After the Border: Building Workforce Pathways for Returned Migrants

November 17, 2026

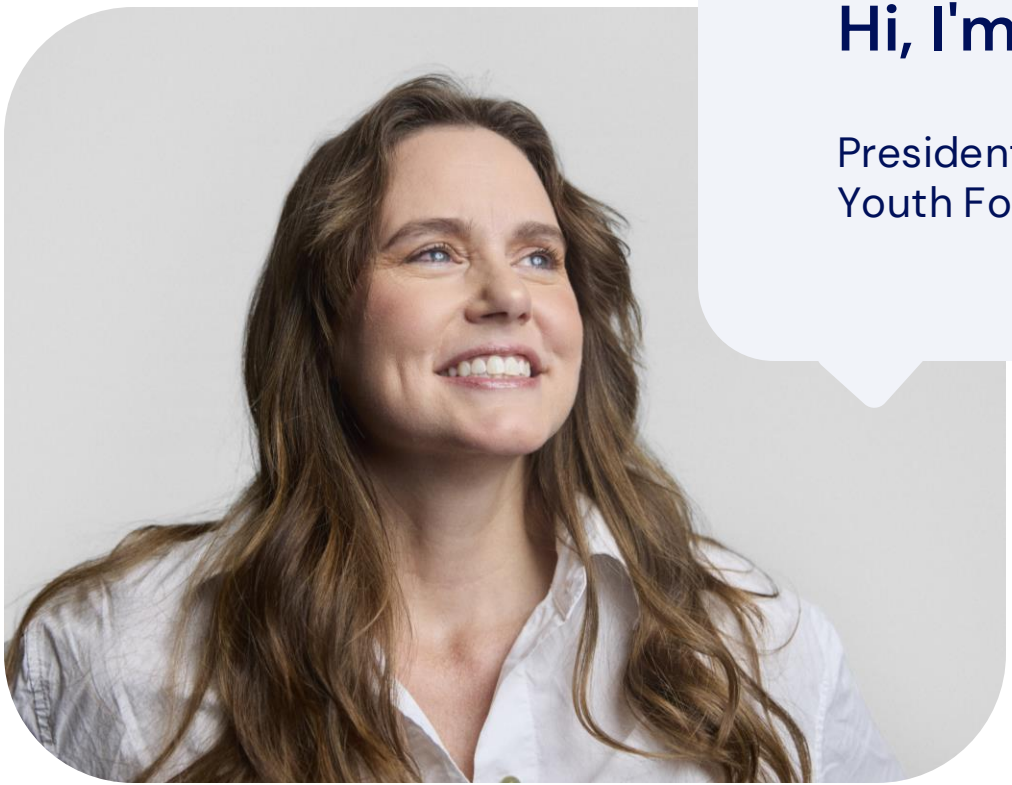


Housekeeping

Welcome!

- This meeting is recorded and we'll share the recording after we're done.
- We'll save time at the end for questions. Please feel free to add them in the chat!
- Any other questions? Please send them to webadmin@iyfglobal.org.





Hi, I'm Christina.

President & CEO of International Youth Foundation (IYF)

Mission

The **International Youth Foundation** transforms lives and tackles economic inequality at scale by equipping young people with the skills to thrive today and lead tomorrow. We've been investing in young people for **35 years** and have served over **15M** across the globe.



Research

Tools

Programs

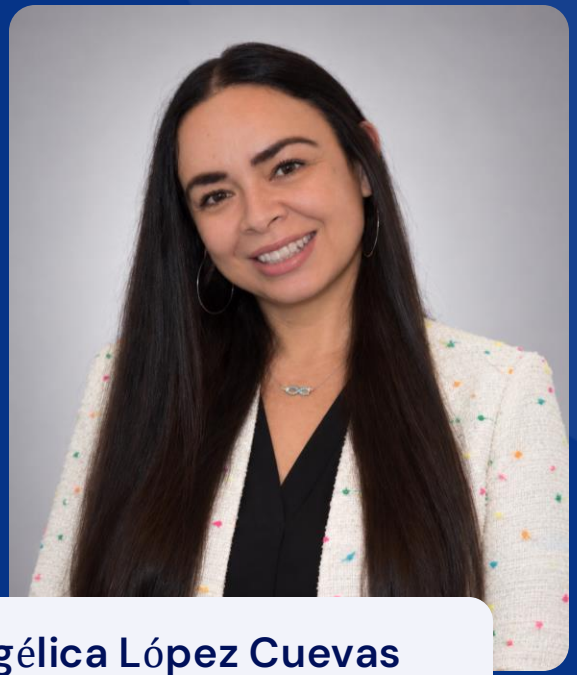
Over six months we followed migrants after their return.

