

LIVING UNDOCUMENTED: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF UNDOCUMENTED MEXICAN MIGRANT MEN

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Presentation outline

- ✓ Background and research significance
- ✓ Research question and dissertation aims
- ✓ Theoretical background
- ✓ Study design and methodology
- ✓ Results Paper 1
- ✓ Results Paper 2
- ✓ Discussion
- ✓ Future research and intervention implications

Background

International migration and documentation status

- **International migration**

- 232 million international migrants worldwide (approx. 10%-30% undocumented*)
- Over 11 million persons live undocumented in the USA (50% from Mexico, 52% adult men)

- **Immigration policies**

- Integration Vs. control & restriction
- National (border control) Vs. local level (policing through local institutions)

Significance for Public Health

- Migration-related policies are health policies, thus we need to understand their impact of migrants lives.
- Documentation status, which is one of the byproducts of migration policies, is a social category worth exploring in greater detail.
- Migrants that lack a recognized status are left without protection of their rights, including their right to health

UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION AND MENTAL HEALTH



Symptoms of depression
and anxiety

Clinical depression

Impairing anxiety

Psychological distress

UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Illegal syndrome / Legal Status
Stress

Somatic symptoms
(headaches, sleep problems,
back ache)

Confusion, disorientation,
depersonalization

UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Cyclical nature/ chronicity

Coping strategies / resources

Access to/ availability of
community and service
resources

UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Illegal syndrome / Legal Status
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Somatic symptoms
(headaches, sleep problems,
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Confusion, disorientation,
depersonalization

Cyclical nature/ chronicity

Coping and individual
resources available

Access/ availability to
community and service
resources

Symptoms of depression
and anxiety

Clinical depression

Impairing anxiety

Psychological distress

Research question and dissertation aims

Research question and dissertation aims

How does living undocumented in the United States affect the mental health and wellbeing of Mexican migrant men?

Aim 1. To describe the lived experiences of Mexican migrant men living undocumented in the US and return migrant men in Mexico that lived undocumented in the US at some point of their lives.

Aim 2. To identify the mechanisms through which undocumentedness affects Mexican men's mental health and wellbeing, and the coping mechanisms and strategies men enact.

Theoretical background

Theoretical background



Intersectionality

Social suffering

Embodiment

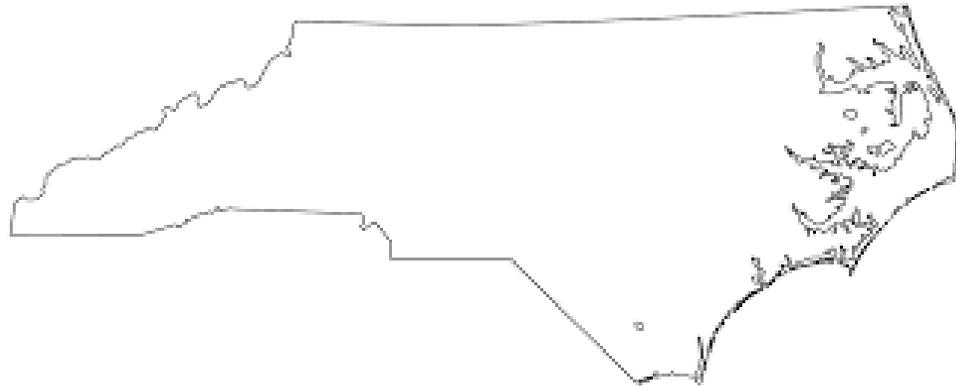
Study design and methodology

Methodologies

Ethnography

Phenomenology

Study settings



North Carolina, United States

Guanajuato and Hidalgo, Mexico



Ethnographic fieldwork

- Participant observation at a day laborer's center 2014-2016
- Observation during fieldwork



Sample: In-depth & Key Informant interviews

- **Men, n=26**
 - NC=8 (multiple interviews)
 - Guanajuato=11
 - Hidalgo=7
- **Family members, n=15**
 - NC=5
 - Guanajuato=7
 - Hidalgo=3
- **Mental Health Providers in NC, n=5**
- **Community leaders in NC, n=3**

Interviews were conducted between June 2016 and June 2017



Data management

- Interviews with men and family members were conducted in Spanish, interviews with mental health providers and community leaders were conducted in Spanish or English, digitally recorded, transcribed and analyzed in the original language
- I translated from Spanish to English quotes selected, and checked for accuracy by a bilingual colleague (gracias Humberto!).

Analysis

- Comprehensive listening and reading of interviews
- Analytical summaries
- Codebook
- Coding in Atlas.ti8
- Memoing and writing
- Matrices

Analysis

- **Aim 1: Phenomenology “whole-part-whole” process**
 - Comprehensive review of data (Whole)
 - Identification of meaning units (Part)
 - Integration of the meaning units (Whole)

- **Aim 2: Thematic content analysis**
 - Common themes/patterns
 - Differences

Results

General characteristics of participants in NC

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

General characteristics of participants in Mexico

Men in Mexico (n=18)

Age range 28-57

15 married, 3 divorced, 16 had children (between 1 – 10)

