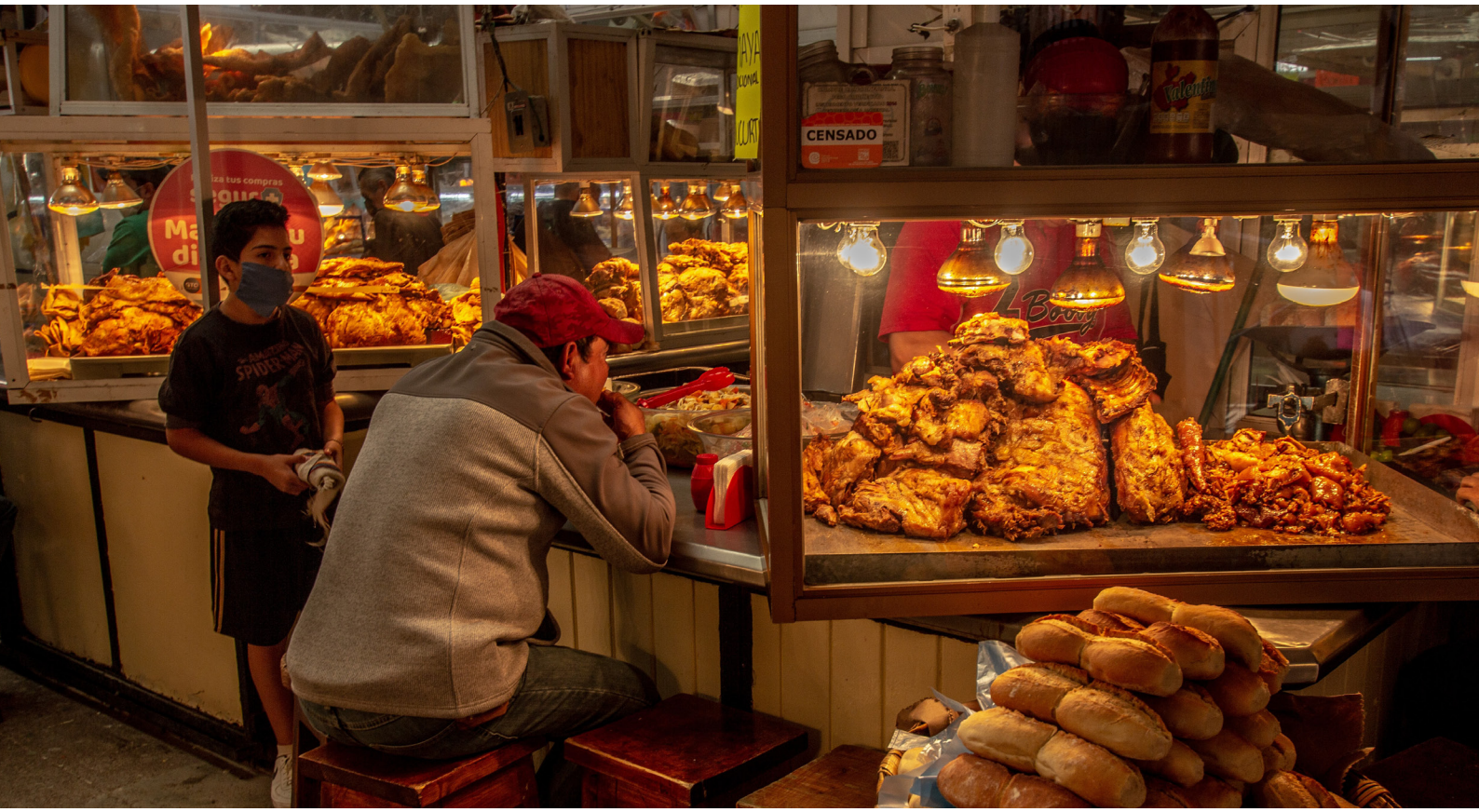
Incomplete Documentation, Isolation and Food Security among Central American Migrants in Mexico City

Tiana Bakić Hayden



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Abstract

This paper examines some of the factors that contribute to food insecurity among the growing populations of Central American migrants who reside in Mexico City. It contributes to a growing body of literature that focuses on the relationship between migration and food security by analyzing the specific challenges faced by migrants who are (semi)permanently settled in an urban area (rather than border region). The main argument of this paper is that although many of the challenges faced by migrants are parallel to those faced by low-income citizens and internal migrants in Mexico City, transnational migrants face unique challenges that contribute to their increased vulnerability and food insecurity. These challenges have political/bureaucratic, social, and economic dimensions. The paper argues that incomplete documentation and social isolation pose specific challenges to migrants that compound their difficulty in achieving individual and household food security.

