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Article

Collective Trauma in Migrant Communities

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Abstract

This article explores the complex migration pathways undertaken by individuals who arrived in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan area. The findings reveal a clear distinction between formalized legal migration routes and highly dangerous irregular journeys, yet people coming through both routes experience instability and a proactive desire for a more viable future. This paper identifies three critical themes among 233 structured interviews: 1) The primacy of existential threats—where political collapse, chronic economic insecurity, and targeted violence act as root causes; 2) Systemic vulnerability and danger—demonstrated through widespread corruption, extortion, and life-threatening environments; and 3) The psychological burden—including direct trauma and a significant prevalence of community trauma. This study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the choice, logistics, and human cost involved in contemporary migration to the United States.

Keywords: migration; displacement; root causes; Darién gap; corruption; trauma; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Displacement due to conflict and crises presents significant policy, humanitarian, and mental healthcare challenges. While media coverage often focuses on moments of arrival and border crises, the decision-making process, the journey, and the lived experience of vulnerability remain less understood. This article addresses that gap by analyzing the migration journeys of 233 individuals who have settled in the Washington D.C. Metropolitan (DMV) region. This analysis offers a detailed assessment of the factors that triggered their movement, the logistical challenges of their journeys, and the intense perceptions of danger and trauma they carried with them. For many migrants, the decision to leave is not an economic calculation, but rather an urgent existential matter. It is a choice forced by conditions, such as political collapse, targeted violence, or complete economic destabilization, that render continued life in the country of origin unsafe. This shift from a voluntary and opportunity-seeking model to a survival-driven and forced-choice model gives a closer look at the actual experiences of the movement.

The participants in this study come from Central and South America. These interviews provide an opportunity to examine migration not as a single event, but as a complex, multi-stage process defined by instability, corruption, and resilience. The analysis is organized around four comprehensive and interwoven themes, which delineate the experience from departure to arrival: 1) the root causes and initial triggers; 2) the diverse pathways and the logistics of travel; 3) the perceptions of danger and the associated psychological trauma; and 4) the lasting impacts of the migration journey. By centering the voices of the participants, we aim to deliver a professional yet accessible account that highlights the necessity of the journey and the deep human cost required to achieve stability.

Millions of people migrate internationally and the U.S. used to have positive net migration, with more people immigrating into the country than emigrating away, although this pattern changed in 2025 (Chi et al., 2025). The number of internationally displaced people has rapidly increased over the past ten years (Li et al., 2016; Hong et al., 2025). In order to understand migration trends holistically,

it is critical to examine the actual experience of migrants, including their emotional and mental well-being. Migrants from Central America face an increased risk of experiencing mental health challenges, such as PTSD and depression, due to their exposure to violence, abuse, family separation, and other traumatic circumstances. Specifically for children, exposure to traumatic events increases their risk for psychiatric symptoms and disorders, particularly PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Cohodes et al., 2021).

Trauma materializes not only through direct experiences but also “witnessing a traumatic event, learning that a close family member or friend has experienced trauma, or repeated exposure to the details of a traumatic event” (Hong et al., 2025, p. 1253). The way trauma manifests reveals how the trauma of migration extends beyond an individual migrant and through family and community members. Some families may cope with the trauma of migration through maladaptive mechanisms, magnifying the symptoms and effects (Hong et al., 2025). Trauma can also manifest physically in the body. Individuals who are affected by PTSD and depression often face impaired cognitive performance, including difficulties with attention, impaired verbal memory, and learning deficiencies (Brandes et al., 2002). Further, PTSD is connected to physical health outcomes, including immune activity, often exacerbating other medical conditions (Pacella et al., 2012).

