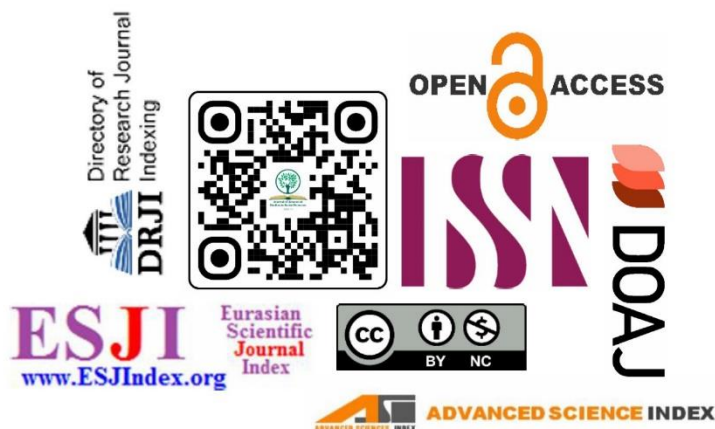
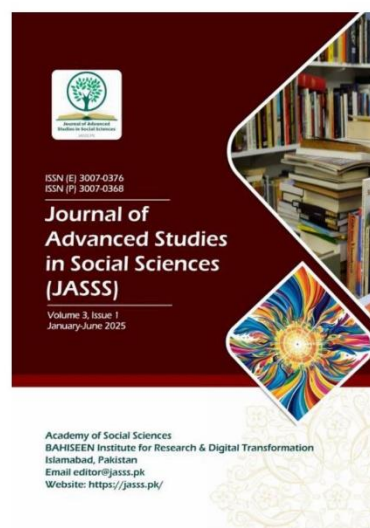


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Migrating from Central America to the United States: A Qualitative Interpretive Meta-Synthesis of individual experiences

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Abstract

Immigration is woven into the fabric of the United States. More than 40 million immigrants currently live in United States, the largest group of whom are of Mexican nationality; additionally, more than 24% are from other Latin American countries (Pew Research Center, 2015). Beyond this, migration across the globe continues to be a concern for large populations impacted by climate change, violence, and poverty. While research increasingly has focused on the individual experiences of migrants, refugees, and asylees, exploration of these data at a meta level is lacking. We conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis of literature that explored the experiences of migrants from Central America coming to the United States to capture overarching experiences of this vulnerable population. Results identified 11 studies with 3 meta-themes: 1) motivation to leave, 2) perilous journey, and 3) the expected and the unexpected. Exploration of these themes identify the ways in which migrants, refugees, and asylees are impacted by their efforts to enter and remain in the United States. The social work practitioner should recognize the needs of this group and the ways in which they may be supported. Implications for direct practice and policy making are discussed with application across cultures and beyond the United States.

Keywords: migration, immigration, qualitative, meta-synthesis, social work

The United States has long been a destination for immigrants seeking economic opportunities, political freedom, and safety from persecution. Over the past decade, US immigration policy has undergone substantial transformations, shaped by shifting political landscapes and global events like the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have had profound impacts on immigrant populations and the social work profession, which plays a critical role in supporting these communities. To understand the experience of migrants coming to the United States, the present study examines published qualitative literature focused on individuals who migrated from Central America to the United States. As such, a review of policy changes and immigration over the last decade follows.

Changes in US Immigration Policy in the Last Decade

The past decade has seen dramatic shifts in US immigration policy, largely influenced by the transition between the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. The Trump administration's policies were characterized by a marked increase in immigration enforcement, the introduction of the "zero-tolerance" policy, and the suspension of programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (Gonzalez-Barrera & Krogstad, 2018; Pierce, et. al., 2018). These policies represented a significant departure from the Obama and Biden administrations' approaches, which emphasized deportation priorities and the protection of certain undocumented immigrants (Kandel, 2021). The second Trump administration appears to be returning to immigration policies he championed during his first term.

The Biden administration sought to reverse many of Trump's restrictive measures, focusing on more inclusive policies and comprehensive immigration reform (Miller, 2021). However, despite these efforts, the policy environment remains highly polarized, with significant legislative challenges hindering the passage of comprehensive reforms (Pierce, 2021). The literature highlights how these policy shifts have created a volatile environment for immigrants, where the protections and opportunities available to them can change drastically with each administration (Kerwin, 2020; Menjívar, 2022).

Impact on Immigrant Communities

Research consistently shows that restrictive immigration policies, such as those implemented during the Trump administration, have significant negative impacts on immigrant communities. Studies have documented increases in deportations, family separations, and heightened fear among undocumented immigrants (Chishti & Bolter, 2020; Menjívar, 2022). These policies have also exacerbated social and economic inequalities, as immigrant communities face barriers to accessing education, healthcare, and employment (Gelatt, 2020).