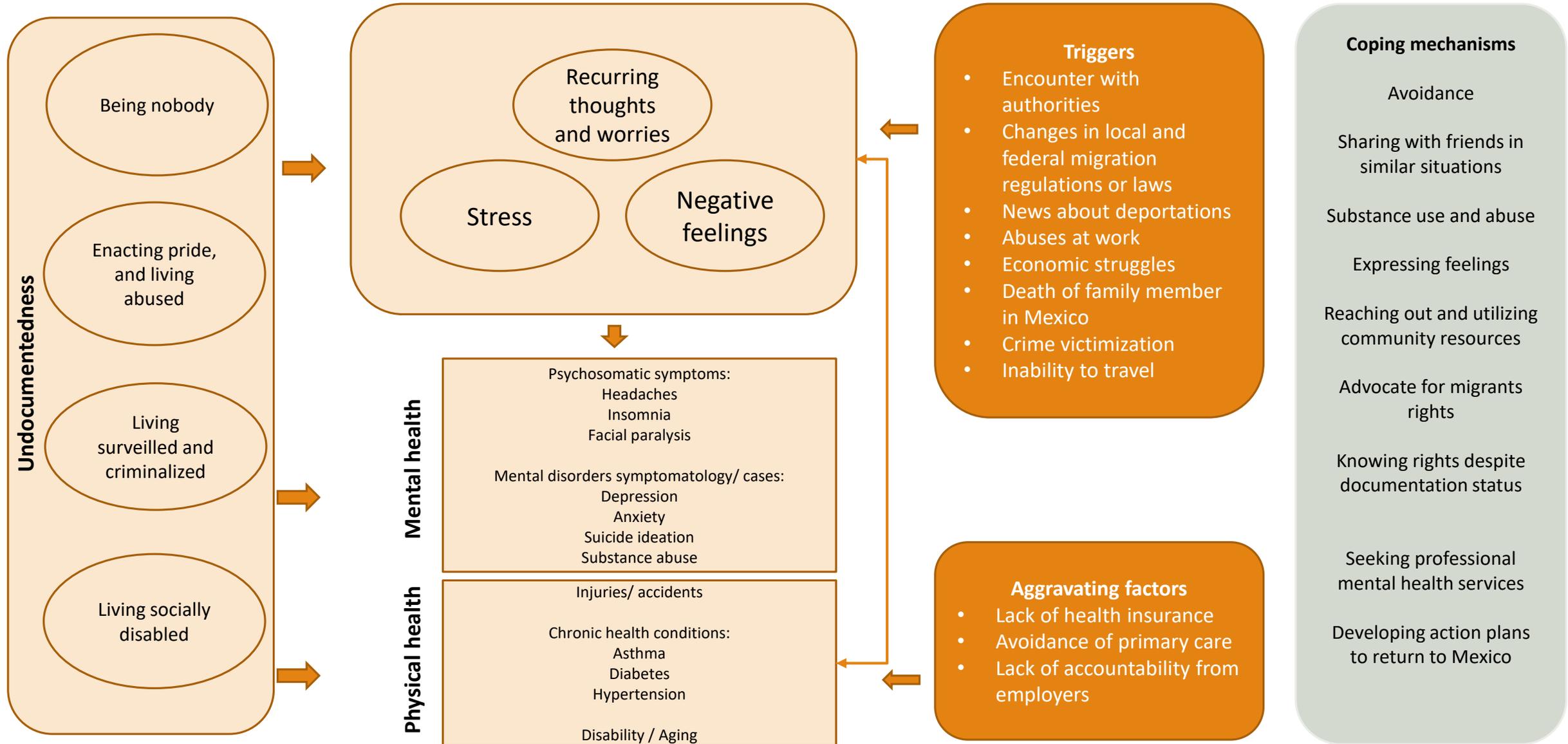
All had engaged in circular migration (from 1979 - 2013)

Jobs held in the US: construction, gardening, farming, factories, services (restaurants, laundry mats), carpentry.