Immigrants face trauma at different points in their journeys, including in the pre-migration, the actual act of migration, and post-migration stages (Sluzki, 1979; Ornelas & Perreira, 2011). Each stage includes unique risks to trauma. Prior to migration, many migrants witness violence against loved ones, experience persecution, or feel targeted by gang violence (Castañeda et al., 2021a; Ornelas & Perreira, 2011). Migrants attempting to enter the US through the southern border overland brave gruesome conditions including treacherous terrain, extreme weather, and lack of water (Cohodes et al., 2021; Ornelas & Perreira, 2011). Once at the border, asylum seekers may face harrowing experiences in detention facilities, where they await their credible fear interviews (MacLean et al., 2019). Children in detention facilities face considerable psychological distress, particularly those who are separated from their mothers, ultimately impairing their development (MacLean et al., 2019).

Settling in a new community, migrants must navigate economic challenges, language barriers, and the stress of integration into a new culture, or acculturative stress (Castañeda et al., 2021; Ornelas & Perreira, 2011). Migrants also face discrimination in their new communities, influencing their mental health (Attia et al., 2024; Vos et al., 2023). Real or perceived discrimination is positively associated with PTSD symptoms in Venezuelan female migrants (Vos et al., 2023). Migrants also may develop anxiety and depression with the extra stress and concern for family members they left behind in their country of origin (Li et al., 2016). Furthermore, the stress and concern felt impair migrants' ability to concentrate, learn languages, and find employment (Li et al., 2016). These post-arrival stressors impede on migrants' ability to cope and recover from pre-migration and migration journey trauma (Castañeda et al., 2021a). Latin youth are at high risk for depression and low self-esteem, with 55% of the population experiencing discrimination (Castañeda et al., 2021b).

Restrictive immigration policies and the slow asylum process also exacerbate poor mental health among migrants (Attia et al., 2024). Hatzenbuehler et al. (2015) found that Latin individuals in states with more restrictive and exclusionary immigration policies had worse mental health outcomes than those in states with less restrictive policies. Long-term exposure to harsh immigration policies heightens the trauma experienced by immigrant communities and families, perpetuating generational trauma and mental health disorders (Dadra & Hazratzai, 2025). There is well-documented evidence of poor mental health of migrants and the traumatic experiences they are exposed to.

2. Materials and Methods

This research is part of the project *Immigration to the DMV*, which explores the experiences of post-COVID-19 pandemic migrants residing in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area (including parts of Maryland and Northern Virginia). The overarching study includes 233 interviews with migrants from diverse established and emerging diasporas in the region, including Ethiopia, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Venezuela, and others, aiming to capture a range of migrant stories. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling and snowballing. Interviews were

conducted between 2023 and December 2024. Interviewees were 18 years of age or older and varied in educational background, socioeconomic status, and occupation.

Bilingual research assistants at the Center for Latin American & Latino Studies and the Immigration Lab at American University conducted interviews with migrants in English, Spanish, Russian, and other languages, guided by a comprehensive interview script designed to explore multiple dimensions of the migration experience, including: basic demographic information, the migration journey, and integration into the U.S., including education, employment, and healthcare access. This analysis concentrates specifically on the migration journey, including conditions in the home country prior to departure, journey duration and pathways, the physical migration journey, and the psychological toll of migration.

All interviews were transcribed, translated, and analyzed individually as case summaries. Additionally, all sensitive data has been permanently redacted to protect the identities of participants. Pseudonyms have been utilized to humanize narratives. An inductive approach was employed to identify recurring themes within the migration journey.

3. Results & Discussion

The findings from the interviews demonstrate that migration journeys are rarely linear or predictable. Instead, they are defined by a mix of external pressures, forced choices, and overwhelming danger. The analysis is structured across the four core themes identified in the data.

A. Root Causes and Triggers

The decision to migrate, for over half of the participants, was not precipitated by a slow decline in quality of life but by a rapid erosion of safety and opportunity, rendering life in their home country impossible. This represents an existential threat—a situation where survival, rather than prosperity, becomes the driving force.