Keywords

food security, Mexico, migration, ethnography, documentatio

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Author

Tiana Bakić Hayden, El Colegio de México, thayden@colmex.mx

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe some of the factors that contribute to food insecurity among the growing populations of Central American migrants who reside in Mexico City. Mexico represents one of the most important global migrant corridors, with nearly 18.9% of global migrants entering and passing through the country annually by 2020, many of them hoping to cross into the United States (CONAPO 2021). Although migrants come from a variety of Caribbean, South and Central American countries as well as other regions, the most significant populations are from the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (Torre Cantalapiedra 2020). Historically, these Central American migrants have been considered a transitory population, for whom Mexico represents primarily a transit country and a corridor on the way to Canada or the United States. In recent years, however, due to difficulties in entering or remaining in the United States and challenges in the migration process itself, an increasing number of Central American migrants are choosing or being forced to remain in Mexico (Faret et al 2021). While there is an emerging body of studies on Central American migrants who settle in Mexico, the vast majority focus on populations at the northern and southern border, and very few of these studies focus on the food (in)security of migrant populations. Little is known about the migrant populations who settle or reside in the non-border urban areas, and there is no data to date on the food (in)security of these groups.

Research in other parts of the world has shown that migration and food security are phenomena that intersect at multiple levels, but are rarely considered together in policy contexts (Crush 2013). While there is a burgeoning academic literature on the connection between migration and food security, the bulk of this research hails from the Global North and is particularly focused on the experiences of migrants who have settled in Europe, Australia, and North America. In general, existing research has shown somewhat contradictory results. In certain settings in the Global North, migrants have been found to have better diets and food security than the general population, although there is no consensus on this point. The emerging literature from the Global South suggests that migrants face greater vulnerability and challenges in terms of food security. There is a need for greater research on this topic, particularly in Latin America, where generalized violence, economic insecurities, and climate change have triggered widespread regional migration (CNDH 2018). This paper contributes to this discussion by analyzing the food security situation of Central American migrants in Mexico City's metropolitan area.

This paper does not focus on migrants on the move through Mexico heading northward, but rather on those who have settled in the country, about whom little is known in terms of food practices and food security. Recently, a group of researchers from Mexico and the United States have drawn attention to the lack of studies on food (and water) insecurity during migration between populations "on the move" (Gama et al 2020; Deschak et al 2022; Orjuela-Grimm et al 2022). Conducted with migrants of diverse backgrounds in Mexico's border with the United States, these studies, based on both survey and qualitative data, show that migrants face exceptionally high rates of food insecurity and that there are grave consequences for the health and well-being of these populations. The latest research from Sub-Saharan Africa indicates that migrants and refugees are regularly exposed to real and often severe risks of food insecurity (Carney and Krause 2020; Crush 2013; Crush and Tawodzera 2016). For the Mexican and Latin American context, there is a lack of studies on the food security of migrants who are (semi) permanently settled in the region. One of the reasons for this dearth is that Mexico has traditionally been seen as a sending or transit country, rather than a destination country. However, while this has historically been true to some extent, the situation is changing, with 28.6% of migrants in 2019 reporting Mexico as their destination (Nájera Aguirre 2016; REDODEM 2019). One reason for this is that the United States has engaged in a process of border militarization and migrant criminalization that has served as a deterrent for some migrants. Second, climate change, economic instability, and violence in many areas of South and Central America, as well as Mexico itself, have created continued flows of displaced people. In this context, not only the Mexico border regions, but also the cities are becoming places of attraction for the migrant populations. Another challenge, however, is that defining who is settled and who is not is methodologically challenging, given the uncertainties and contingencies that characterize many migrant trajectories. In this paper, I consider as "settled" those migrants who live in non-shelter housing in Mexico City's metropolitan area.