We went in asking two questions:

How do people rebuild?

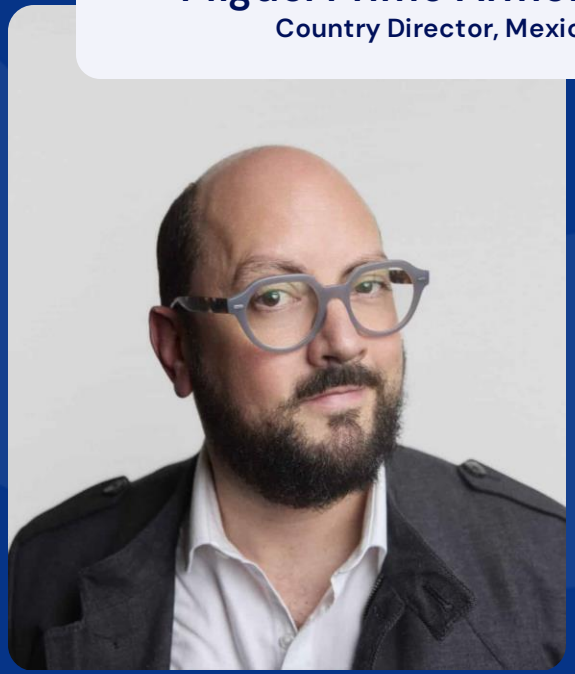
How could the skills they carry back become a strength for the communities receiving them?

Presenters



Dr. Angélica López Cuevas
IYF Technical Expert & International Consultant

Miguel Primo Armendariz
Country Director, Mexico



Labor-Market and Social Reintegration of Returned Migrants and People on the Move in Mexico