1. Political Collapse and Targeted Violence

For participants from Afghanistan, the root cause was unambiguous and acute. The Taliban takeover in 2021 immediately triggered a mass exodus, particularly among those with prior affiliations to U.S. or Western entities. One highly educated Afghan male, Emad, who undertook a grueling journey through ten countries, stated that his primary motivation was the future and education of his children. The sudden shift in political control meant not only a loss of status or opportunity but a direct threat to the family's security and worldview. Similarly, in non-conflict zones, political instability and widespread civil insecurity played a central role. Participants from countries such as Venezuela, cited systemic governmental dysfunction and economic collapse as the primary drivers. For Santiago, a Venezuelan male who arrived with his wife and 8-year-old son, the decision was driven by a situation that could not be resolved: "the economic and social situation, including a lack of work, insufficient income, and issues with government and corruption." When the social contract breaks down to this degree, the country ceases to offer the basic scaffolding required for family survival, forcing a relocation decision.

2. Localized Gang and Social Violence

Localized, targeted violence, often perpetrated by non-state actors like gangs, was cited as a powerful displacement agent, particularly for Central American participants. The threat of gang recruitment, extortion, and inter-gang warfare created micro-security zones that were impossible to navigate safely. One Salvadoran female interviewee, Isabella, described the severe, almost impossible geographical division and danger within her childhood neighborhood, where identity was linked to territorial control. She explained the high-stakes environment, "where I lived, I was from one gang, and [my neighbor] was from the other... so there it became dangerous." This scenario illustrates how local violence can be as effective as war in forcing a family to flee. The simple act of traversing one's own neighborhood could become a life-threatening boundary crossing, making long-term stability an unreachable goal. The decision to migrate, in this context, is simply a desperate attempt to move from a known, constant battlefield to an unknown, potentially safer territory.

B. Journey Duration and Pathways

The logistics of migration were highly heterogeneous, falling into two broad categories: official, planned migration routes (often relying on legal visas or parole programs) and irregular, unplanned

routes that relied on dangerous overland transit. This division highlights a deep disparity in access and privilege within migration.

1. *The Privilege of Legal Pathways*

For a select group of participants, legal pathways—such as parole programs or existing family/professional ties leading to official visas—provided a mechanism to avoid the most acute physical dangers. Mario arrived in the U.S. through a parole program and expressed immense gratitude for this legal route, contrasting his experience sharply with those forced to cross without authorization. He noted that while his journey avoided the physical dangers of the irregular route, adaptation and the post-arrival struggle were still profound: "Coming to this country and not having anyone to support you is not easy; you suffer because there are not many opportunities when we arrive." This demonstrates that the trauma of migration is decoupled from the physical danger of the journey, the struggle of uprooting remains regardless of the pathway. The narratives reveal that the distinction between "legal" and "irregular" primarily dictates the type of hardship faced, not the absence of hardship.

2. *The Irregular and Treacherous Routes*

For the majority of participants, the journey took place over many months, through many countries, and was defined by a lack of resources, extreme environmental conditions, and systemic vulnerability to criminals and corrupt officials. Journeys often lasted months, with migrants traversing entire continents. The Darién Gap: This passage, connecting South America to Central America, emerged as a universal symbol of danger and physical endurance for those traveling overland. A Venezuelan male, Adrian, detailed his seven-day ordeal through the jungle, which followed a three-year multi-stage journey through Peru and Chile. He recounted, "the jungle is not for everyone," describing a week of walking "from 5 a.m. to dusk, for seven days," enduring hunger and cold, and surviving only with help from NGOs and indigenous groups in Panama. The Darién Gap is not merely a difficult hike, but a zone of legal and humanitarian void where organized crime and environmental hazards come together to create a life-or-death gauntlet.

The Northern Passage: Even after the Darién, the route through Central America and Mexico presented continuing dangers, including the notorious freight train, known as La Bestia (The Beast). Santiago noted that his treacherous trip involved a "dangerous passage through the jungle and riding atop a train to cross parts of Mexico." Throughout the journey he and his family ran out of food and were exposed to multiple life-threatening risks over the course of the migration.

