Contributors

This study was designed and implemented collaboratively by the Mexican Migration Field Research Program at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) and the Al Otro Lado Border Rights Project, with support from the Tijuana-based NGO Espacio Migrante.

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Executive Summary

This project aims to understand how joy and resilience are experienced and what conditions facilitate these emotions among migrants living in Mexican border cities waiting to apply for asylum in the United States. For the purposes of this report, we define joy as an emotional state that involves thoughts, feelings, and actions that enable pleasure or fulfillment. We borrow our definition of resilience from the American Psychological Association (2012), which describes resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress.” Thus, we present a distinct perspective on the migrant experience - one that does not focus solely on suffering and instead seeks to convey a comprehensive picture of migrants’ lives without quantifying or sensationalizing their difficulties. While stories of migrants and their journeys often center on extreme adversity, there is also an abundance of beautiful stories. Additionally, this research helps offer ideas about how conditions at the border can be improved to give migrants more opportunities for joy and resilience, especially when they face long wait times and extended uncertainty.

Our analysis focuses on the external and internal conditions that enable or constrict the experiences of joy and resilience among migrants. We argue that although migrants experience harsh conditions due to external factors such as poverty and violence, they can still generate joy and resilience through internal factors such as spiritual beliefs, personal connections, and practices that make them feel agency. Still, while migrants may feel joy and resilience, these feelings often coincide with negative emotions such as grief, fear, and trauma.

In this report, we draw on 326 WhatsApp interviews conducted by the Mexican Migration Field Research Program in 2022, with asylum seekers along the US-Mexico border. We focus on the subset of 233 interviewees who mentioned joy or resilience during their time at the border (whether positively or negatively). We explore how factors like their access to basic needs impacted their reporting of joy or resilience. We suspected that those who had more trouble meeting their basic needs would, in turn, experience less joy or resilience. In categorizing basic needs, we looked at participant responses to questions regarding factors like income and the ability to pay rent, having enough food, and access to medical and psychological treatment.

In total, 233 interviewees mentioned joy or resilience. Of those, 65 claimed they experienced joy while 92 said they did not. Meanwhile, 99 migrants said they experienced some form of resilience while 58 did not.

After tracing which participants mentioned joy or resilience, we began to identify the sources of those emotions. We identified three key sources: (1) spirituality and religion, (2) personal connections [such as family and friends], and (3) empowerment through agency and autonomy. Those who felt connected to a higher power expressed more hope and resilience than those who did not. In the face of adversity, spirituality could give migrants a sense of comfort that things would eventually be okay. Meanwhile, migrants who were connected with others like family, friends, or a community expressed more joy than those who felt isolated at the border. People also felt empowered by recreational activities, institutions, or other practices in a few cases. Finally, a feeling of purpose and or ambition gave migrants a sense of meaning that sometimes manifested as joy or resilience.
Introduction
A migrant’s journey to a border city in Mexico is filled with struggle, hardship, and suffering. Many migrants leave their hometowns without notice to escape violence or threats of violence. There are countless stories of migrants having to leave everything after being threatened by gangs, police, military authorities, or even intimate partners. Most go on to endure violence in Mexico, including physical abuse, psychological torture, theft, and fraud.

Despite these challenges, many migrants have an incredible capacity to overcome adversity. In our interviews, we heard and read many stories about times that migrants felt joy and resilience, finding the strength to carry on in their journeys. To contextualize these spaces of joy and resilience, our team chose to define joy as an emotional state that involves thoughts, feelings, and actions that enable pleasure or fulfillment. We also recognize that migrants’ experiences of joy are unique. Given the history and trauma that many carry, other emotions, such as grief, guilt, or regret, often coexist with joy. We looked for resilience, for instance, in the form of expressing hope, like through religion or family or any other ways that showed or suggested that people had adapted and learned to overcome the hardships of their situations.

