives that are affected by living undocumented, from family to work, increase men's risk of experiencing stress and negative emotions, which could eventually facilitate the onset of mental disorders.
- In terms of physical health, men endured in their bodies the hardships of the process of migration, living undocumented, their low-paid precarious jobs, their lack of access to health and other social services, and their poor living conditions. In addition, aging undocumented represents an uncertain future, where men do not know if they will have the means to cover the cost of services they might need in the future, and if their families will be able to support them. Several men got sick or physically unable to work while living and working undocumented in the US and had to return to Mexico.
- Men enacted several coping behaviors to deal with the mental and physical health impacts of living undocumented, including avoidance of the topic, talking about their problems or expressing their feelings, or proactively putting together action plans in case of deportation actually happened. The enactment of this resources shows an attempt to alleviate the impact on their lives of their migration status, and the possibility of reclaiming a sense of control over their lives.

Actions that can be implemented by public health practitioners:

- Learn **from strategies that men and other members of the Latinx/ migrant community use** for coping with the stressors related to living undocumented
- Increase men's knowledge about their **rights**, regardless of their documentation status
- **Distribute information** of health prevention services that are available at low cost.
- Increase community-based mental health interventions focused on alleviating migration and documentation status related stress, and **avoid stereotyping behaviors as "cultural"**, such as alcohol consumption and other substances use.
- Advocate for a **comprehensive immigration reform.**

## Funding & Support

- Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología (CONACYT)
- Research Program on Migration and Health (PIMSA)
- Mellon Dissertation Award
- Fundación Comunitaria del Bajío, Guanajuato
- Programa de Atención a Migrantes, Hidalgo

- Castañeda, H. (2009). Illegality as risk factor: a survey of unauthorized migrant patients in a Berlin clinic. *Social Science & Medicine*, 68(8), 1552-1560.
- Christi, M., Pierce, S., Bolter, J. (2017). The Obama Record on Deportations: Deporter in Chief or Not? *Migration Information Source*
- Coleman, M. (2012). The "local" migration state: The site-specific devolution of immigration enforcement in the US South. *Law & Policy*, 34(2), 159-190.
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1609406917733847.
- TRAC (2014). ICE Deportations: Gender, Age and Country of Citizenship. Syracuse University.
- Willen, S. S. (2012). Migration, "illegality," and health: mapping embodied vulnerability and debating health-related deservingness. *Social science & medicine* (1982), 74(6), 805-811.