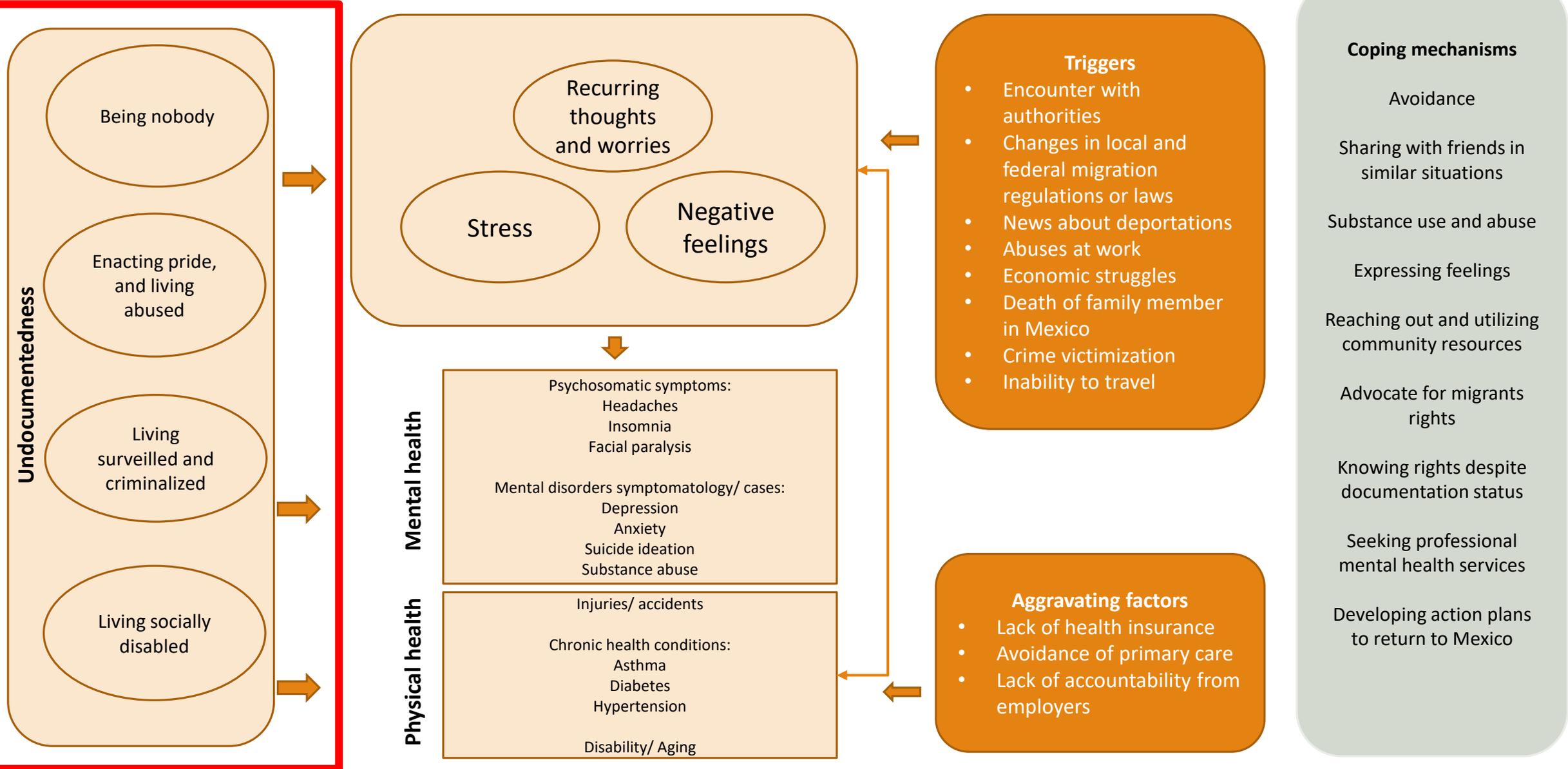
Average monthly income: USD\$260

Family members interviewed (n=10, all women): wives, aunt, cousins, daughters

The mental health and wellbeing impacts of living undocumented among Mexican men

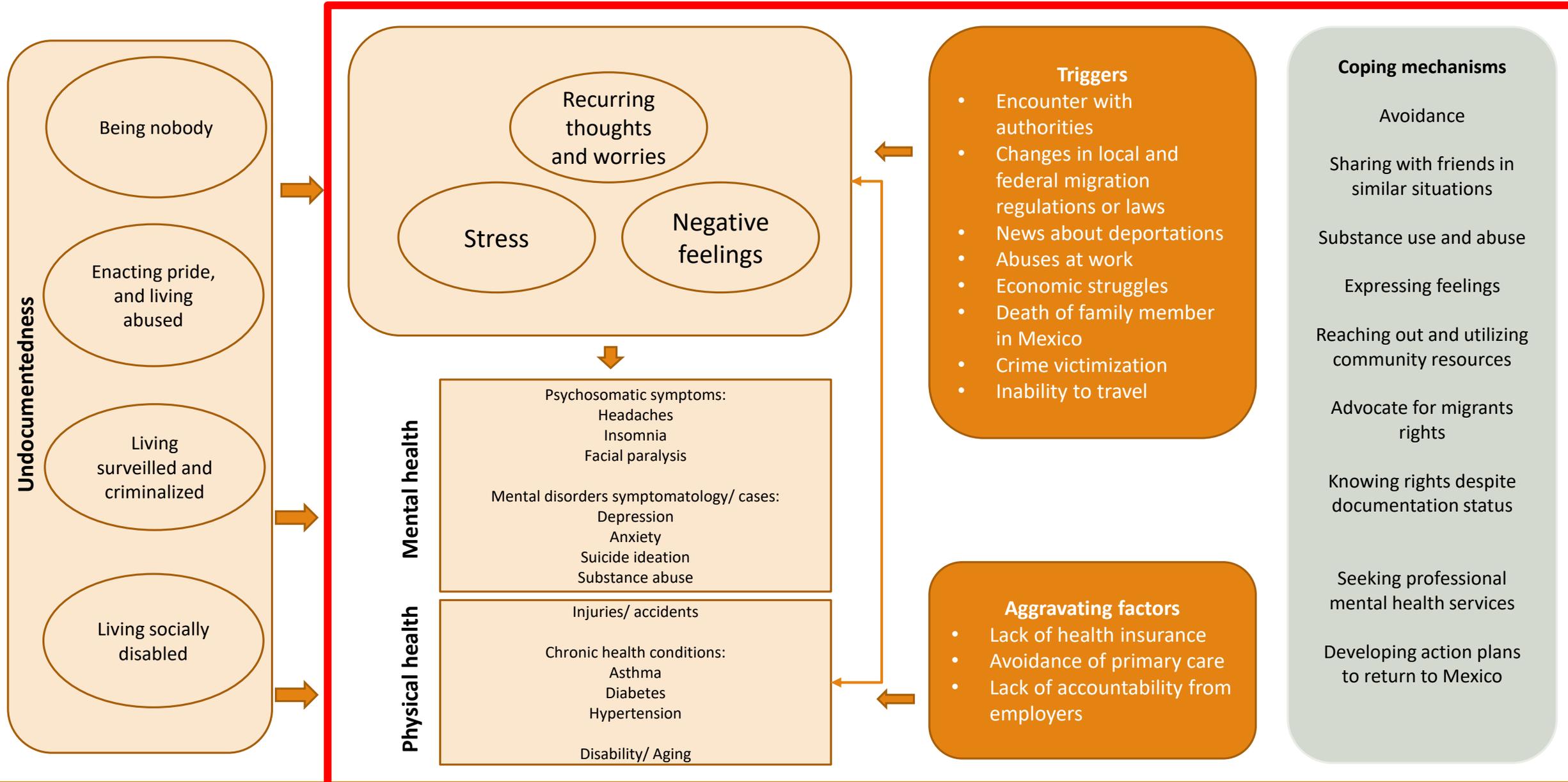


The mental health and wellbeing impacts of living undocumented among Mexican men



Aim 1. To describe the lived experiences of Mexican migrant men living undocumented

The mental health and wellbeing impacts of living undocumented among Mexican men



Aim 2. To identify the mechanisms through which undocumentedness affects Mexican men’s mental health and wellbeing, and the coping mechanisms and strategies men enact.

Results Paper 1

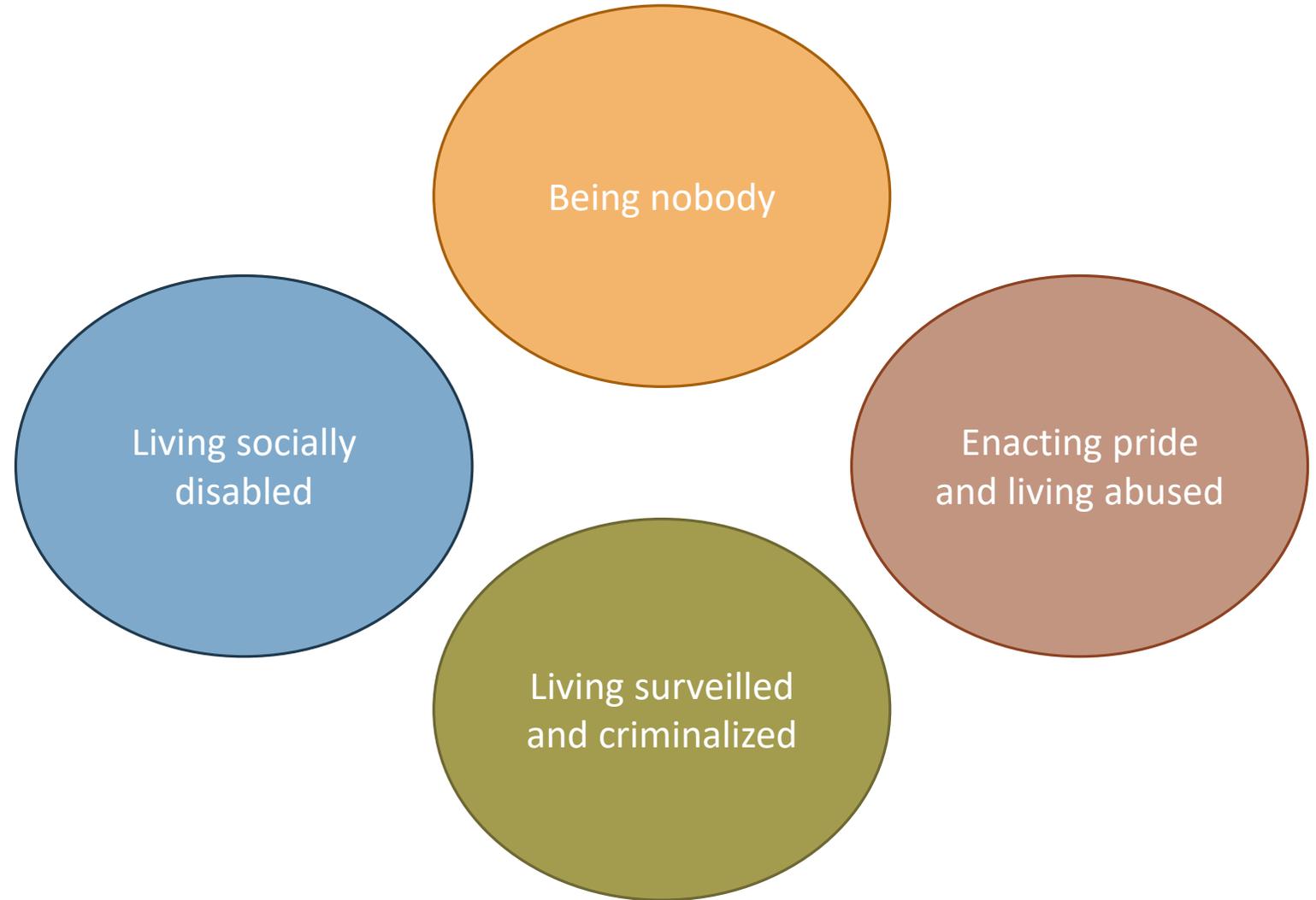
Living undocumented, a phenomenological study of Mexican men who migrated to the United States