C. Perceptions of Systemic and Environmental Dangers

The danger perceived and experienced by the migrants was multi-faceted, stemming equally from the natural environment, criminal organizations, and state agents. These dangers were often interconnected, creating a state of vulnerability.

1. *The Reality of Violence and Kidnapping*

Direct violence was a constant threat, often carried out by criminal groups operating with impunity along known migration corridors. One male participant, Eduardo, vividly recalled his group being targeted by armed individuals. He detailed running through the desert, day and night, to escape being shot at, and ultimately hiding there for days. This episode illustrates the instantaneous and unpredictable nature of encounters on the journey.

Kidnapping and extortion are also particularly prevalent during the journey for many migrants. Mauricio, a male participant from Venezuela, explained that during his journey, "There was a moment when I was going to be kidnapped and they asked me for a certain amount of money." However, Mauricio did not have the exact amount the kidnappers were demanding; he was able to give them what he had in order to be freed. However, he recounts, "they told me that if I returned to Mexico, they were going to kill me."¹

¹ "Hubo un momento que a mí me van a secuestrar y me pidieron una sustancia de dinero que no tenía y, te has [inaudible] si tenía un dinero, pero la cantidad que me están pidiendo, no tenía, pues entonces me quitaron ese dinero y me dijeron que si volvía a regresar a México me iban a hacer me iban a matar y por el simple hecho agarré miedo y tenía la obligación de cruzar para acá por el simple hecho que querían."

Javier's journey was distinctly traumatic as he also faced threats of kidnapping and witnessed violence and death. A group of people that Javier was with was kidnapped, however only some of them were able to hand over the ransom. He explained, "We were kidnapped by a group. They demanded money from us to release us. Most of us didn't have the money to pay, so they weren't released. I don't really know. I mean, I don't know what happened to those people...We were released because we paid what they demanded. But the others, I don't know, I honestly don't know what happened to them."² Javier worries about what happened to those who didn't have money to pay the ransom. He described, "Whoever had money were the ones who got out. They ones who didn't, well, I don't know. Because, I mean, there were places where, literally, you'd see dead bodies lying on the ground."³ While he explains how some of those deaths were due to lack of water and food some of them were "being killed for money." Javier emphasized how intense this experience was to feel as if you could be killed at any moment all while seeing others suffering. He recounts, "many people were raped in the jungle, along the trail: women, children." Eduardo, Mauricio, and Javier's experiences all demonstrate the role of violence and force as normalized and highly organized risks of the irregular route.

2. Extortion and Corruption in State Actors

Critically, the danger was not confined to external criminals; state actors frequently became part of the systemic vulnerability. Multiple participants reported experiences of corruption and extortion by police and immigration officials across multiple countries. After successfully navigating the Darién Gap, Adrian reported that, "[in] Nicaragua...officials extorted us a lot," an example of how state systems actively prey on vulnerable migrants. Another young male, Roberto, reported alleged police corruption in Guatemala, where officers attempted to "plant illegal items in his backpack" during the journey, essentially manufacturing grounds for arrest or extortion.

This phenomenon of corruption was so pervasive that it sometimes started before the migrants even left their home country. Sonia, a Venezuelan migrant, described systemic corruption and extortion at airports in her home country, illustrating that danger begins even before crossing a border, "the guards asked you for money to get on the plane." This kind of incident was so widely recognized that local service providers advised travelers to conceal their international status. She recounted the warning, "the taxis said, if they stop us, say that you are going on a domestic flight because if you say you are on an international flight, the guards will inspect everything and ask us for money." Most alarmingly, this participant also noted the belief that robbers were "connected with people who work in customs, in migration," suggesting that state corruption and organized crime are not separate entities but are frequently integrated into migration. This blurring of lines fundamentally undermines the migrant's ability to seek protection from any authority.