Evidence to inform the design of a pilot model



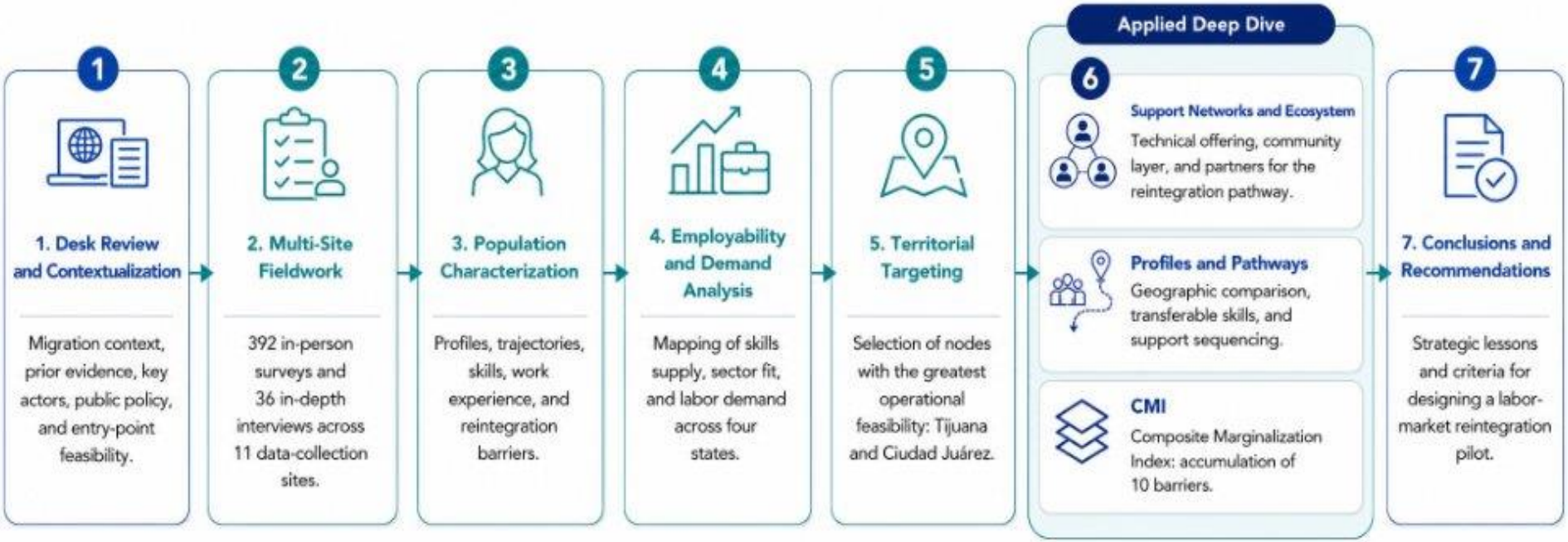
Objective

- **Generate actionable evidence** to design youth support programs in Mexico, focusing on returned migrants.
- **Bridge key domains:** Connects human mobility, social reintegration, and workforce development.

Research questions

1. **Ecosystem:** what support networks exist to sustain labor-market reintegration?
2. **Profile & experience:** who are these youth, and what are their work trajectories?
3. **Transferable skills:** which competencies align with high-demand sectors?
4. **Reintegration barriers:** what key obstacles limit their inclusion?
5. **Pilot design:** where, for whom, and with which partners should the pilot operate?

Methodology



Design rationale: Rather than estimating national prevalence, this study focuses on building a robust analytical base to design a successful pilot. It directly evaluates target population profiles, systemic barriers, institutional capacity, and feasibility conditions to launch a viable labor-market reintegration model.

Migration, return, and workforce development

- **Multi-faceted issue:** migration in Mexico is about more than border management, it involves workforce development, social protection, and economic inclusion
- **Shift in dynamics:** stricter enforcement and higher risks discourage new crossings, reconfiguring how migration occurs.
- **Changing return patterns:** returns have shifted from border arrivals to interior enforcement and ICE flights, creating less visible trajectories.



* Jan–Jul, 2026 (partial: latest month published, cut of Sept. 8. 2026). Source: authors' elaboration with data from the Migration Policy Unit, SEGOB: Boletín Estadístico 2026, Cuadro 5.1; 2018-2025 from the annual bulletins



Photo: ALCtia. Fieldwork for a study commissioned by IYF.

The 2026 shift: return & reintegration trends

- **Border apprehensions drop:** monthly averages fell from 250k (dec 2023) to ~8.2k (FY2026).*
- **Southern flight focus:** ICE flights to tapachula and villahermosa have largely replaced land-border returns.
- **Evolving reintegration:** voluntary returns and pre-border detentions are altering support requirements.
- **Vulnerable populations:** prolonged waits and documentation barriers heavily impact third-country nationals (e.G., Cubans, haitians).

*Source: U.S. CCBP. FY2026 preliminary data, October 2025–September 2026. Monthly average calculated from the annual total.

Main Findings

A network exists, but mostly for initial reception

- **Ecosystem gaps:** Multi-sector partners offer immediate reception, but long-term care—documentation, psychosocial support, skill certification, and job placement—remains limited.
- **36-hour relief window:** *"México te Abraza"* covers immediate meals, cash, transport, and basic document processing. However, repatriation letters fail to serve as valid IDs for banking.
- **Low employment reach (6.9%):** Only 32.5% of returnees stay at reception centers, and just 21% of those hosted get linked to jobs (18,644 of 271,193 total arrivals).
- **Shrinking infrastructure:** Reception centers dropped from 10 (Jan 2025) to 7 (Aug 2026), shifting south to Tapachula and Villahermosa while capacity fell from 2,500 to 200 per center.

Takeaway: initial assistance is essential, but support breaks down once people leave.