This paper addresses these gaps by linking to a relatively new and growing body of studies that analyze the relationship between migration and food security. It looks at migrant populations that are settled rather than itinerant and who are residing in an urban area rather than border regions. These characteristics are important, as we shall see, because the urban context and experience of living in (rather than passing through) a place pose specific challenges to migrants in terms of food security. Although it is important to develop and apply quantitative instruments to the study of these populations, this paper approaches the problem through ethnographic methods, described in more detail below, because of its ability to analyze the meanings and social significance of food practices in relation to the broader course of people's lives. In this sense, I follow Megan Carney's (Carney 2015) insight that the (gendered) reproductive labour of feeding, as well as food consumption, has long been neglected in migration studies. She argues for the need for studies that consider food practices holistically and in the broader context of migrating people's lives, where the affective dimensions of food are considered in relation to their social roles and identities.

In this paper, we employ the UN Food and Agricultural Organization's widely accepted definition of food security. Food security exists "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO 1996, emphasis mine). It is important to note that, although most policy

and research approaches to food security tend to prioritize the "objective" factors (quantity, frequency, stability of food access, variety, or healthiness according to predetermined categories), FAO's definition incorporates individual preferences. This aspect is often overlooked for both theoretical and methodological reasons, since much of the research on food security has tended to have a quantitative focus, but is crucial because food security is not simply a biological or nutritional fact. Food security can be treated as a symbolic system that is closely related to group and individual identity, sociality, and well-being. Individual or household food preferences or restrictions may lead them to reject food that is available because it is not considered as food or seen as undesirable or contaminated food. This lack of preferred foods can cause stress, identity shift, and conflicts.

Taking these aspects into consideration, the main argument of this paper is that, although many of the challenges faced by migrants are parallel to those faced by low-income citizens and internal migrants in Mexico City, transnational migrants face unique challenges that contribute to their increased vulnerability and food insecurity. These challenges have political/bureaucratic, social, and economic dimensions, which I will elaborate below. I argue that incomplete documentation and social isolation pose specific challenges to migrants that compound their difficulty in achieving individual and household food security. The paper is structured as follows. The first and second sections provide the context and characteristics of Central American migration to Mexico and offer a detailed description of the research methods and process. The third section analyzes various challenges and characteristics of migrant food insecurity in Mexico City using ethnographic descriptions, selected vignettes, and testimonies from migrants with whom I conducted research.

Central American Migrants in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area

In Mexico City, there are large and identifiable immigrant and ethnic neighbourhoods that contain shops, restaurants, places of worship, and residential concentrations of specific communities. Chinatown, Zona Rosa for the Korean population, and Condesa and Roma Norte for American immigrants are prominent examples of such neighbourhoods. These distinctive geographical clusters offer certain benefits to migrant newcomers: networks that provide safety; access to jobs; a sense of place, although these spaces are also tied to urban segregation, exclusion, and discrimination (Malheiros 2002; Merry 1984; Yu 2016). Interestingly, Central Americans appear to be largely not organized in clearly identifiable geographical clusters within the city despite their growing presence. Interviews with community members and actors who work with these populations, as well as the existing literature, have confirmed this significant fact.

Central Americans from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala comprise the largest group of migrants passing through and residing in Mexico. Additionally, there are other groups, such as Venezuelans, Cubans, and Haitians, who also appear in large numbers at certain times or parts of the country. Estimates for the number of Northern Triangle migrants entering Mexico annually range from 140,000 according to more official estimates to upward of 400,000 if undocumented people are considered (cited in Najera Aguirre 2016). Although a much smaller proportion of this population ends up remaining in Mexico, this number has been growing consistently. As a result of this shifting migration pattern and trajectory, Central Americans have become the second largest immigrant population in Mexico (Masferrer and Pederzini 2017). This broad group is increasingly settling in Mexico City (Faret et al 2021). Young, working-age men dominate in terms of numbers, although the feminization of migration and child migration has been witnessed in recent years. This broad migrant cohort represents a highly vulnerable population fleeing desperate, volatile circumstances of political and criminal violence combined with economic deprivation. Recent research suggests that climate change is exacerbating both phenomena and needs to be treated as an additional push factor (Cohen et al 2013; McMichael 2014; Nawrotzki et al 2015).