Hearing such stories challenged Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs – a highly cited model in various fields of psychology. In 1943, Abraham Maslow proposed a hierarchical pyramid in which certain human needs, such as hunger and safety, have priority over others, such as affection and esteem. According to this idea, an individual cannot fully experience one of the “higher order” needs until the lower order needs are satisfied. At the top of this hierarchy is self-actualization, defined as the pursuit and fulfillment of positive experiences and one’s creative potential. According to Maslow’s theory, therefore, an individual is incapable of self-actualization until all other needs are met. Our research challenges this model. We believe needs are not fixed but dynamic and evolving, allowing the individual to jump from one level to another without needing to have satisfied all of the lower-order needs first (Kendrick et al., 2010).

Spaces of joy and resilience are essential for all, but even more so for migrants because of the hardships they face at and en route to the US-Mexico border. Research shows that feeling and experiencing positive emotions are directly tied to mental and physical well-being (Cohen et al., 2010; Davidson et al., 2010; Landes et al., 2014; Stone et al., 1987). By comparing among migrants, we begin to identify conditions that can make joy and resilience accessible to some migrants more than others. Thus, our findings shed light on structural and institutional factors that impair or enable migrant well-being.

We hope this information can help inform the programming of humanitarian organizations at the border and broaden social awareness about migrants’ needs. Determining which conditions and practices enable joy and resilience can also help facilitate access to spaces of joy for present and future migrants. Furthermore, migrants’ perspectives and personal stories humanize them, helping to combat harmful stereotypes and false narratives, including the association of migration with both desperate suffering and criminality.

Methodology
This report draws on a total of 326 one-on-one 30-60-minute WhatsApp surveys followed by brief qualitative interviews of roughly 20 to 30 minutes each. Interviewees were
selected from a list of tens of thousands of asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border who had signed up on an online form to receive services from the legal services provider Al Otro Lado. We selected from this list at random and then called everyone whose name appeared. When participants answered, we offered them an opportunity to participate in a 30–60-minute phone interview over WhatsApp. As a stipend, we offered US$15 worth of phone call credits to their cell phones.

In the service of anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Demographic and background (i.e., quantitative) information was captured for contextual purposes via the survey, followed by open-ended follow-up questions. Here, we focus on the content of the qualitative interviews. The responses from the qualitative interviews were used to create a new database to code for themes of joy and resilience. Given that interviewers had the discretion to formulate qualitative interview questions (in order to avoid inflicting harm on participants), not all interviews addressed these themes. Therefore, our results are based on 233 responses that did explore joy and resilience, whether its presence or absence, among migrants in several border cities along the US-Mexico border.

Our analysis began with categorization. As a team, we discussed common themes and developed eight areas of interest we noticed had been associated with joy (i.e., coding categories) – recreational activities, family, a sense of purpose, trauma, religion/spirituality, basic needs, isolation, and community. Next, we scanned each interview via keyword searches for “happy” or “happiness” (i.e., feliz, felicidad, alegría, contento/a) and “enjoyed” (i.e., gozado, disfrutado, disfrutar).

Having selected key excerpts from each qualitative interview, we tracked and compiled our findings on this new database. Then, we refined our initial interview coding categories by sorting each into one of three broader groups: spirituality and religion, personal connections, and agency and autonomy. It is important to note that our analysis revealed a wide array of recreational activities purportedly related to joy (e.g., gardening, walking or sitting outside, going to the beach or the park, dancing, exercising, playing sports, watching television, movies, or videos, playing music, singing, listening to music, playing board games, dining out, attending community events, cooking, taking classes, knitting, and meditating), which we classified as manifestations of agency and autonomy.