Preliminary mapping: an active but uneven network

A preliminary national mapping identified an active support network with uneven capacity, weakened by closures, reduced operations and security pressures.

- **Regional imbalance:** operational capacity is heavily concentrated in Mexico city and the state of Mexico, while border regions suffer from resource shortages and closures.
- **Funding shortfalls:** USAID-related funding cuts have forced closures and reduced key services in guidance, referrals, and employment support.
- **Security risks:** gaps in local support networks heighten migrant exposure to organized crime, recruitment, and safety threats (notably in Jalisco, Tamaulipas, Sinaloa, and Sonora).

15 of 181 organizations contacted responded; most were concentrated along the northern border.

Where we worked in Mexico

Three study regions inform the design of employment support in Mexico.

- **Northern Border:** Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez
- **Central:** Mexico City (CDMX), State of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Querétaro and Hidalgo
- **Bajío and South:** Guadalajara (Jalisco), Oaxaca and Tuxtla Gutiérrez (Chiapas)



392
in-person surveys across 11 locations

336
participants ages 18–35 within the 392 surveys

36
in-depth interviews

Note: Exploratory study. Regional comparisons use the 336 participants ages 18–35. Figures describe this sample. Data-collection sites were selected jointly with IYF based on strategic relevance, operational feasibility, presence of IYF-linked networks or programs, responsiveness of the local ecosystem, access to spaces serving returned migrants, and locations where returnees arrive or are known to be present. The selection was exploratory and applied, aimed at generating evidence for pilot design.

Who they are: A diverse population in early stabilization

Demographics & Tenure:

- **82%** Mexican-born | **18%** Foreign-born
- **56%** arrived in Mexico less than 3 months ago
- **44%** are aged 30–35 (young adults with prior work experience)

U.S. Ties & Detention:

- **90%** lived in the U.S. (**60%** for over 5 years)
- **40%** spent time in U.S. detention (average stay: 3 months)

Future Intent & Needs:

- **75%** plan to stay in Mexico for 12+ months; **20%** consider returning to the U.S.

Takeaway: Most are in an early stabilization phase requiring documentation, income, and local network support.

Three return corridors with distinct profiles

The sample was grouped into three corridors to identify patterns in population profile, migration trajectory, and employability prior to territorial targeting.

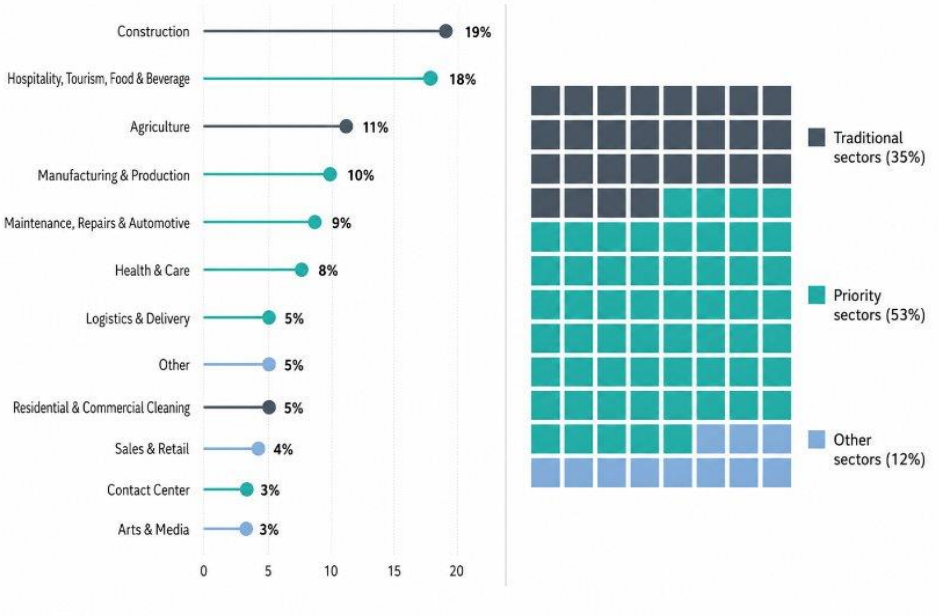
Indicator	Northern Border (n=193)	Central (n=90)	Bajío-South Corridor (n=53)
SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE			
Women	19%	**37%**	28%
Foreign-born	20%	22%	6%
Under age 30	38%	42%	36%
Middle school or less	58%	48%	**68%**
MIGRATION TRAJECTORY			
Had lived in the United States	86%	92%	100%
More than 10 years in the United States	35%	28%	**38%**
Returned within the last three months	30%	**56%**	49%
Circular migration (back-and-forth)	25%	21%	**30%**
Plan to stay in Mexico for at least 12 months	76%	72%	77%
SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY			
Advanced English	**12%**	3%	4%
No formal certification	83%	78%	89%
Learned their trade on the job	65%	67%	72%
Interested in validating prior experience	**86%**	78%	62%
Prioritize higher income, even if informal	69%	74%	**85%**