It should be noted that one of the key challenges in providing a detailed and complete account of Central American migrants in Mexico is that studies on these populations are emerging and very few quantitative studies have been conducted so far (for exceptions, see Masferrer and Pederzini 2017; Najera 2016; Torre Cantalapiedra 2020). Existing data are primarily based on census information, which can exclude and undercount migrants who choose not to disclose their real identities. Other studies draw on data provided by migrant shelters' networks, civil society organizations, and community kitchens, but these also provide a partial picture. The situation is even more complicated in relation to urban migrant populations. Anecdotal accounts and qualitative studies suggest that Mexico City is home to a growing Central American migrant population (Faret et al 2021). However, official statistics on these populations are extremely limited, since those who do not possess residency cards, temporary humanitarian status, or other formal recognition are rendered invisible. Given the importance of Mexico City as a historically important gateway for internal and transnational migrants, its location at the confluence of transnational migrant routes, the presence of a significant number of migrant shelters, and its status as a sanctuary city since 2017, it represents an attractive destination for many migrant populations from this region.

A new study on recent Central American migrations to Mexico City argues that their presence is characterized by a high degree of invisibility and fragmentation (Faret et al 2021). This invisibility often occurs willfully to avoid detection by authorities and discrimination by Mexicans. Central American migrants change their language, clothing, and consumption habits to appear Mexican, as "passing". For example, Spanish-speaking Central Americans report incorporating Mexican intonation and slang into their speech to sound more "local". At one of the public markets where I went to try to interview migrant workers, I was told that it was highly unlikely to find them because "they will just tell everyone that they are from Chiapas". This invisibility can

also occur as a result of exclusion when migrants are not counted, serviced, and recognized by the state and most NGOs. Although being unnoticed by the gaze of the state can provide certain protections to local migrant communities (Scott 1998), this document shows the very real risks and challenges that invisibility poses in terms of the ability of migrants to feed themselves in ways that are consistent, adequate, and appropriate.

Research Methods

This paper is based on ethnographic research that I conducted with five Central American migrant households in Mexico City during May and October 2022. Members of these households were interviewed about their life histories, migration trajectories, and food insecurity experiences before, during, and after the "active" migration phases. Members of four participating households agreed to participate in a photo-food diary, in which they kept track of their food intake over the course of a week via photos that were sent to me in real time via WhatsApp. These photo diaries documented the specific amounts and variety of foods that household members consumed. This was an important process because the participants often gave vague or non-specific accounts of what they ate during the interview process. The photo-food diary also served as a core basis for ongoing conversations about how people felt about what they were eating, why they prepared what they prepared, who they ate with, and other social and subjective dimensions of their food experiences. I also made home visits to three of the families where I was able to observe household conditions, existing facilities, and routines and conduct informal conversations.

The five participating households were selected with the aim of having a mix of characteristics in terms of gender, family composition, and national origin (although, ultimately, Guatemalan households were not included because none were present in the larger pool of contacts that I made through shelters). Following Small's (Small 2009) argument that the virtue of qualitative research is the generation of theoretical rather than empirical generalizability, the observation and argument developed here will be relevant to scholars studying other similar cases. The table below identifies details of the participant households and shows the name of the primary contact person or interlocutor in each household, number of household members, their country of origin, duration and immigration status in Mexico.