Conversely, the Biden administration's efforts to restore protections for immigrants, such as reinstating DACA and halting the border wall construction, have provided some relief (Pierce & Bolter, 2020). However, the continuation of policies like Title 42, which has been used to expel migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights the ongoing challenges faced by immigrant communities (Pierce & Bolter, 2020; Menjívar, 2022). As we return to more draconian immigration policies in the new administration, these challenges will increase.

Impact of COVID-19 on US Immigration Pandemic-Induced Policy Responses

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to US immigration policy. The Trump administration used the pandemic as a justification for implementing restrictive measures, such as the invocation of Title 42 to expel migrants at the border and the suspension of visa processing (Gelatt, 2020; Pierce & Bolter, 2020). These measures significantly reduced the number of immigrants entering the country and created additional hurdles for those seeking asylum or family reunification (Chishti & Pierce, 2020).

The literature on the pandemic's impact on immigration highlights how these policies have compounded existing vulnerabilities within immigrant communities. Immigrants, particularly those in essential industries, were disproportionately affected by the economic and health impacts of the pandemic, facing higher rates of unemployment, COVID-19 infection, and barriers to healthcare (Gelatt, 2020; Menjívar, 2022). These challenges have underscored the need for more inclusive and supportive immigration policies, as well as targeted public health interventions (Pierce & Bolter, 2020).

Immigration and the Evolving Role of Social Workers

Social workers have played an essential role in addressing the needs of immigrant communities, particularly in the context of the restrictive policies and challenges of the last decade. The literature highlights the critical role of social workers in providing support services, advocacy, and navigating the legal complexities faced by immigrants (Abrams & Dettlaff, 2020; Dettlaff, 2018). As immigration policies have become more complex, social workers have increasingly engaged in legal advocacy and collaboration with other professionals to support their clients (Dettlaff, 2018).

Present Study

Multiple researchers have explored the experiences of migrants coming to the United States; however, a systematic gathering of this qualitative research has not been completed. This study seeks to systematically find qualitative research on the experiences of migrants coming to the US. from Central America to synthesize the findings.

Methods

This study sought to synthesize literature related to the Central American immigrant experience in the US. utilizing the Qualitative Interpretive Meta-Synthesis (QIMS) approach. The QIMS approach was initially introduced by Aguirre and Bolton (2014) and has been used to synthesize qualitative studies within the social work profession in order to give a “new, deeper, and broader understanding” of a topic (p.283). QIMS involves an interpretive process that avoids aggregating the data as is commonly done in quantitative research. The “meta” aspect of QIMS refers to changing the way a phenomenon is understood, and the “synthesis” part refers to merging different ideas (Aguirre & Bolton, 2014). Given that QIMS is an emerging approach being used to evaluate qualitative studies, published articles have used this method are still relatively rare (e.g., Crawford, 2021; Kataja, Lantela, & Romakkantemi, 2020; Maxwell, Robinson, & Rogers, 2018; Murphy & Alexander, 2019; Nordberg, Crawford, Praetorius, & Hatcher, 2016; Parekh, Praetorius, & Nordberg, 2018; Ravi & Casolaro, 2018; Watkins-Kagebein et al., 2019). According to Aguirre and Bolton (2014), QIMS begins with the development of a research question. This is followed by providing a short description of the authors' roles and their credibility. Following this, the authors sample the literature, extract themes, and report their results (Aguirre & Bolton, 2014).

Instrumentation and Reflexivity

It is typical in qualitative research to use the authors as the predominant instruments of the study, as this allows them to disclose their professional and personal experiences, including training, connection to the focus of the study, and disclosure of any possible biases (Patton, 2002). This practice is referred to as reflexivity (Patton, 2002). In the present study, seven authors collected and analyzed data from qualitative studies.

The first author has published a QIMS before (see: REDACTED, 2016). His research experience includes qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies. His research interests focus on individuals impacted by systems of care, including foster care, juvenile justice, and immigration. The second author comes to this project with over five years of experience working with incoming asylum seekers. She navigates the privilege she inherits as a cisgender woman from whiteness, citizenship, class, and settler colonialism. Her experiences working intimately with refugees informs her understanding of migrants' experiences, at the same time, she comes to this work as an outsider aware of her positionality and the power imbalances. The third author is completing his MSW with the goal of becoming a licensed clinical social worker. He is concerned with human rights abuses across the world, and his status as a Hispanic-American living in California's Central Valley has helped develop his ability to empathize with and critically analyze the present study data. The fourth author is completing her MSW. She has experience working in the criminal justice system where her undergraduate internship took place in the Public Defender's office. Her long-term goal is to work as a school social worker in working with diverse groups in the school system and advocating for at-risk youth. The fifth author's research interest is immigration. As the daughter of an immigrant from Central America, her goal is to continue conducting research among the immigrant community to support the members of marginalized communities. She is currently an MSW student pursuing school social work. The sixth author is a current MSW student. As a Mexican-American immigrant in the United States, he understands the obstacles of having Spanish only speaking parents. His philosophy consists of advocating for human rights, and spreading awareness of cultural barriers that block equal access and opportunities to knowledge and mental health services. The seventh author is the proud daughter of immigrant parents, which informs her interest in this topic. She is aware of the struggles and injustices immigrants endure both during their migration journey and in the United States. She is currently an MSW student seeking to continue serving and advocating for at-risk youth and families.