Changes in migration patterns and migration policies:

Increased border control and end of circular migration

Increased restrictions for undocumented migrants, particularly after 9/11

Move of the policing of undocumented migrants from the border to the interior of the country, through local institutions and local policies and regulations



“If you are undocumented, you are nobody”



Restrictions on how men can **identify** themselves

Not being able to exist with **their own names**, utilizing other people's names routinely

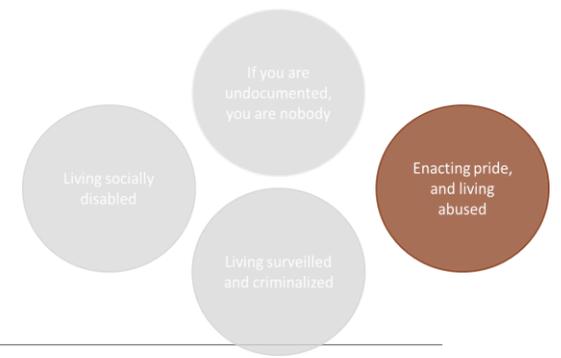
Increased **risk of being detained** due to lack of identification

“If you are undocumented, you are nobody”



“Well, it is always being afraid because they are not your documents, because one does not know who that person really is. Going to the doctor is also very difficult because one knows the age of the person, because it is on the paper. Then it happens that they call you, but by the name appearing on the papers, and one wonders, ‘Who is that person? I don’t know’, but then you realize that it is you they are calling, but sometimes you are late to realize it is you.” (Wife of Tomas, NC, 3 children)

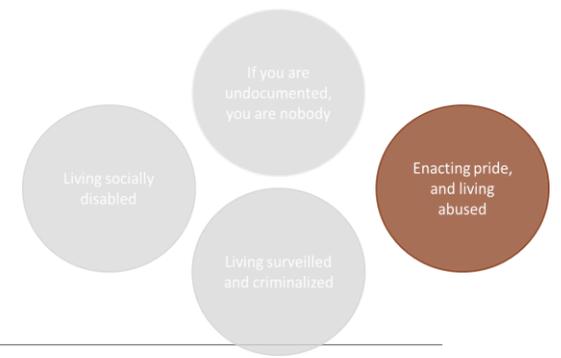
Enacting pride, and living abused



Men showed a deep sense of pride as undocumented workers

*“I am an immigrant, I am neither more or less than anybody else. One must feel proud of who one is; and I now freely tell people, ‘I am undocumented’, I am not ashamed, on the contrary, I am proud that I have accomplished more than other people that have papers.”
(Pablo, NC, 37 years old, no children, youth counselor)*

Enacting pride, and living abused

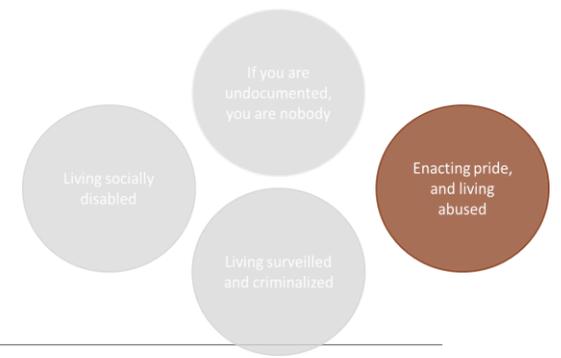


Men detailed how they were preferred as workers because they could be **easily abused**

Men's available job options are limited to jobs where **heavy body engagement** is required, and reached a glass ceiling faster, particularly due to the lack of a driver's license

Although they work hard, they will never be able to enjoy the **"American way of life"**

Enacting pride, and living abused



“I can’t work a job where I worked very hard to achieve [professional certificate], I feel like it is unfair, because I think that people here only consider that undocumented immigrants are here because they know how to work hard. But in my case, for example, I can’t have a job that would not have me working under the sun.” (Elias, NC, 32 years old, 2 children, construction worker)

Living surveilled and criminalized



Neighborhoods where Latinos live are increasingly **surveilled** and laws are applied in discretionary ways

Behave well all the time: *“No meterse en problemas”*

Crime victimization at border crossing and in local communities

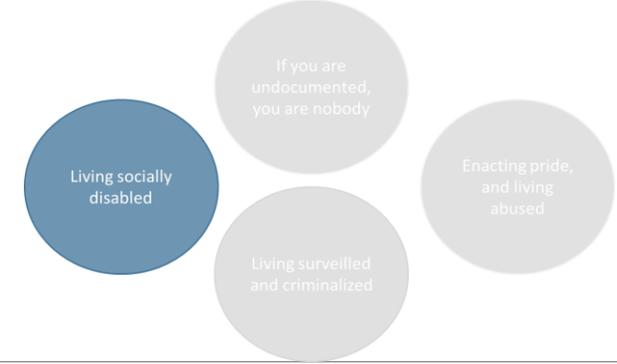
Experiences of **detention and deportation**