**Spirituality and Religion**

In the context of the traumatic experiences many migrants endure, spirituality and religion offer one important source of resilience and joy. Although the relationship between spirituality, religion, and trauma is rarely discussed in clinical interventions, our data suggest that the two are often intertwined. Traumatic events force individuals to grapple with the uncertainty that underlies the human experience and reconsider their sense of identity and deepest, most integral beliefs about control, justice, fairness, responsibility, suffering, forgiveness, love, and guilt, to name a few. Many people resolve these questions via some form of spiritual or religious understanding or expression. For the purposes of our analysis, religion and spirituality were treated as overlapping constructs. Though they imply different connotations—religion connotes the organized and institutional aspect of faith, while spirituality suggests an inward and personal aspect outside of traditions—both acknowledge and reflect the belief in something sacred, via which humans strive to understand and transcend their daily lives.
In our analysis of 233 responses, migrants often turned to religious or spiritual strategies to cope with past and present experiences of trauma. Out of the total of 233, 92% said they had a religion, and only 7% claimed to not have one. The most common religious affiliation was Catholicism at 36%, followed by another form of Christianity (26%), Evangelicalism (22%), Mormonism (1%), and Protestantism (< 1%). A minority of the population identified as Other (6%), explaining that they believed in a higher power but rejected organized religion.

When we asked migrants whether they experienced joy in their daily lives, 59% answered No and 41% answered Yes. These responses were not correlated with migrants’ declared beliefs in organized religion or spirituality.

Nevertheless, our qualitative interviews suggested that religion offered some people space for reflection, introspection, comfort, meaning, and a sense of safety. For example, Sabrina was a 26-year-old woman from Honduras who left her country after repeated direct threats from a criminal organization were ignored by federal authorities. She and her family fled to Mexico, where she said she felt like she was back in Honduras due to threats from cartels and continuous harassment by Mexican immigration officers. When asked to give an example of joy in her life, Sabrina at first said she could not think of one. Then she said, “Except being in church, in worship, yes, yes, because one is in the presence of God and everything, but... Yeah, yeah, well, but with everything else, well, no.” That is, while Sabrina felt little positivity in her life as a migrant, church was her place of refuge. Belief in God helped people like her have hope that things would eventually be OK.

Evangelical migrants were especially likely to associate a sense of resilience with their religion. This response was sometimes related to the belief in the afterlife, heaven, or a greater plan that promised a reward for the suffering they experienced in life. Such was the case for Leonel, a 44-year-old Honduran man, living in a migrant shelter in Tijuana with his four-year-old son. They traveled to Mexico to request US asylum after being chased and directly threatened by a gang in Honduras. Since arriving in Mexico, Leonel said, he and his family had experienced more of the same, with the added vulnerability of being identified as migrants without official status in Mexico. When asked about what kept him hopeful, and where he drew strength in his daily life, Leonel replied:

[God and my religion] are the only things that have sustained me and have strengthened me in this place that sometimes I ask my God to give me strength, to strengthen me. Because he is the only one who can [inaudible 07:51] day after day, to pass the time in this place. So, the reason is that God helps us to get to that place to be able to give my children, my wife, and me a future.

Leonel’s statement demonstrates how believing in God can provide emotional support in difficult times and how faith may help to reinforce other sources of joy, like the connection to family. In this case, the feelings and hope Leonel had for family, coupled with the strength he derived from his belief in God helped nurture resilience.

Another example is Artemisa, a 47-year-old single mother from El Salvador, traveling with her 13-year-old daughter. The pair fled El Salvador due to the violence perpetrated by local gangs, domestic violence at the hands of Artemisa’s ex-partner, and their home nation’s economic instability. They attempted to cross into the United States by swimming across the Rio Grande but were apprehended by US officials and returned to Tijuana after being held for three days in a US detention facility. Artemisa and her daughter had been in Tijuana for approximately six months when we met and planned to apply for US
asylum so that they could reunite with Artemisa's son, who lived in Maryland. Even though she felt intimidated and discriminated against by Mexican police, from a religious perspective, she perceived her migration experience as positive, even beautiful. She explained:

The most beautiful experience for me, right? I feel that it has been to have arrived at/found shelter at a church [in Tijuana]. In my personal experience, it has been to arrive at a church where I have felt that God has truly manifested himself in me. Because this journey that one goes through is not easy... Falling into the hands of strangers, armed people, these cartels, and God, well, knowing that, that he never let go of one’s hand and knowing that he always took care of one at all times, well, it has been the most beautiful experience in my life, that and preaching about it and giving my testimony. In other words, it is very important in one's life.