The participants resided in the low-income neighbourhoods in the Mexico City metropolitan area that face regular challenges of inadequate access to public services, weak infrastructure, high rates of social marginalization, and rampant crime/insecurity. Indeed, Mexico City as a whole is characterized by high rates of inequality, social segregation, and deficiencies in the provision of urban services and infrastructure (Faret et al 2021; Rubalcava and Schteingart 1985; Schteingart 2007). Thus, migrants arrive in urban spaces that already contain multiple challenges that contribute to socioeconomic vulnerability. For example, recent surveys suggest that almost 60% of Mexico City residents experience some degree of food insecurity and that these statistics are worse for indigenous or female-headed households, as well as households with dependent minors (ENSANUT 2022). Numerous quantitative and qualitative studies have identified key factors that contribute to urban food insecurity in Mexico and Mexico City (ENSANUT 2022; Rubio and Pasquier Merino 2019; Villagómez 2016). Although income is a particularly salient factor, other dimensions, such as the question of time and the presence of unhealthy foodscapes, have also been suggested as relevant issues. There are no such data or analyses on migrants. This paper does not provide generalizable data on the subject but rather provides some insights into the particular challenges that migrants face that weaken their food security, namely incomplete documentation, isolation, and culinary estrangement.

Details of Participating Households

Name (Age)	Country of origin	Household members	Duration in Mexico	Immigration status
Alma (32)	Honduras	Husband, son (9), daughter (9)	1.5 years	Permanent resident (refugee)
Ame (18)	El Salvador	Son (2)	10 years	Temporary resident (expired)
Jorge (38)	Honduras	–	2 years	Permanent resident (refugee)
Brandon (32)	Honduras	–	2.5 years	Permanent resident (refugee)
Ryan (25)	El Salvador	Girlfriend	3 years	Permanent resident (refugee)

Vignette 1

Ame is 18 years old, a mild mannered and pretty young woman from El Salvador who arrived in Mexico at the age of eight. We are standing at the door of her kitchen, a small windowless room where a one-ring burner sits on a countertop next to a box of cereal, some plates, a pot, and some cutlery. There is no fridge in the kitchen, nor a space for washing up. Just a couple of chairs, a folding table and some cardboard boxes are placed on the floor, with bags of dried goods, mainly rice, beans, lentils and some cans nestled inside. I have come to deliver food to one of Ame's benefactors, a former teacher of hers who recently helped her pay rent and acquire basic food for her and her 2-year-old child. There is a strange and dense stench that fills the room, and it dawns on me that it comes from the pile of black garbage bags that are stacked up against one of the kitchen walls. It turns out that these bags are full of days and perhaps weeks of garbage. Styrofoam takeaway cartons, some leftover omelet scraps, dirty diapers, and whatever else has become a breeding ground for maggots and a magnet for cockroaches. Ame explains to her teacher that she does not have the money to pay for this garbage to be taken away. In the part of the city where she lives, there is no public waste collection. The 5 or 10 pesos per bag (USD.25-.5) that the private collectors ask for garbage disposal is more than she has or has been willing to spend.

Ame's son, Osito, is a smiling child who does not use many words but is clearly eager to interact and run around. He brings me an empty bottle, coated with the neon red residue of the soft drink that sits half-empty on the floor. Ame looks guilty as I pick up the bottle and says that she had no money to buy milk that week. Even if she had the means, an open box of milk would quickly spoil in warm weather and buying individually packaged tetrapack servings of milk is very costly. I open one of the litre-sized milks that we have brought and fill Osito's bottle, belatedly realizing that the size of the box assumed the existence of a refrigerator. He guzzles it eagerly, points to a ball, and brings it to me. We spend several hours there with Ame and Osito. I interview her, we play with the baby, and we go grocery shopping at the supermarket below to bring some fresh produce with her. During the following week, Ame sends me photos on WhatsApp of everything she and her son have consumed. She is exceptionally diligent. Good morning, this is breakfast, she writes, sending a photo of some heart-shaped chocolates. My boyfriend gave them to me :) A photo of pasta coated in a creamy sauce next to corn tortillas and a glass of milk shows up for dinner. During the week, they eat regularly, thanks in part to the food and money her former teacher brought her, as well as gifts from her boyfriend. On other occasions, they have had almost no food, where meals have been skipped, although she is quick to say that Osito has always had food. This week though, there are three meals a day, plus snacks. On one occasion, there was chicken, but Ame and Osito mainly eat eggs, pasta, corn tortillas. They also consume food they purchase outside the home: pizza, quesadillas, sandwiches, potato chips, and other snacks. Nowhere did the dried goods that I saw in her kitchen appear in the photos, nor did the fruits and vegetables that we left at her home.