This diverse set of experiences, both personal and professional, created a team of researchers that were able to develop a research question that guided the examination of qualitative literature on the topic. The research question is *What are the lived experiences of people who migrate from Central American countries to the United States?*

Sampling

Sampling for QIMS involves a combination of purposive and theoretical sampling along with an exhaustive review of qualitative studies (Aguirre & Bolton, 2014). For the present study, we searched for journal articles and other literature related to the topic on Google Scholar, as well as a "OneSearch" tool that aggregates results from different

databases available to the California State University system. Title and basic searches were completed for terms: *Latin** OR *Hispanic**, *“Central America*”* OR *Guatemala* OR *“El Salvador”* OR *Honduras* OR *Nicaragua* OR *Panama* OR *Belize* OR *“Costa Rica”*; *Migrant** OR *Migrant** OR *Immigrant** OR *Immigrant** OR *Asylum* OR *Asylee* OR *Undocument** OR *Refugee* OR *Visa* OR *“green card”* OR *“permanent resident”*; *Qualitative* OR *Ethnography** OR *Narrative* OR *“case study”* OR *phenomenology** OR *“grounded theory”* OR *“participatory action research”*.

The inclusion criteria for this research were (1) peer reviewed journal articles or dissertations, (2) written in English or Spanish, (3) included immigrants from Central America, (4) sampled individuals who had migrated to the US., (5) and were qualitative studies. From our initial search, we found 1131 articles in the OneSearch database and 16,700 from Google Scholar. The titles of the studies were reviewed and left us a total of 227 studies. An abstract review further eliminated quantitative studies or those that otherwise did not meet the inclusion criteria. Following this, 87 articles remained, and a reading of their methods sections eliminated another 60, leaving 27 articles. A thorough review of these remaining articles helped verify they met all of the inclusion criteria, thus leaving our final total of 11. Articles eliminated during this final step were those that focused on participants from areas other than Central America, did not identify countries of origin, or were not focused on the experience of migration from the migrant’s perspective. The lead author conducted a final review for fatal flaws in the articles and found none. A quorum chart (Fig. 1) details the sampling process, while Table 1 provides a detailed synopsis of each study included in the synthesis.