Living surveilled and criminalized



*“I am proud to be Mexican, but I don’t want to make myself known as such by having a van with the Virgin Guadalupe on the back, because it is possible that if there is a concept of discrimination; that a police officer is, let’s say, a little racist, well, he will only have to say, ‘That car belongs to a Hispanic and I am going to stop him.’”
(Elias, NC, 32 years old, 2 children)*

Living socially disabled



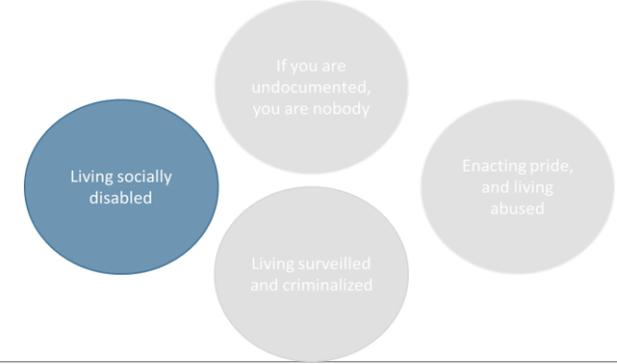
Life feels unbearable, is like living in the **“Jaula de Oro”** (“golden cage”)

Fragility and uncertainty about the present and the future and resignation that the situation is not going to change soon

Their undocumentedness comes with a **high economic cost** that affects other aspects of their lives, such as feeding and housing

Face a **second family separation**, men are willing to leave their family back if deported as they see the US as a better place for their kids

Living socially disabled

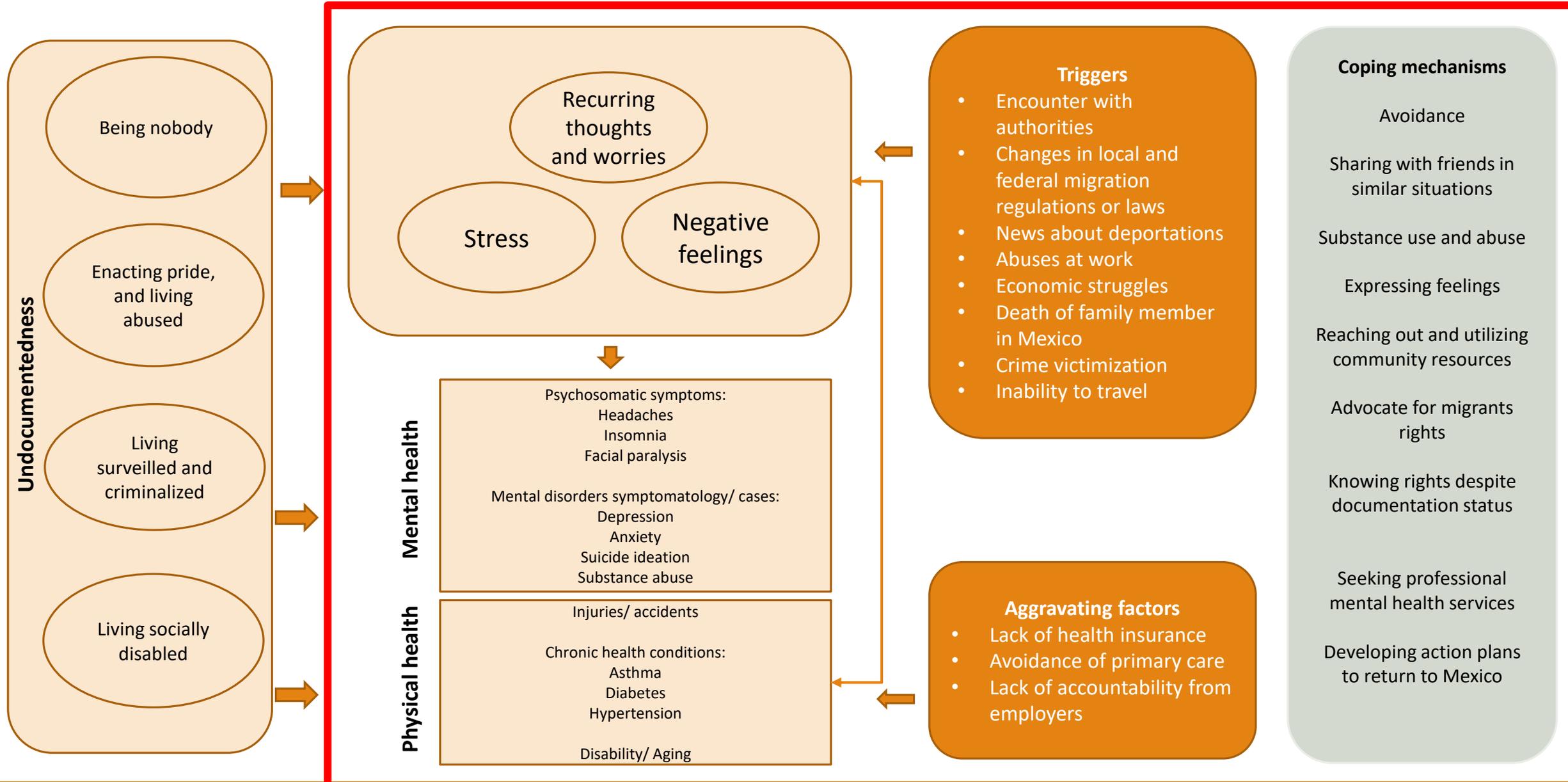


“We are going to leave willingly, if you look around, we don’t have stuff, my idea is if they kick me out I leave like this, I don’t have anything of value or anything like that, and for that reason, I tell my wife, ‘Why would we buy nice stuff? Let us just bear with this’. Because later if you want to sell all that stuff, who is going to buy it? It is wasted money.” (Leonardo, NC, 38 years old, factory worker, 5 children)