Recalling her guilty face when talking about milk, I decide not to ask Ame why she does not use those ingredients, not wanting her to feel judged. Instead, I ask her what kinds of recipes she likes to cook and mention that I saw that she had lentils and beans. She laughs and says that she did not buy those items of food. They were donations that she received from a migrant shelter. She does not really know how to cook, she explains. She cannot even make good rice, let alone beans or lentils. She says that no one ever taught her. Or rather, they tried to teach her somewhat at the home for young women where she lived for much of her adolescence, but she was never very interested. She likes to buy food on the street but does not have much money to do so. In fact, Ame has no money to talk about. She is just 18 years old, a single mother, without parents, siblings, or other family networks. Currently, her former teacher is the only person standing between her and homelessness.

Ame would like to buy cooked food from outside more often, but that takes money. She would like to work but cannot. The neighbourhood where she lives in the dusty and flat outskirts of Mexico City lacks public daycares. Even if she moved to another neighbourhood, Osito cannot be registered for daycare because he lacks a birth certificate, despite having been born in a public hospital. The main reason for this is that Ame herself lacks valid and legal identification documents. Her Mexican residency permit expired before her baby was born, and she does not have a passport from her native El Salvador. She has not been in her country of birth since she was 8 years old. She has no family with whom she is in contact in El Salvador and barely knows anyone in Mexico. After a major disagreement with Osito's father and his family when the baby was only one year old, Ame found herself on the brink of homelessness.

If Ame were a Mexican citizen, she would qualify for government assistance in the form of social assistance programmes and cash transfers. But Ame is currently in limbo. Although her status as a minor refugee from El Salvador gave her residency in Mexico, her expired document has stripped her of the benefits and rights that such a status could have conferred. Although not strictly "'undocumented", Ame and her son, who should be a Mexican citizen by birth, live in a state of partial, uncertain citizenship, and incomplete documentation. They do have certain documents, an expired

residency permit in her case, and a declaration of birth from the Mexican hospital for Osito, but they lack other required ones, such as a valid passport or driver's licence. As a result, Ame cannot access most of the services and programs to which she is entitled. Although Ame's case is particularly dire, compared to other migrant households with whom I conducted research over the past few months, it underscores several common elements that directly or indirectly contribute to food insecurity. Incomplete documentation is a prevalent experience for 'settled' residents. Even for those whose have valid, unexpired permanent residency, as was the case for all other households, there were always certain documents they lacked that made routine bureaucratic transactions incomplete and complicated their access to basic services and resources.

Vignette 2

> *Ryan is a young El Salvadorian man from San Salvador. He is thin and muscular, his arms, neck, and shoulders are completely covered with dense tattoos. He says that he is judged negatively for having tattoos. He separated from his daughter's mother in part because her family assumed erroneously that he was involved in gangs. In fact, Ryan fled El Salvador in 2019 because gangs invaded his neighbourhood, killed his brother, and several of his friends, and then threatened him. They gave him only 24 hours to decide whether to join them or face his brother's fate. That night, he and his pregnant girlfriend packed their bags and headed to the border towards Mexico. It is worth noting that many migrants fleeing violence are forced to leave with little or no warning and therefore unable to seek, compile, and pack a variety of legal documents (REDODEM 2019). Alma, a Honduran mother of four who now lives in Mexico City with her husband and two of her children, had to flee similarly in the middle of the night after receiving death threats from an abusive family member with connections to the police in the village where she lived. They left, Alma stated, with only clothing on their backs, some money and a vague sense that they had to travel north. This lack of documentation of different types has extended repercussions at various stages of the migrants' journeys and trajectories, and regularly limits their ability to work, earn their livelihoods, and access various programmes and services.*
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> *In Ryan's case, he had no legal standing in Mexico during his first year living in the southern border town of Tapachula from 2019-2020. He worked as a mechanic in a motorcycle repair shop and was paid only 500 pesos per week, placing his household well below the extreme poverty line. He had to pay 1500 pesos rent and could afford to eat only rice and beans. On some occasions, only his pregnant girlfriend could eat a meal. However, without official papers of any kind, he said, there were no other jobs available. In migrant shelters in Mexico City, informal word-of-mouth information is circulated for pay-by-the-day work in factories of different types or jobs such as cleaning or construction. Pay can be as low as 250 pesos (USD12) for an 11-hour day, plus one or two hours of commute each way. These wages, lower than what locals can earn in similar jobs, are so low precisely because migrants lack papers and social networks that can help them obtain better paid work.*
>
> *However, today Ryan has permanent residency status and is eligible to work in Mexico. He has a lot of experience and skills as a mechanic and construction worker. He was also offered relatively well-paid work as a technician for a local Internet company, but could not accept it without a passport, a common challenge faced by most Central American migrants and refugees. Local banks do not accept Mexican government-issued residency cards as sufficient documentary identification, and without a Mexican passport, Ryan is unable to open a bank account to receive his salary. He must pay an acquaintance to allow him to use his bank account and is unable to receive benefits or social security. He is also unable to obtain his driver's licence and is ineligible for promotions that require it.*