Figure 1 : Quorum chart

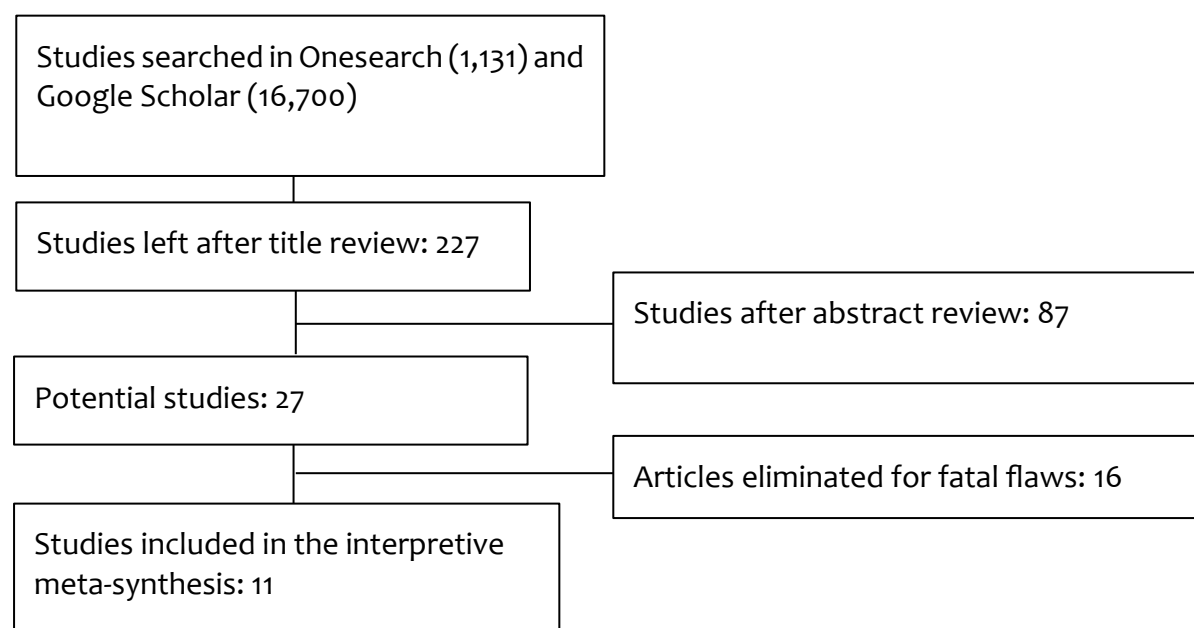


Table 1**Table 1: Articles included in the synthesis**

Author and publication year	Title	Qualitative data collection method	N	Age range, ethnicity/ nationality, gender, when immigrated	Location
Carol L. Cleveland (2013)	“I stepped over a dead body...”: Latina immigrant narratives of immigration and poverty	Interviews and ethnographic observation	16	18 to 45 (mean = 33); six from Honduras, six from El Salvador, one from Guatemala, and three from Mexico; all women; all immigrated as adults except for one (18 year old Mexican woman, immigrated at age 12)	Prince William County, VA
Laurie Cook Heffron (2019)	“Salía de uno y metí en otro”: Exploring the migration-violence nexus among Central American women	Interviews	19	25 to 53 (mean = 35); six from El Salvador, five from Guatemala, and eight from Honduras; all women; all immigrated within previous 15 years of study	Texas
Frank Anthony Rodriguez, Marika Dawkins (2017)	Undocumented Latino youth: Migration experiences and the challenges of integrating into American society	Interviews	12	16 to 33 (mean = 22/23); five from Honduras, seven from Mexico; all males; all immigrated between ages 10 and 19	Texas
Andres Tapia (2016)	How Unaccompanied Minors From Central America Make Meaning of Migration-Related Trauma	Interviews	9	15-17, two participants from Honduras and seven from El Salvador; two females and seven male	Texas and South Carolina

Becker Herbst, Forooz Sabet, Swanson, Suarez, Marques, Ameen, and Aldarondo , (2018)	“They Were Going to Kill Me”: Resilience in Unaccompanied Immigrant Minors	Life-History Interview	10 0	Age: 18 and younger Mean age (16) High school graduate (1) Missing data (7) <i>Ethnicity/Nationality</i> : Guatemala (40), Honduras (28), El Salvador (25), Ecuador (3), Caribbean (1), Mexico (1), Missing Data (2) <i>Gender: M (94) F (6)</i>	Shelter for UUIM
Edberg, Benavides- Rawson, Rivera, Shaikh, Monge, and Grinker, (2020)	Transnational determinants of health for Central American migrants to the U.S.: Results of a qualitative study	Interviews	75	Age: 18-57 <i>Ethnicity/Nationality</i> : El Salvador (37), Guatemala (27), Honduras (10), Nicaragua (1) <i>Gender: Female</i> (44), Males (31)	Washington , DC, USA
Montes (2013)	The role of emotions in the construction of masculinity: Guatemalan migrant men, transnational migration, and family relations	Interviews	8	Age: 19-62 <i>Ethnicity/Nationality</i> : Guatemala <i>Gender: Female (4),</i> Males (4)	Guatemala (3 interviewed) and Nuevo Amanecer, California (5)
Sladkova (2013)	Stratification of undocumented migrant journeys: Hondruan Case	interviews	21	Age: Adults <i>Ethnicity/ Nationality:</i> Honduras <i>Gender: Male (14)</i> Female (6) Missing data (1) <i>When immigrated:</i> 1998 - 2005	Honduras
Caldera, (2019)	“A Qualitative Research Study on Unaccompanied Minors From Latin Americans	Interview face-to-face interviews	7	13-19 years old, minors, highschool students, Men (5), Women (2,)	The University of San Francisco

				Honduras (1), Guatemala (3), El Salvador (3),	Oakland, California
Lusk, (2019)	“Resilience, faith, and social supports among migrants and refugees from Central America and Mexico”	Interviews	14	18-49 years old, Men (12), Women (2), Guatemala (1) Honduras (12)	Texas
Willers, (2018)	“Migration and reproductive strategies of Central America women in transit through Mexico”	Interviews	36	19- 56, Women Honduras (17) El Salvador (12) Guatemala (7)	Mexico City

Theme Extraction

The instrumentation and sampling processes have been described, and the next step is to report the 11 studies' original themes. These were extracted directly from the papers to maintain the accuracy and original results from the authors (Aguirre & Bolton, 2014; see Table 2).

Table 2 Theme Extraction

Author (year)	Extracted themes
Becker Herbst, Sabet, Swanson, Suarez, Marques, Ameen, & Aldarondo (2018)	Motivation Tensions of Resilience Context of Resilience Protective factors Journey
Caldera (2019)	Motivation Post
Cleveland (2013)	Motivation Journey Post
Cook Heffron (2019)	Motivation Journey Post
Edberg, Benavides-Rawson, Rivra, Shikh, Monge, & Grinker (2020)	Motivation
Lusk, Terrazas, Caro, Chaparro, & Puge Antunez (2019)	Protective factors

Montes (2013)	Journey Protective factors
Rodriguez & Dawkins, (2017)	Motivation Journey Post
Sladkova (2013)	Journey
Tapia (2016)	Protective factors Motivation Post Journey
Willers (2018)	Journey

Results

Themes extracted from the original articles are analyzed to develop meta-themes, creating a broader and richer exploration of the experience of migrants coming to the United States from Central America. This synthesis of the 11 articles identified three major overarching meta-themes: 1) motivation to leave, 2) perilous journey, and 3) the expected and the unexpected. The results are presented below with supporting narratives from the participants in the included studies. When possible, we provide the names given to the participants in their respective studies and include the age and country of origin in parenthesis. For some, this information was not provided.