Results Paper 2

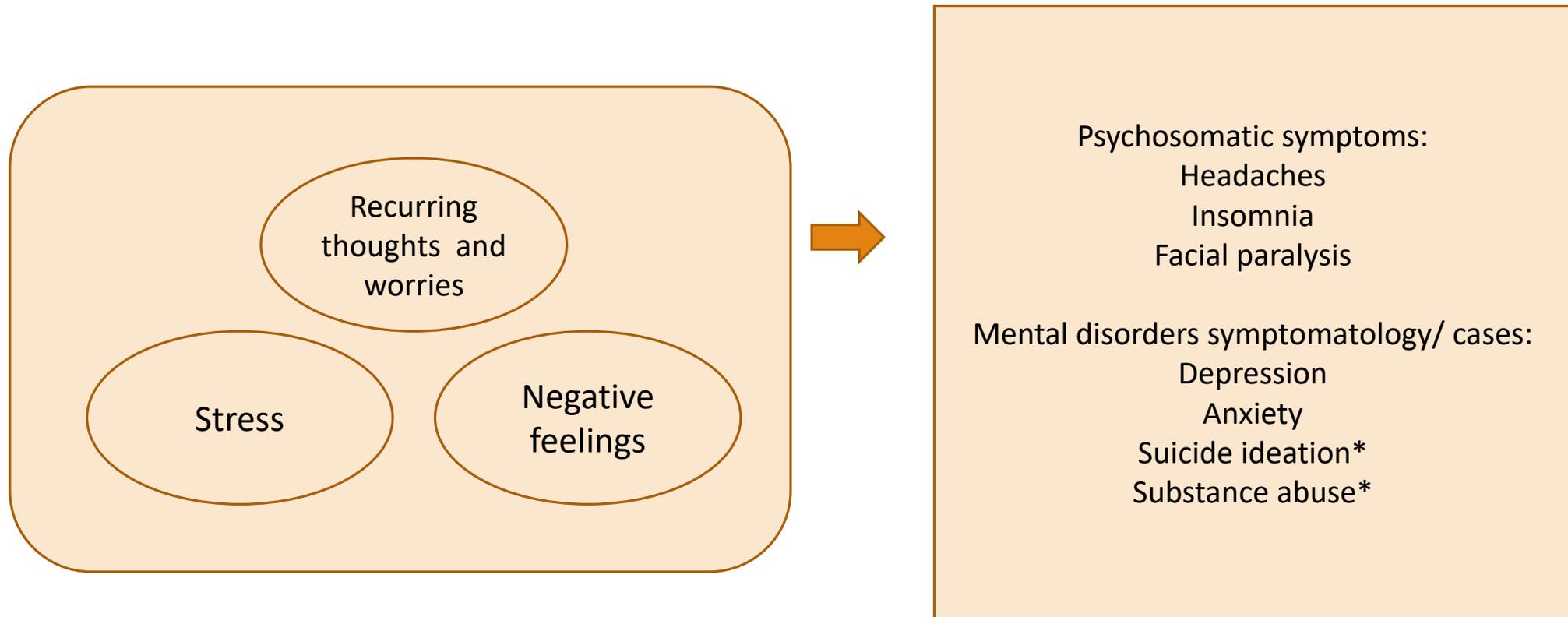
The mental and physical health impacts of living undocumented among Mexican men that have migrated to the United States

The mental health and wellbeing impacts of living undocumented among Mexican men



Aim 2. To identify the mechanisms through which undocumentedness affects Mexican men’s mental health and wellbeing, and the coping mechanisms and strategies men enact.

Mental Health and Undocumentedness



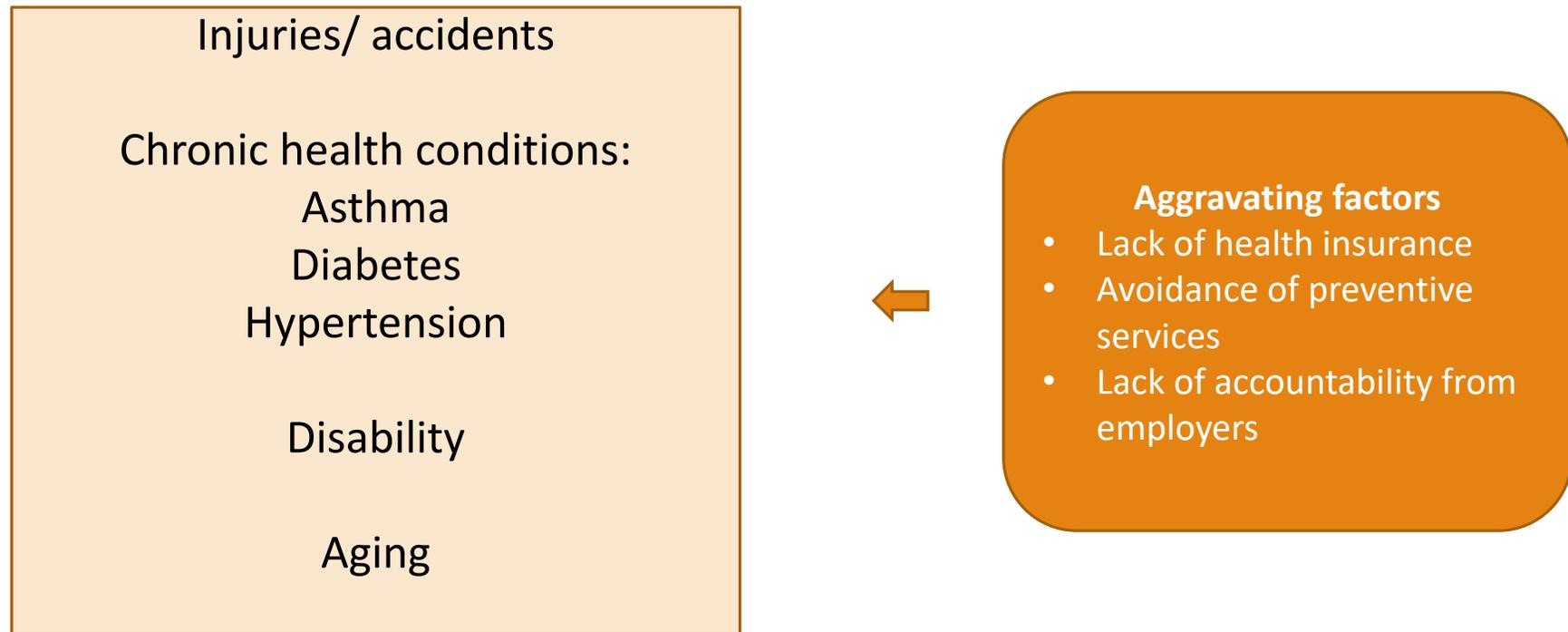
Results: Mental Health and Undocumentedness

“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)