In this excerpt, Artemisa directly linked her experience of resilience to religion. Moreover, she credited her relationship with God as a source of positivity, which she felt most strongly inside a religious establishment. Despite her traumatic experiences, she believed her faith enabled her to channel this strength and mindset and to appreciate the cross-cultural and community-building opportunities that exposed her to new cultures, languages, and traditions.

While most migrants identify as religious, religion and spirituality only gave some a sense of joy or (more often) resilience. Often, they mentioned using these beliefs – and the related institutions – to cope. The examples here and throughout our database cite religion and spirituality as key to mental and emotional well-being, providing comfort and assurance during times of uncertainty, as well as a change of perspective that allowed migrants to reinterpret their past and present and hope for a more uplifting future.

Personal Connections

Various interviewees also cited personal connections as a source of joy and sustained resilience at the US-Mexico border. Personal connections are defined as social links between two or more people, such as family or friends. Some of the reported benefits of personal connections included a sense of well-being, comfort, happiness, belonging, encouragement, and emotional support. In contrast, participants who felt isolated experienced considerably lower levels of joy. Our study aims to analyze personal connections at a micro level to evaluate whether their reported benefits are protective against the challenges of life at the border and identify how they relate to higher levels of joy.

Out of our interview pool of 233 participants, just over two-thirds spoke about personal connections to family, friends, and communities. Of those participants, 60% reported experiencing joy thanks to these connections, and nearly 83% spoke of resilience. Conversely, only about one-fourth of isolated participants reported feeling joy. However, almost 71% of this same group expressed resilience. Therefore, personal connections may be more strongly associated with joy than resilience. Further data collection and study are required to determine the strength and significance of these relationships.

Artemisa’s story also illustrates the relationship between personal connections, community, and joy. As mentioned above, Artemisa was a single mother traveling alone with her adolescent daughter. En route to the border, they endured discrimination and intimidation by Mexican state authorities. Despite such adversity, Artemisa and her
daughter persevered.

Surprisingly, Artemisa valued these experiences, framing them as opportunities, and she rated her time at the border as more positive than negative. In the excerpt below, Artemisa recounts stories of cross-cultural sharing, learning, and community building through activities like cooking at the shelter where she was staying. She marveled at the many countries and regions represented in migrant shelters (e.g., Central America, Mexico, Haiti, and Russia), explaining that she was grateful for the exposure to new and diverse cultures and traditions. She reflected:

I mean, they are very nice experiences, they are very nice experiences interacting with a lot of people here, it's very nice. Well, I met some Haitian women in the kitchen... I have already learned how to make food from them...they are very nice experiences. These are things that I - my, my, my time here these six months, I will never forget. And as long as I'm here, I'll never forget all of this. Unique experiences. Sharing. Just think, I never imagined that I would come here to meet people from another country.

In this excerpt, Artemisa’s excitement and amazement reflect her internal joy, which stood in stark contrast to the reality of her external living situation at the border. For instance, she often worried about her daughter’s mental well-being and prospects, given their limited access to healthcare and education. Through her positive interactions with and personal connections to other residents in the same shelter, however, Artemisa reframed her ostensibly challenging life in Tijuana as something to be thankful for, and something that gave her joy.

Another migrant at the border, Gaia, demonstrates how community support and love for family have the power to supersede rejection and disappointment. Gaia was a 21-year-old Salvadoran woman. She and several family members made the decision to leave their home country because their lives were being threatened by local gangs. The family continued to experience violence on their journey north and ultimately decided to apply for asylum at the US-Mexico border. At the time of our interview, the family had lived in Tijuana for approximately three years.