However, Ryan has advantages that many other migrants, such as Ame, lack, especially social and kin networks that provide material and logistical support and without which social vulnerability increases greatly in Mexico City. For this reason, Ryan was the most food-secure of the migrants with whom I conducted research for my project. He reported never having to limit his food intake and did not identify food security as an individual challenge (after his first year in Mexico).

Vignette 3

> *Alma worries every week about having enough food to feed her family. This is especially the case during the first week of the month, when they are required to pay their rent and bills. That week, she says, they do not buy any eggs, just basic food items such as tortillas and rice. Alma's husband works as a cleaner in a gym and leaves his home very early each day. He gets paid around 6,000 pesos (USD300) per month, all of which is used for household expenses leaving little for savings. We go through their spending, item by item. Alma is a diligent homemaker and keeps an eye on everything. The one room that the family shares is dingy, its walls are gray with dirt, but everything is very neat. Alma is always folding and smoothing things while we talk. Her children, fraternal twins, are similarly neat and tidy.*

Although some people migrate with their nuclear or extended families or with several friends, this is generally not the case. In most cases, one or two family members first set out, sometimes heading towards an area where they already have family or regional connections. In many cases, these connections are in the United States. Despite being

closer geographically, linguistically and culturally to Central America, Mexico can often feel distant and isolated. This is because most migrants do not travel with Mexico as their intended destination and change plans along the way. And while some migrants claim to want to start de cero (from zero) without contacts, the costs and disadvantages of absent social networks are immediately clear, especially when care-work is needed for infants/children, or when migrants face health issues, and to gain access to jobs, housing, and other essential resources.

> *Alma, for example, was able to work and contribute to supporting her family in Honduras because her mother would take care of her children free of charge. As a two-income family, she and her husband were able to earn an acceptable living. 'We weren't rich, but we never worried about what to eat,' she reflects on her life in her country of origin. Today, Alma stays home because there is no one to take care of the children and help with errands. Like many migrants, Alma is forced to rent precarious housing at relatively high costs because she has no one to vouch for her and help with the deposit. She has had to move twice in one year due to abusive landlords and poor living conditions. As a result, she says that she does not really know her neighbours and there is no one who she and her family can turn to for help. Last Christmas, her husband was robbed on the way home from work and left without money for the next two weeks, including festivities. Back home, there would have been special foods, music and alcohol. Here, she said, they faced the prospect of literally no food and a tragic sense of no one to turn to. Not only that, there was also no one to eat with, which was a source of sadness and made food and its consumption feel unsatisfactory.*