Results: Mental Health and Undocumentedness

*“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)*

Physical health impacts of living undocumented



Physical health impacts of living undocumented

“I see him as being very irritable and he is gaining a lot of weight quickly. He feels stuck; he cannot even have a driver's license to pick up his son. You are always cracking your knuckles, you cannot get ahead, you survive, but you do not move forward and Jaime does not know how to ask for help or say, ‘Hey, I feel bad, and I need to talk to someone’. [Voice breaks] I have seen him as looking bad lately, he looks sick, he always says that everything hurts, and you cannot really get close to him.” (Sister of Jaime, NC)

Results: Physical health impacts of living undocumented

“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)

Coping with physical and mental health impacts of undocumentedness

Avoidance

Sharing with friends in similar situations

Substance use and abuse

Expressing feelings

Reaching out and utilizing community resources

Advocate for migrants rights and getting informed about their rights

Seeking professional mental health services

Developing action plans to return to Mexico

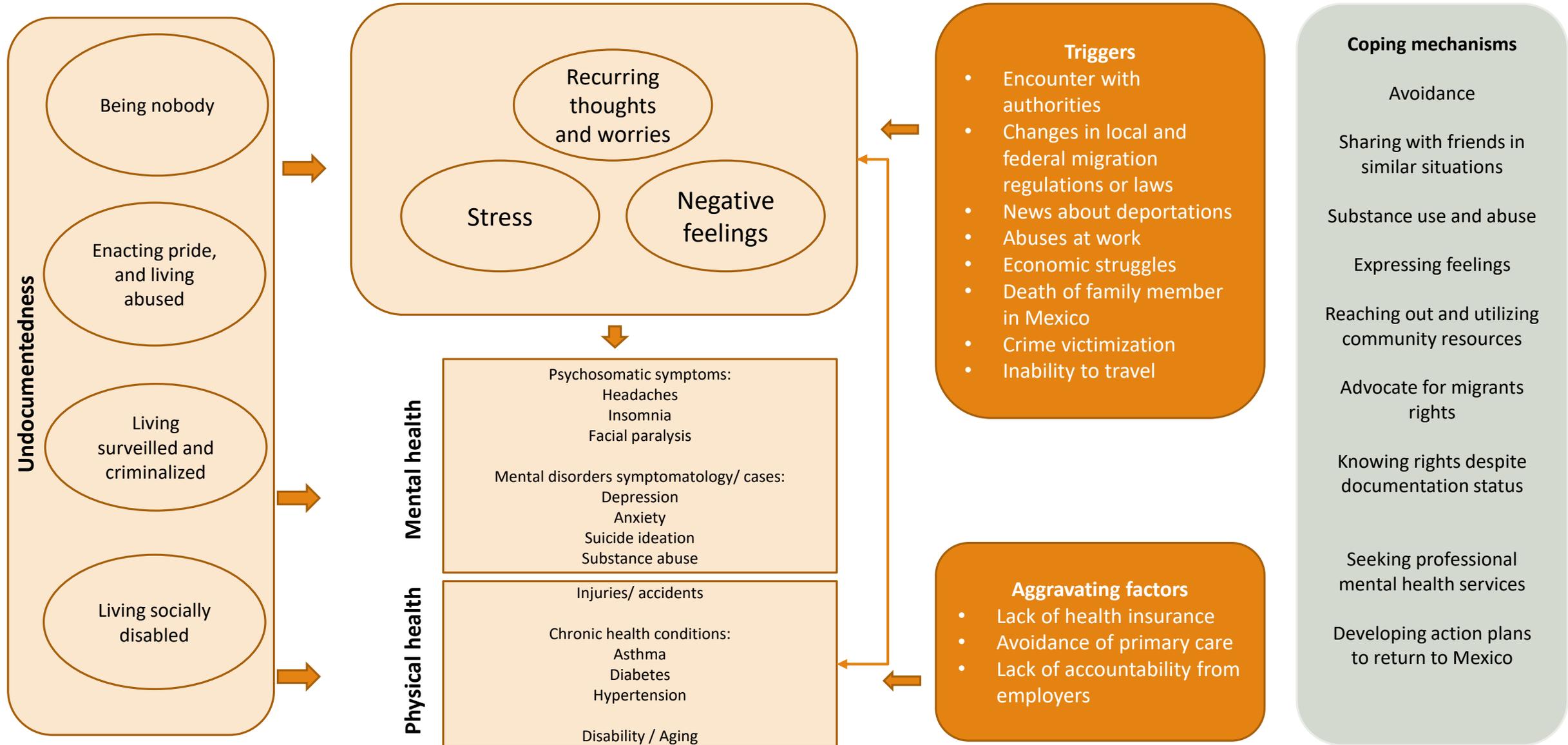
“I try to forget, to focus on other things, I try not to think about it. Although I cannot do it, it is not going away, it remains there, but at least it has not bothered me all the time. It will bother me when the topic comes, but not all the time, I just try to forget.” (Elias, NC, 32 years old, 2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

Coping with physical and mental health impacts of undocumentedness

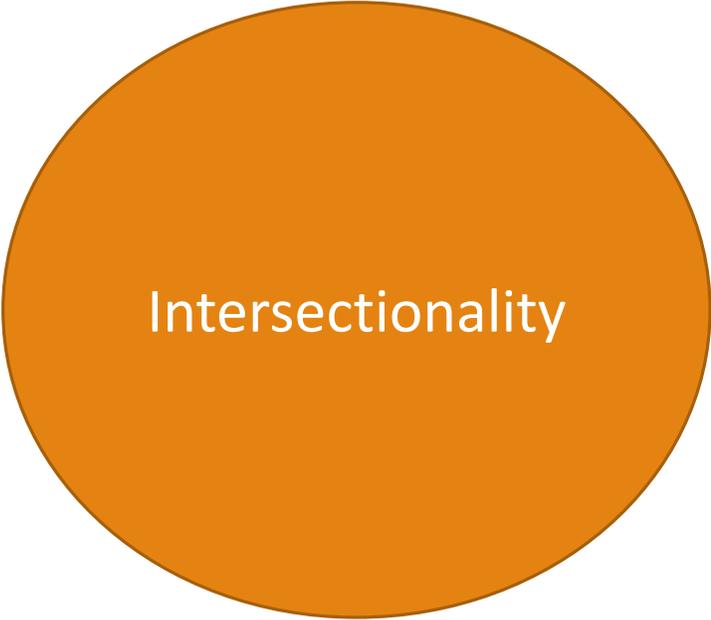
“Part of the work in therapy is creating a sense of safety again. I actually see, there’s no ideal way to cope with the fear of deportation. Most parents that I’ve talked have said that having a plan has actually been really helpful. That way, you don’t feel maybe completely out of control. It’s hard 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)