Regions have n>53 and can be compared with confidence; within Bajío–South, state-level subsamples are small (e.g., Oaxaca n=10).

Work experience to build on

- **53%** have experience in sectors with higher potential for formal job placement.
- **~33%** have held technical or mid-level responsibility roles
- **57%** have low and **39%** have mid-level educational attainment, mostly with interrupted trajectories.

Takeaway: Migrants bring practical trade skills, resilience, adaptability, and cross-border work experience.



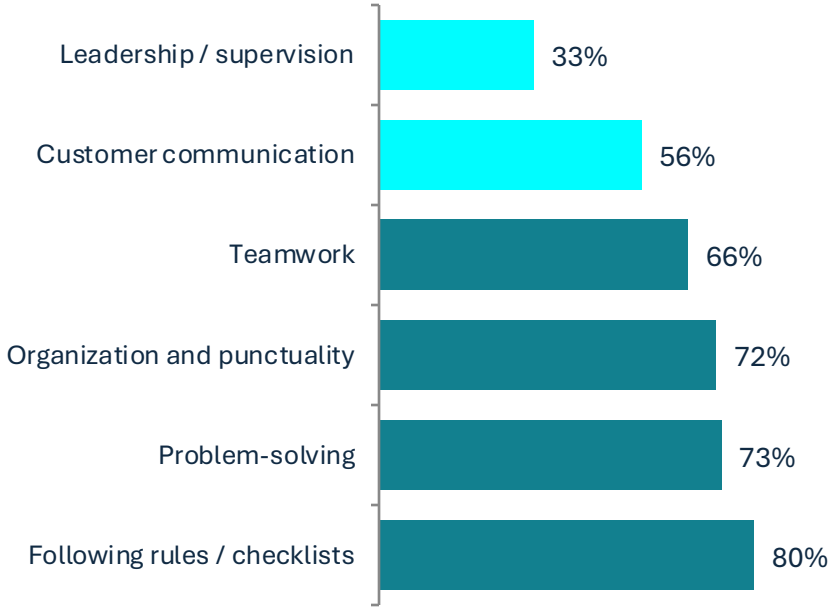
Experience spans 11+ sectors — more than half concentrated in priority sectors with higher potential for formal job placement.

Strong Operational Foundation; Communication and Leadership Need Strengthening

Areas for strengthening: Customer communication (56%) and leadership (33%): customer-facing and advancement-related skills need further development

Strengths: Rules/checklists, organization, problem-solving, teamwork: the operational foundation is in place.

Implication for the pilot: Add an explicit power-skills module covering workplace communication, customer service, conflict resolution, and formal work adaptation.



Field Stories

Ruth (26, from Puebla)

- **Background:** lived in NC for 17 years; worked as a McDonald's assistant manager; fluent in workplace English. Returned to Mexico while her family remained in the U.S.
- **Key assets:** operational management, restaurant supervision, fluent English.
- **Primary barriers:** lacks official ID documents, high school diploma, and formal English credentials.
- **Support opportunity:** provide ID recovery, assess and certify language/management skills, and link directly to employers.