D. Lasting Impacts of the Migration Journey

Beyond the immediate physical dangers, the psychological toll of the migration journey leaves a lasting impact, manifesting both as direct trauma and a unique form of vicarious community trauma.

1. Direct Trauma and Enduring Effects

The sheer endurance required for the journey, including hunger, cold, extreme physical exertion, and constant fear, resulted in significant direct trauma. Santiago and his family running out of food

² "Sí, la verdad, sí, sí nosotros, pues a nosotros un grupo y a nosotros nos secuestraron. Nos quitaron dinero para poder soltarlo. La mayoría del grupo de nosotros como no tuvo que pagar, pues no salió, no sé la verdad. O sea, no sé qué pasó con esa gente para que te voy a decir mentiras, nosotros nos soltaron porque pagamos lo que esa gente nos exigió para pagar. Pero la demás gente, no sé, no sé la verdad qué pasaría con ese tipo de personas."

³ "Sí, o sea, el que tenía era el que salía. El que no tenía la verdad, pero no sé. Porque se, o sea hubieron espacios donde literalmente, o sea, uno veía muertos tirados en el piso. Tú veías personas muertas tanto en la selva como en el camino. Personas que se morían porque no podían llegar ya eran 3, 4, 5 días caminando, sin agua, sin comida, personas que se morían en la calle o personas a veces que tú veías que mataban por plata. Es algo, pues, fuerte tú era una persona que que la vayan a matar mucha gente que violaron también en la selva, en el camino: mujeres, niños."

while traversing a dangerous route is a classic example of this acute stress. Mario, who arrived via the legal parole program, related how his brother "nearly died locked in a truck" during his migration journey through an irregular route. Even though Mario was physically safe, the constant awareness of his brother's near-death experience exemplifies how direct trauma is often extended to the immediate family, creating a shared burden of anxiety. The two months Adrian spent in ICE detention after surrender to U.S. authorities also highlight the official, bureaucratic mechanisms that contribute to post-arrival psychological strain, prolonging the vulnerability experienced on the journey.

2. Vicarious Community Trauma

One of the most profound and unique psychological findings is the concept of vicarious community trauma, where the collective narrative of migration danger heavily influences the psychological experience of those who may have had a safer transit. The Salvadoran female, Isabella, who arrived legally and safely, expressed feeling the "trauma of other Salvadorians' journeys." This suggests that for communities sharing similar origins or migration routes, the stories of violence, death, and disappearance are not merely news reports; they become integrated into the individual's psychological landscape. The migrant internalizes the potential fate they avoided, or the suffering of their peers, which becomes a vicariously lived experience of collective trauma. This phenomenon requires a broadened understanding of trauma assessment and care, recognizing that a "safe" passage does not negate the psychological baggage carried by the migrant from the shared community narrative.

4. Conclusions

The findings of this qualitative study look at the complexity and cost of contemporary migration to the DMV area. The data firmly establish that for the majority of participants, migration is an existential choice driven by an unresolvable collection of political chaos, economic collapse, and targeted violence, particularly perpetuated by gangs. The dichotomy between legal and irregular pathways highlights a fundamental global equity issue: access to safe, predictable migration is a privilege reserved for a minority. The majority are left to navigate zones of extreme danger, such as the Darién Gap, and systemic vulnerability to corruption and criminal exploitation. The findings related to systemic corruption are particularly alarming. When state agents participate in extortion alongside criminal networks, the distinction between licit and illicit actors collapses, and migrants are left with no viable avenue for safety. This suggests that border policies must be created with anti-corruption measures within transit countries to dismantle the criminal infrastructure that profits from migration. Finally, the prevalence of direct and vicarious trauma demands a shift in post-arrival services. Settlement programs must move beyond simply providing economic integration assistance to offering adequate mental health and trauma-informed care that acknowledges the individual's direct experiences as well as the burden of their collective community narrative. Further research is needed to explore the long-term adaptation and integration of these diverse migrant groups in the DMV region.

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