Discussion

Figure 1. The mental health and wellbeing impacts of living undocumented among Mexican men



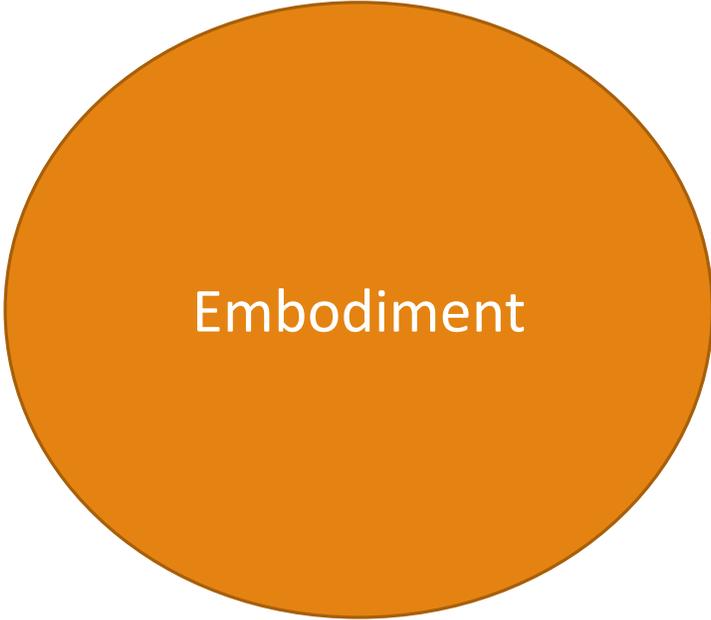
Discussion



Intersectionality

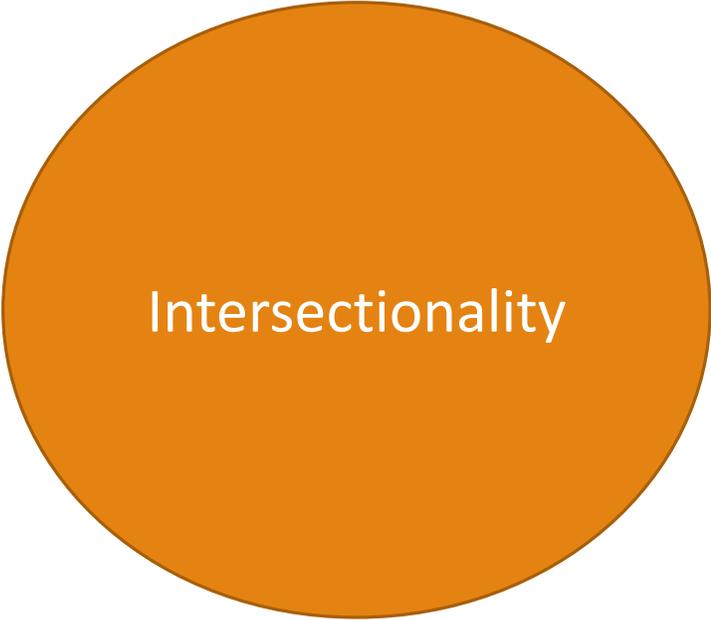


Social suffering



Embodiment

Discussion



Intersectionality

- The experience of living undocumented is very **complex, deeply related to local social and political contexts**, and intersects with other social locations
- In the case of Mexican migrant men, their **undocumentedness intersects with their class, gender and ethnicity** in specific ways to produce their lived experiences
- As a result, Mexican men that live undocumented, struggle everyday to be **recognized as members of the communities** where they have worked and lived for many years

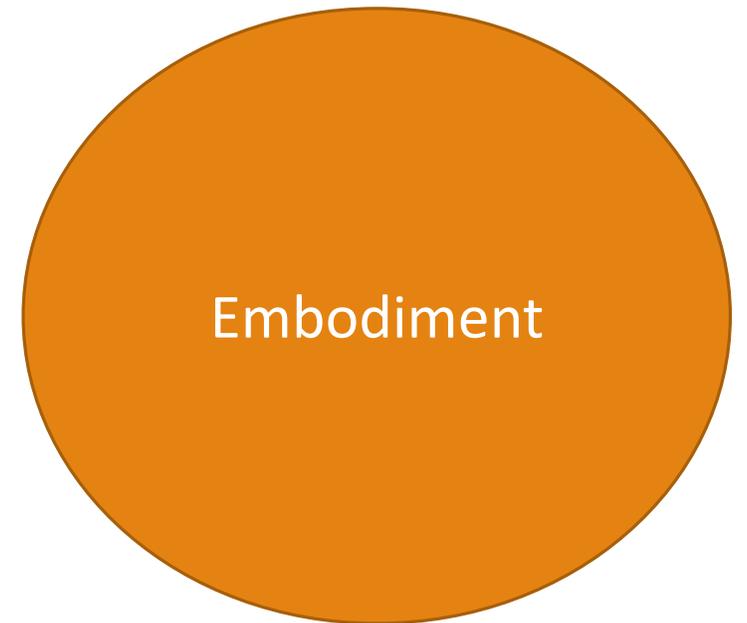
Discussion



- Living undocumented produces very specific **forms of suffering**, shared by men and their families and communities
- Men **bear with this suffering** in different ways, but common across the men was the active avoidance and the preparation to return to Mexico, willingly or forced
- Despite men not presenting specific mental disorders, **the constant experiences of stress and everyday challenges** require attention.

Discussion

- Living undocumented is embodied by men through their **experiences of injuries, illnesses, and disabilities.**



Future research and intervention implications

Future Research

- Exploration of experiences of **detention and deportation**
- Exploration of specific populations that could speak to a different experience of undocumentedness, such as **senior men and non-heterosexual men**
- The exploration of the **generational experiences** of undocumentedness
- Substance abuse & suicide
- Explore more how being undocumented affects the experience of **living with a chronic condition**
- Further explore other **mechanisms linking living undocumented with health outcomes**, both at the individual level and community level

Stressors related to documentation status → Allostatic load → Onset of illness

Future Interventions

Interventions with men

- Community mental health interventions
- Promote the utilization of preventive services
- Promote occupational and work safety practices
- Increase awareness of their rights

Interventions in the community

- Sanctuary cities
- Issuance of local identification documents and collaboration across agencies to protect migrants
- Community integration projects, such as Building Integrated Communities

Interventions at the policy level

- Advocate for comprehensive migration reform and transnational agreements
- Advocate at the state and local level against further restrictions against undocumented immigrants

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