Field Stories

Juan Pablo (32, from Michoacán)

- **Background:** experienced in harvesting, operating sorting/processing equipment in packing houses, greenhouse cultivation, fertilization, and basic construction.
- **Key assets:** machine operation & packing, greenhouse management, structural construction foundations.
- **Primary barriers:** possesses official ID but lacks formal trade certifications; shelter schedules and travel distances limit course attendance.
- **Support opportunity:** provide practical skills assessment and flexible trade certification tailored to his location and daily routine.



Field Stories

Luis (30, from Guerrero)

- **Background:** Managed construction crews, trained new hires, and drafted house plans on a computer. Currently working in Tijuana after returning to Mexico.
- **Key assets:** Construction & plumbing, crew leadership & training, computer drafting (CAD/design).
- **Primary barriers:** Official trade certifications remained in the U.S.; seeks stable employment and pathway to continue studies.
- **Support opportunity:** Assist with retrieving or verifying U.S. credentials and highlight his technical and leadership experience for local employers.



Field Stories

Félix (35, from Panama)

- **Background:** Two years in Mexico at time of interview. Worked in an electronics factory with prior inventory experience; currently facing ~5 months without steady work following job loss.
- **Key assets:** Manufacturing & inventory management, customer service, welding & refrigeration trades.
- **Primary barriers:** Holds permanent residency status yet faces employer rejection due to legal paperwork misconceptions and bias against foreign nationals.
- **Support opportunity:** Educate employers on foreign hiring compliance, assist with documentation matching, and connect him to short practical training and hiring partners.



First filter: states with labor demand and operational feasibility

Four states were selected by evaluating territorial need, operational access, and local labor-market conditions to identify viable job-placement pathways.

Selection criteria:

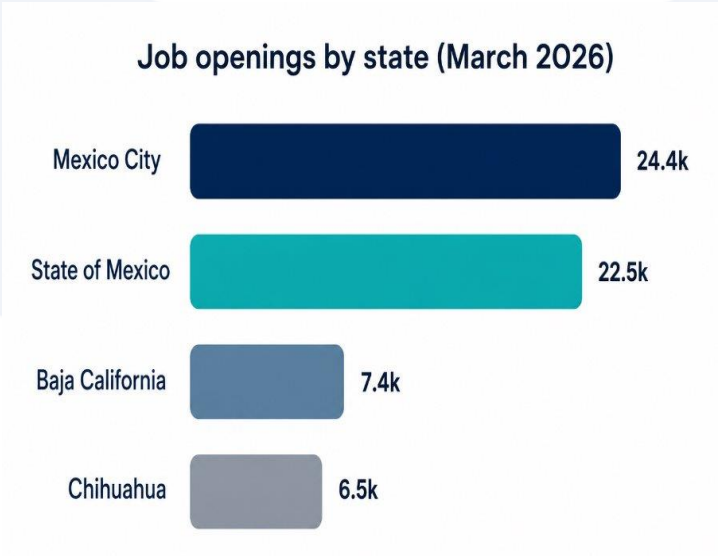
- **Territorial relevance:** Presence of routes, reception points, transit flows, or reintegration needs among the target population.
- **Operational feasibility:** Openness of the local ecosystem and a real possibility of conducting fieldwork
- **Labor demand:** Markets with sufficient volume and a diversity of job opportunities.
- **Comparative value:** A mix of border and metropolitan contexts.



Where the demand is – two market logics

1. Population profile → **2. Local labor market** → **3. Employment fit**

- **Market volume vs. Quality filter:** Opportunities exist across markets, but screening for high-quality, formal job placements is essential.
- **Metro markets** (CDMX & State of Mexico): 3–5× larger but show wider wage dispersion and a higher risk of low-quality placements.
- **Border markets** (Baja California & Chihuahua): smaller, closer to migrant-serving ecosystems, and have a more predictable wage floor.
- **Best initial fit:** logistics & transportation, manufacturing & maintenance, health & care, hospitality, and customer service with communication and English support.



Four local markets: Baja California, Chihuahua, Mexico City & the State of Mexico

Two sites, equal potential, different architecture

Both sites combine active labor demand, manageable entry barriers, and high migrant presence, but differ in ecosystem maturity.