Motivation to leave

Interviewees from six of the studies identified different sources of motivation in their reasoning to make the journey to the US. Widely, the two primary factors in choosing to migrate to the United States were the opportunities to provide for themselves and their families through educational or financial means, and to escape violence, whether sexual, gang-related, or domestic. Below is a synthesis of participants' motivations to emigrate.

Opportunity

Opportunity was paramount as a motivation for many who spoke of the poverty that they and their loved ones dealt with in their home countries. One Guatemalan woman (30) shared how her family was "careful to not get sick, because when [they] got sick, the mothers and the grandmothers... gave you homemade medicine, to avoid the expenses" (Edberg et al., 2020, p. 7). This same individual also discussed the rate of pay in America where she can earn in a couple of days what she was paid in a month in Guatemala (Edberg et al., 2020).

Often the economic prosperity of one family member is directly tied to that of their relatives. Sometimes, a lack of familial or "caretaker" support was cited as youths' reasoning behind migrating. "Nobody took care of me in my country because I don't have people to take care of me, because they died" (Becker Herbst et al., 2018, p. 254). Maria (22, Honduras) shared that her father died several years earlier, forcing her to work to care for the family (Cleaveland, 2013). A man (23, Guatemala) spoke of "entire families" leaving "because of problems with money" (Edberg et al., 2020, p. 6). These sentiments were echoed by other Central American youth who desired to study in the US. and further their

education as a means towards helping their families. Many interviewees discussed their desire to help their families as their motivation (Becker Herbst et al., 2018).

Generally, the communities from which the interviewees migrated are characterized by a lack of access to basic necessities such as food, healthcare, or opportunities to earn a living. An El Salvadoran man (20) stated, “many of my peers have nothing to eat at home, and the little they have to eat is only for a few days or for some meals. Sometimes, they don’t eat anything, and they’re doing pretty bad” (Edberg et al., 2020, p. 6). Similarly, a woman (24, Guatemala) shared that “there are also many people starving because there are people who have no possibility to work” (Edberg et al., 2020, p. 7). Perhaps representative of the entire sample of youth collected as part of the present study, one interviewee simply put it this way: “In my country, I did not have the opportunity to do something... I could not do anything” (Becker Herbst et al., 2018, p. 254). Summarily, respondents often saw migrating to America as the only chance for them to be able to provide for themselves and their families, while their willingness to make the grueling journeys from their home countries highlights their resilience.

Violence

Unfortunately, the reality for many citizens of Central American countries is one that is often shaped by a life or fear of violence, regardless of their age. For those who do not succumb to or join the ranks of local gangs, they must deal with constant harassment and threats to their and their families’ lives. Youth respondents frequently cited escaping gang violence as one of their primary reasons for migrating to the US. Two Honduran youth gave almost identical accounts of the gangs murdering their older brother before targeting them for recruitment. The threat was obvious to them: join or be killed too (Tapia, 2016). Another respondent stated, “They wanted me to join the gang and I refused, so one day they beat me and they followed me, threatening that they were going to kill me” (Becker Herbst et al., 2018, pp. 253-254).

Intersectional forms of violence, which are perpetrated on women or members of the LGBTQ+ community, were also highlighted as a central reason for an individual wanting to flee their home country. One transgender respondent (El Salvador) shared her harrowing account: “They were killing everyone from the gay community... when I saw that, I let my brows grow, I cut down my hair, when I came here, I came as a man” (Edberg et al., 2020, p. 6). Women, often powerless against the dominant patriarchy of their home communities, also spoke about the fear of domestic violence that they had to endure before deciding to migrate. Gloria (Northern Triangle country) shared that she had not thought about coming to the US. until “one day [she] was coming back from the store and [the father of her children] threw a pot of water” on her, burning her entire body, before she grabbed a few pieces of clothing and fled (Cook Heffron, 2019, p. 685).

Oftentimes, peace is unattainable in the home communities of powerless individuals residing in Central America, regardless of their well-intentioned efforts. As Anita (32 El Salvador) described: “We had two beautiful places by our house, where the neighbors kept their horses [...] one day we went out and found them... their heads were cut-off [...] while they were still tied up all around our house” (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 8). She went on to describe finding a decapitated man in front of her house one morning, and “Maria” (32, Honduras) recalled a story in which her mother was attacked by a boy outside of their house:

My sister's boyfriend came to defend her, and ended up killing the kid. The boyfriend left and went to the United States, and left my mother there. The mother of the boy who was killed couldn't do anything, so she accused my mother of killing him. My mother will spend 15 years in prison. She's 60 now. (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 7)

Perilous journey

The 2,500+ mile journey from Central America to the US./Mexico border is considerable under any circumstance, but for Central American migrants, many of whom are fleeing their countries out of fear of violence or economic disparity, this journey comes at an even greater cost. Several themes emerged around the interviewees' experience of migration and border crossing which include the difficulties of migrating over harsh and violent landscapes, experiences of gender-based violence, and encountering US. immigration enforcement.