This sentiment was echoed to some extent by all the families that I interviewed. For example, Jorge, a single man from Honduras, who fled violence in San Pedro Sula only to encounter terrible violence, including robbery and kidnapping, while travelling in Mexico, described a life in which he has little meaningful social contact with others. There is little time for a social life because he works long hours. Although he rents a room in a shared apartment, his roommates are not sociable, and their doors are usually locked or closed. Brandon, too, lives alone in temporary housing and has few friends or acquaintances in the city, let alone in his neighbourhood. His work as a construction worker is patchy and unpredictable. When he finds himself without work, he cuts down on his meals. During the week he wrote to me, he was starting a new job after several weeks without income and had not yet been paid. Because the job was far from his home, he would have had to eat out twice a day. But it was too expensive, and he skipped meals. "You know me, I just drink a coffee in the morning and then I cook when I get home," he wrote. At 8 pm, after Brandon came home, I received photos of plates of scrambled eggs with white rice, the only thing he had at home. "It's not much, but it's only for me," he said.

Jorge and Brandon eat outside the house daily when they can afford it. Brandon says that he can eat out for less money than it would cost to cook, but he also says that he does not like to cook for himself alone. Jorge, too, says that eating in his shared kitchen by himself feels uncomfortable. In his case, where the kitchen is shared, his discomfort with eating at home is due to both isolation and lack of privacy. There is an implicit expectation that no one person will take over the kitchen for too long. There is also a lack of trust among household members that food items are locked and not shared. In such a hostile setup, he finds it unpleasant to cook and eat, even though he explains that he likes to cook and learned from his mother, who worked as a private cook for middle-class families back home.

The general lack of community and isolation experienced by migrants in Mexico City may be related to the lack of well-defined "enclaves" or "clusters" in the city. However, what emerged in every household that I researched was the acceptance of shelters as the only instance of meaningful community. Some migrants, such as the three men, Jorge, Ryan, and Brandon, had spent weeks or months living in a local shelter and reported returning to visit the director, support staff, and some long-term residents. Shelters can be the people to whom they turn when faced with the worst circumstances. Ame called the shelter when she ran out of food and was told to pick up a box of dried goods despite not having been a resident for more than a year. In Alma's case, when her husband was robbed before Christmas, they ended up going to the shelter where they had lived when they first arrived in Mexico City and received special holiday meal packages. When Brandon was caught trying to cross the desert into the United States and deported to the border, the migrant shelter was the first place he called for help and advice about what to do and for food.

Conclusion

Central American migrants in Mexico City are a growing but largely invisible group. They represent highly vulnerable populations whose migration is linked to both economic necessity and generalized endemic violence in their home countries. In Mexico, like many marginalized and poor populations, they struggle to make ends meet, put food on the table, and live with dignity. However, their ability to find decent jobs and housing is limited by their social isolation and incomplete documentation. Among the households with which I conducted research, lack of money was the main deterrent to eating as often and as well as one would like. But quality or satisfaction often took the form of not a particular type of food, for example, meat or fish, but rather the ability to eat outside of the house regularly. In addition, the appeal of eating outside the home is a product not only of the well-known commute time and long work hours in Mexico City, but also of the inadequate conditions inside and outside of the migrants' homes in terms of cooking. Lack of refrigeration, blenders, running water, private kitchen and eating spaces, and regular garbage collection all make preparing food at home a daunting undertaking. Although these conditions are also common for many Mexican

households, migrants face greater structural challenges in their daily lives.

Research on food insecurity in Mexico City suggests that households headed by women and children are even more vulnerable than others. Incomplete documentation, increased social isolation, and the absence of care networks make paid work extremely difficult for migrant mothers. Also, children have specific food needs and demands, such as sweets and treats, which are not always available in the types of food that can be accessed through bulk donations. Migrants who migrate as young people, such as unaccompanied minors, may be at a special disadvantage because they may not have learned to cook or shop. The same holds to some extent for young men if they were not responsible for cooking before migrating.

It can be argued that the relative lack of clusters or visible communities among Central American migrants in Mexico City exacerbates the situation of social isolation and socioeconomic vulnerability, as these types of neighbourhoods can provide spaces of sociality and consumption that strengthen social and economic ties. In this context, it is unsurprising that migrant shelters mostly run by religious or nongovernmental organizations play a crucial role and last-ditch support networks for migrants, even those who are "settled" in the city and are not residents of shelters. However, shelters are barely equipped to handle this magnitude of work and generally lack adequate resources themselves.

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