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The Root of the Deportation Stigma

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In the United States in 2013, 152,382 Central American migrants were forcibly returned to their homelands (Simanski 2014). This rate was a 22% increase from 2012 and a 68% increase from 2011. When migrants arrive back in their home country they face a social stigma of criminality, laziness, and hostility because of the way that they were forced out of and treated in the United States. This stigma prevents migrants from reintegrating into their home country because they no longer feel welcome and find it exceedingly difficult to find employment. Facing intense social stigma and few connections at home, forced returnees tend to re-migrate back to the United States; creating a cycle of deportation and re-migration (Molina 2013). This cycle does not benefit either party, yet with recent policy changes the number of forced returnees has been increasing rapidly. I argue that the United States deportation process is the root of the stigma that migrants face when they return to their countries. To investigate this I ask

the question: how do Central Americans in the United States perceive the US deportation system and the stigma around it?

Deportation is the primary way the state exerts its power over people in terms of border control, and determines who is welcome and who is a security threat. “Deportation is a means of dividing the insiders from the outsiders, the wanted from the unwanted, the deserving from the undeserving” (Schuester 2015: 552). Migrants who are subjected to the deportation process are commonly labeled as criminals who are a threat to the United States and its citizens. (Anderson et al 2013). After 9/11, the Department of Homeland Security greatly increased the repercussions of undocumented immigration to the United States. Their goal was to decrease the amount of possible ‘terrorists’ and ‘national security threats’ in the country by cutting down on the number of undocumented migrants (Ameudo-Dorantes 2014). This new system ended the ‘catch and release’ method that had been in place beforehand, which had allowed agents to use their discretion with whom to deport. With this structure, border agents would only deport actual criminals who had committed crimes, and release innocent people who were unlucky enough to be apprehended. In 2007, a new border policy was implemented called ‘Operation Streamline’ that introduced a zero tolerance policy and subjected all undocumented migrants to criminal prosecution (Amuedo-Dorantes 2014). The crime of “illegal re-entry” used to be reserved for violent criminals, but now it is the country’s most prosecuted federal felony (Preston 2014). The perception that only criminals are deported still exists even though that is no longer the case. This is the root of many innocent people being falsely labeled as criminals by both their home countries and the United States.

Goffman’s theory of social stigma is defined as a characteristic so degrading that an individual is categorized as different from others and different from the norm (1963). This

creates a feeling of undesirability and rejection. Undocumented migrants in the United States are so fearful of the consequences of discovery, leading to detention and deportation, that they are forced to separate themselves from ‘normal’ citizens and the cultural norm in order to hide their undocumented status (Schuster 2015). Link and Phelan identify the distinct elements of the process of stigmatization as: “labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination [co-occurring] in a power situation that allow the stigma to unfold” (2001). Each one of these elements is present in the current US deportation system, which is the root of the stigma that migrants face. Since undocumented immigrants are forced to conceal their identity and to remove themselves from ‘normal’ society, they are set up for disapproval, rejection, and discrimination in both the United States, and when they return to their home country (Schuster 2015).

The false labeling of innocent peoples as hard criminals and then discarding them with this distorted label in another country raises many human rights concerns (Fernandes and Bah 2012). The violations of their rights range from both verbal and physical abuse to failure to inform migrants of their rights (Ameudo-Dorantes 2014). The United Nations, the Organization of the American States Special Rapporteurs, the Mexican Human Rights Commission, and numerous NGO’s have documented and denounced these practices, yet little to no change has been enacted. In fact, it is only getting worse (Miller 2012).

I have shown how interconnected the migrant stigma and the aggressive United States deportation system are, and how deeply this affects not only those deported, but their families and any others living in fear of discovery as well. The Central American migrant perceptions of the US deportation system are important to research because addressing the root of the problem is the best way to begin to understand how to confront these human rights violations. There is

little to no scholarship that investigates the perspectives of migrants themselves and those views have strong potential to contribute to the immigration discourse. In order to enact change, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of all perspectives so that all angles can be addressed. This research will ensure that the minority voice will be heard in the immigration discourse and not forgotten.

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