Difficult Terrain and Violence

Unaccompanied, undocumented minors who traveled from Central America reported the dangers in the trek with one saying, "I arrived in really bad shape, suffering from hunger, thirst, and cold" (Becker Herbst, 2018, p. 257). During their journey, they discussed traveling over extremely dangerous routes where they and their fellow traveling partners experienced threats to their lives (Becker, 2018, p. 257). Central American migrants in nine of the reviewed articles discussed encountering numerous hardships on their journey to the border, often depending on hired agents to get them through difficult terrain and wilderness to cross into the US. The pace of these journeys is relentless, with few opportunities for shelter or relief. As a Honduran woman recounted, "We suffered greatly because we had to sleep on the moving train, we slept in the streets and on the highways, we endured hunger and we endured unrelenting cold" (Lusk, 2019, p.13).

Those who cannot keep up are left behind with no resources or support. The journey Central American migrants take includes traveling on foot for miles without the ability to rest or recuperate, being forced onto trains where they could easily fall and be crushed, and traveling in extreme weather conditions without food, water, sanitation, or proper shelter. In the narratives documented in the articles, the extreme conditions through which migrants must journey left many discussing experiencing physical and lifelong health problems, including loss of mobility, chronic infections, and stress-induced mental illness. Exposure to death was also a common occurrence, with many recounting stepping over or passing by dead bodies of migrants as they continued their journey. A young female migrant recounted:

There was a man who had just passed away, they left him sitting there, it was like there was a group that had just passed by and left him sitting at the trunk of a tree, sitting there with his hat (Edberg et al., 2020, p. 8).

Witnessing injured migrants, elderly migrants, and women and children who were unable to travel and left behind was a repeated experience documented across the articles.

My most difficult experience was when we were crossing the mountains into Southern California, we were walking and as I looked around there were women and children who could no longer continue to walk and who were weeping. I wanted to help them but I couldn't because to stay with them, I would have been

left behind with the rest of them who couldn't make it, staying there in the mountain among the rattlesnakes and scorpions. One of the travelers was bitten by a snake and could not continue to walk and the coyote (smuggler) just left her there stranded (Lusk, 2019, p. 13).

The journey Central American migrants take to cross into the US. is not only difficult but extremely perilous. The danger that migrants face is only further heightened by the likelihood of exploitation and enslavement by hired agents (coyotes), local gangs, and other migrants encountered on the journey. Participants described being robbed, kidnapped, and trafficked by those who they hired to guide them to their destination. Without protection and social support, Central American migrants become victims to local gangs and residents. Many are left assaulted and robbed of their possessions, and several respondents experienced family members or fellow migrants being taken away to never be seen again.

Gender Violence

A noticeable theme present in the articles was gender-based violence and migration. Many of the women interviewed decided to migrate to escape gender-based violence in their countries of origin, only to then be targeted and sexually abused by coyotes, fellow migrants, local gangs, and even while in the custody of US. Border Patrol and Immigration (USBPI) officers. Women experienced unwanted pregnancies, poor health, and emotional trauma from the violence they encountered in their journeys. The extreme precarity that many migrants find themselves in, especially women travelling with young children, meant that many felt helpless to intervene when witnessing other female migrants and children being sexually or physically assaulted.

Marianna (Honduras) traveled to the US. with her three children and witnessed women and girls being sexually assaulted on their migration journey. She recounted the following story:

So, we met one woman in Ixtepec that came with a young boy, she came on a train with the boy; in the train they took her baby, they stole her baby. And twelve raped her, she says. Twelve men raped her and they took her son, she was there with Father and they left her ... she was in a bad state. [...] she would leave with clothes, come back naked, she'd come back naked, just saying ... just saying: 'My son, my son.' And 'No, no, don't rape me', she said. She was left traumatized from everything that happened to her, they stole her child and raped her (Willers, 2018, p. 65).

Marianna's account is indicative of the way that migration is gendered. Gender dichotomies and gender power imbalances not only shape why migrants may leave Central America, but also contribute to the barriers encountered in their journey (Schmidt & Buechler, 2017).

Encountering US. Immigration

Interviewees described encountering USBPI officers and other immigration officials with a mixture of relief and fear. After an arduous journey, encountering USBPI meant the possibility of soon accessing food and water, emergency health care, and protection from traffickers and robbery once in USBP custody. Some of the interviewees described purposely searching for USBPI officers to find relief. The immediacy of this relief, however, was surpassed by the fear of further violence by these agents. One respondent told of this experience:

Federal police, I mean when we were getting off a bus, so there I remember that they started to poke one, "Give me what you have, give me, give me what you have" and they started to take away the money from all the undocumented, they knew who they were. (Sladkova, 2013, p. 89)

The interviewees described having their money taken away by officers, while the risk of being forcibly deported and the uncertainty of what would happen to them next while in custody added to their stress. Separation from family members and other traveling companions only added to their confusion and fear.