Tijuana, Baja California

A more articulated ecosystem to start with

- *CRTM connects shelters ↔ training providers ↔ employers ↔ government ↔ international organizations*
- *Legitimate actors: Salesians and Scalabrinians. CESFOM offers a concrete base for training and certification.*
- *An older population: 75% aged 30+, with longer work histories.*
- *A stronger launch point to test certification, placement, and follow-up.*

Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua

Territorial legitimacy, but no clear convener yet

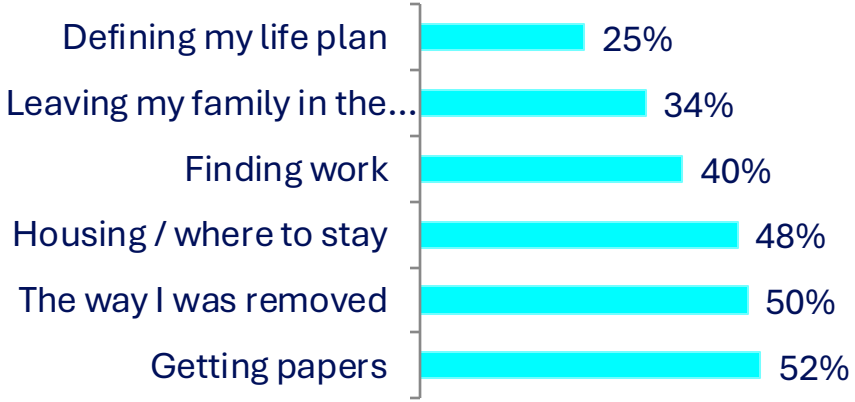
- *Legitimate, trusted actors: Salesians and a community network.*
- *No equivalent hub: the convening role that CRTM plays in Tijuana would need to be built, anchored in the Salesians network.*
- *A younger population: 50% are under age 30; distinctive feature: high exposure to detention and trauma (64%).*

Key takeaway: Tijuana is ready for rapid launch; Ciudad Juárez requires establishing a convening structure first.

Return brings overlapping burdens: trauma, documentation, and housing

The hardest part of returning to Mexico is not only material instability. Documentation barriers and housing insecurity coexist with the emotional impact of the way return occurred.

62.5% in Ciudad Juárez cite “the way they removed me” as the hardest part of return, compared with 34.8% in Tijuana.



Main barriers identified in the two cities (n=193)

Organized Crime: A Risk to Reintegration

- **When people are most exposed.** Interviewees were especially concerned about teens and young adults leaving shelters without safe housing, income, or someone to call.
- What they reported. Shelter staff and community leaders described cases of extortion, kidnapping, and forced recruitment.

"Adolescents between 11 and 17. What happened? Well, organized crime was recruiting them. For them to move on, they had to hand over the adolescent... We could not figure out what was going on, but families would arrive under pressure, stressed, with many things we could not grasp... They would kidnap everyone, but release only the parents and the children..." (PE02)

"In the last three or four months, many safe houses have been found where migrants were being kidnapped... Before, there were minor physical assaults — ... They are suffering increasingly severe physical and psychological violence..." (PE01)

"We believe that when you take them out of the shelter, you expose them to drugs, to crime... (PE03)

Executive answers to the research questions

1. **Ecosystem.** Yes, a support network exists, but it is fragmented.
2. **Profile and experience.** There is no single profile: it is a diverse population in early stabilization.
3. **Transferable skills.** Yes, they have usable labor-market assets, but these are generally uncertified.
4. **Reintegration barriers.** Barriers are multiple, cumulative, and territorial.
5. **Pilot design.** Do not create a separate program. Instead, design for overall mobility—not just returnees—by linking existing local services into a single system.
    - Stabilization → Power Skills → Certification → Job Linkage → Follow-up.

From research to action

What do we want to build?

- Enhance local capacity
- Introduce *Talento a la Vista* to improve visibility of returned talent
- Start in Tijuana and build for scale

Inviting you to join us

Help us transform research into action by sharing, connecting, and joining the conversation.

Thank you!

Questions?

Get involved

iyfglobal.org/get-involved/contact