Expected and the unexpected

Throughout the studies included, participants discussed their experiences after arriving in the US. These experiences were sometimes what the participant had expected, including finding employment, education, and family. Beyond that, many participants also had experiences that they were not expecting which included abuse, mental health concerns, and racism.

Employment

Many of the participants across the studies discussed how important employment was after they arrived in the US. Participants discussed living in homes with multiple other migrants, trying to find steady employment so that they could survive. An unnamed participant from El Salvador said, "Without work, I don't have money for food or to pay the rent" (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 10).

Often, differing documentation statuses made the difference in their employment experiences. Finding and maintaining work was difficult for many of the participants; for instance, Marvin (18, Honduras) talked about the struggle to find work without legal documents saying, "For the last three years I have been crying and crying a lot. I have had a very bad life lately" (Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017, p. 432). Bryan (20, Honduras) explained how legal documentation made a huge difference in his life: "Just so you know, I have already gotten some type of documentation that allows me to work here in the US. and am extremely happy, and now I feel free!" (Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017, p. 431). Elisa (26, Honduras) also had a positive experience with work, primarily because she had made a connection through another migrant woman who helped her obtain work right away (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 10).

Those who found work also discussed how challenging the work was. Magdalena (19) described her employer taking advantage of her. "And then they were having me take more hours, but not paying me more" (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 11). Dynamo (22yo) described working 12 to 15 hours a day through all daylight hours, constantly being pushed to do more (Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017).

Several respondents discussed the dangers in their work. Soledad (29, El Salvador) said she wore a harness to clean windows on multi-story buildings and only quit after falling while three months pregnant (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 10). Often, these dangers were accepted because it was the only employment they could find, and the money was necessary to support family. A minor, whose age and name were not provided, said that his "goal was to help my mother... but I think that all that suffering will be worth it" (Tapia, 2016, p. 77).

Education

Many of the migrants who participated in the studies were adults and didn't discuss education as much as they did work; however, education was a goal for some. An unnamed minor in Tapia's (2016) work discussed using education as a tool to move beyond the trauma he encountered on his journey to the US. He shared:

My greatest desire, my greatest wish is to continue studying. A thanks to God I will soon be enrolling and I am very, very, very happy because I am here and my greatest dream of studying will come true. It is better here, because here I am studying. (p. 78)

Marco (33, Mexico) arrived at age 15, discussed that school was important to him. He is happy that he had the opportunity to finish high school so that he could work and support his children now. Cowboy (16, Honduras) emphasized how important education was in his life, describing school as both "fun" and the "first priority" in his life (Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017, p. 432).

Family

Connecting with family was also a commonly discussed experience for the participants after they arrived in the US. Roberto (Guatemala) recalled being left behind with an aunt of his when his mother came to the US. It was a decade later when he arrived and reunited with her:

My mom told me that she was going to bring us to the US., to be with her and to go to school in the US. I was 4 or 5 years old when my mother left for the US. When I arrived to the US. and was reunited with her, I didn't know her. I didn't recognize her. I had not seen her in 10 years (Caldera, 2020, p. 106).

Bobby (23) recalls coming to the US. as a teenager with aspirations for a better life. He feels the weight of that responsibility as a young man now: "I now communicate a lot with my wife. The decisions I make are not only for me, they are for my entire family" (Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017, p. 432).

Several of the participants also discussed reuniting with family members who had migrated to the US., either with them or separately. Alfonso (Guatemala) migrated to the US. with an American visa. His son migrated in his 20s with the help of a smuggler, and Alfonso recounted their reunification:

Those days were full of pain, sorrow, and anguish because I did not know where he was or who had him. Finally, around midnight, the phone rang, and there was the smuggler telling me that my son had arrived. As soon as I could, I got to where the smuggler had my son. I was allowed to see my son just through the bus window, but in order to release him, I had to pay the rest of what they charge for crossing the border. My son was a mere *mercancia* [commodity]. Finally, he was released; we hugged and we kissed each other. You should have seen him; he looked as if he was dead. He had thorns all over his clothes. My son did not say a single word; for days, he didn't want to talk about what happened (Montes, 2013, p. 481).

The Unexpected

A common theme among the studies was the experience of racism, mental health, and frequent abuse after arriving in the US. An unnamed woman commented thusly:

I want to say that people here don't know our experiences and the fact that we suffer here. I want the people here to know what our situation is. There are many of us here, and I'm not alone. But there are people here who don't have jobs. We came here to get ahead (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 11).

An adolescent migrant said that what they are told is the American Dream means "everything is beautiful and good", but that this is not accurate. She continued, describing experiences of kidnapping and forced labor (Tapia, 2016).

Experiences with racism were also discussed by the participants. One Salvadoran woman (37) stated she just wanted Americans to stop discriminating against individuals who come from other countries. She said, "we don't come here to take away anything from anybody; we just come here to work truthfully" (Edberg et al., 2020, p. 13). Magdalena (19) who previously discussed being taken advantage of at work, had this to say about her former workplace:

The majority were Americans, whites and they were a little racist. They didn't like to talk to us Latinos. There were only two registers open, and they had a whole lot of people there. I was doing more than I could, including the weekends when they had more people. And there were two cashiers. I was Hispanic and she was American. They were having her do hardly anything, and at me with each thing, "Hurry up!" yelling at me. They wouldn't give me a break (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 11).

These experiences also led to participants discussing concerns about their mental health. A Guatemalan woman (30) talked about feelings of loneliness that led to her depression after she arrived in the US. (Edberg et al., 2020). Marvin (18, Honduras) talked about the pressures he felt around employment and the challenges he faced in obtaining and keeping a job. He reported a loss of his happiness and crying frequently at the difficulty he faces in his new life (Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017).

For many of the migrants in the studies we reviewed, abuse and violence were common not just before they migrated or during their journey, but even after their arrival in the US. The violence included psychological, emotional, and physical abuse as well as other violent acts such as sexual assault and rape. Zara, whose age and nationality were not provided, discussed how her abuser alienated her from everyone in her life: "I don't have any friends today, I don't have anyone. He absolutely took me away from everyone. He wanted me to be locked away with him" (Cook Heffron, 2019, p. 692-693). Karla (Honduras) discussed a change in the relationship with her husband after migrating to the United States: "He started hitting me. Every time he would get mad, he would grab me by the neck, he would choke me" (Cook Heffron, 2019, p. 692). Gilberta (Honduras) described her abuse after arriving in the United States:

When we got here they tied our hands and feet up, a handkerchief in our mouths and they threw us on a truck like a ball. When we got to a house, they bought us clothes and they made us put it on and there was a woman who brushed our hair and did our make-up. And they made us do things we didn't want to do. That was

difficult for me. My children are from all of that. The three children here are from the abuse (Cook Heffron, 2019, p. 693).

For others, the abuse was more psychological than physical, and the threat of deportation loomed over their lives. Cowboy said:

My dad got deported and I was abused by my boss. I had to stay with the man who kept abusing me. I was kicked by my boss with hit boots. He would also hit me with a belt on the back. He would call me a wet back (Rodriguez & Dawkins, 2017, p. 428).

An unnamed minor reported that they learned “to not trust in people even if the person is your best friend” (Tapia, 2016, p. 82). Soledad (29, El Salvador) discussed how she and her husband had a plan that one of them would always be home in case the other was arrested for deportation so someone would be home with their children. “That’s the fear we live with, that the family will be disintegrated” (Cleaveland, 2013, p. 10).

Discussion

The decision and journey to migrate is rarely easy, yet it is sufficiently justified by an individual’s desire to secure a better future for not only themselves, but many times, their family as well. Whether they leave their loved ones behind or jointly migrate with them, reaching the US represents a chance to provide for themselves while escaping the dire, violent, and impoverished conditions in their home countries. A social work lens can be applied to the concerns noted in these studies at both the individual and policy level.

Adaptations in Social Work Practice

Immigrants in the US may face several difficulties that require social work intervention, including behavioral health support, navigating social support systems not designed to help them, and legal challenges in seeking legal status through the US immigration system. Social workers should be prepared to assist immigrants regardless of the documentation status. Social workers have had to develop new strategies to support immigrant clients in an increasingly hostile policy environment, including a greater focus on trauma-informed care and culturally responsive practices (Abrams & Dettlaff, 2020; Dettlaff, 2018). The importance of social workers in advocating for policy changes that protect the rights and well-being of immigrants cannot be overstated as well (Kerwin, 2020). While being prepared to serve the immigrant population is an important first step in preparing to meet the needs of individuals, social workers have a responsibility to work at the macro level to intervene as well.

As the US begins a new presidential administration focused on aggressive immigration enforcement and deportation, the role of the social worker is clear in upholding the rights and dignity of all. Advocacy for humane immigration policies that recognize the unique and perilous situations for all involved is necessary. Asylee and refugee status must be recognized for those who qualify. Social workers must advocate for those who meet those requirements by first becoming familiar with asylum and refugee laws. Beyond that, for the millions of migrants already living and working in our communities, we should recognize the positive contributions they make to our society and the negative impacts their forced removal would have.

Migration on the scale that is seen from Central America to the US does not happen in a vacuum. As told by many of the participants in the studies reviewed here, their decision to leave their countries of origin was not an easy one. Often, they left because they had

little choice. As wealthy country in a hemisphere with many poorer nations, the US can and should be assisting in lifting the economies of those nations. Instead, we have often contributed to the extraction of wealth. The drug epidemic in the US also contributes to instability, violence, and gangs in many Central American nations, which is not a problem that can be solved by those countries alone. Creating a wealthier and more stable region is in the best interest of all nations in the Americas.

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