In the excerpt below, Gaia describes the birth of her daughter and the experiences that led up to the birth. She talks about being denied medical care at a critical juncture in her pregnancy. Fortunately, Gaia found refuge in the hands of local midwives who gave her free care, but more than that, gave her the gift of comfort. She recalled:

Yes, the truth is that everything that happened to me in the hospital truthfully was very distressing and very ugly because of how my last weeks were. In fact, my daughter was born at 42 weeks because I told you that they did not want to serve me before. My daughter could have been born at 40 weeks, but they didn't want to provide me with services, so I went to the midwives who work with migrants. So I think that was the most beautiful experience I had because they made me feel super, super good. They made me forget everything bad and told me, 'No, don’t worry. If they don't want to serve you, then we will receive you with all the affection' and in fact, that's how it was. I had my daughter with them, and they made me feel like, super good. It was all free and it was like really nice, too. I think that has been like the most beautiful thing I have experienced here in Tijuana. Having had my daughter with them.

In this excerpt, Gaia acknowledges that finances and convenience played a role in the
outcome of her birth story. However, she also repeatedly mentions the unofficial services she received - care, comfort, and ‘feeling good.’ Thus, her comments suggest that her personal connection to the midwives and their positive interactions contributed to her experiences of joy. Admittedly, the birth of a child is a meaningful experience, and one could argue that she felt joy simply because her child was born. However, the turning point in Gaia’s story from hardship and disappointment to joy begins with the introduction of the midwives, establishing a direct link between the two.

Though Artemisa and Gaia’s reported sources of joy differed, they both drew on personal connections. Their stories demonstrate how connections like family, friendship, and community can inspire joy, foster belonging, and strengthen overall migrant well-being. Moreover, their stories echoed across much of the data we collected on personal connections. Of 151 participants who spoke about personal connections during the interviews, a staggering 78% touched on family, with community and friendship coming in at about 16% and 6%, respectively.

**Agency and Autonomy**

Similarly, despite the taxing conditions at the border, having a sense of agency and autonomy over their lives helped migrants generate experiences of joy and resilience. That is to say, having or finding hope, aspirations, or a sense of purpose were all factors that helped a person feel joy or have resilience, in spite of their difficult situations. Many of the people we interviewed expressed this sentiment. Of the 233 interviews that addressed the topic of joy, just over one third of participants (about 35%) connected feelings of autonomy and agency to joy and resilience. From feeling a sense of purpose, most notably due to having a job, to being able to go outside and enjoy recreational activities, even those as simple as a walk, these accounts were all contingent on the sense of agency and autonomy over their lives. It was being able to feel like they had some sense of control, despite their stress, and uncertainty, and fear.

One participant who fits in this category is Israel. A bright 18-year-old from Honduras, Israel found himself in Piedras Negras after he was forced to flee Honduras due to threats from gangs. He was hardworking and found joy in the days when he was able to pick up a job from people that came to offer day labor. In response to a question regarding what he believed he needed to be able to enjoy more of life, he responded that what he needed was to feel fulfilled through a job:

> When you have a job you know that you have your salary and the money you earn, well you already have it for sure and you buy your food, all your sustenance to survive... Well, the way I have felt a little relaxed, as I can tell you from this and feel that emotion, well eh, it’s when I work, I feel like I have money in hand and well if I feel like eating something, well I do it and well how do I tell you well, but it is only for moments because here the situation is difficult.

Israel, like many other participants, found joy in a sense of purpose, like having a job in his case. Being able to work gave him the freedom of feeling secure in providing for himself and took away worries, helping him to relax and enjoy things, in a way that others in similar situations could not.

Like Israel, Yuri discussed her experiences in Mexico, the career in Honduras that she had to leave behind, and her struggles after attempting to apply for asylum in the United States. In Mexico, she and the father of her children were unable to work because they
lacked legal status. She recalled entering a clothing store that was looking for workers, but they looked at her disdainfully and she felt humiliated. Instead, she fantasized about continuing her career once she arrived in the United States. Yuri had been in the army in Honduras and had also trained in rescue teams, first aid, and more. She loved this work, as it made her feel empowered to help others and provide for her family. She reflected:

Thank God for my job that I had in my country, I have been- I have learned to be strong because I have worked a lot in first aid and rescue and all that, so that helps a lot to, to be stronger, to coexist, to deal with people... that they [my children] will be able to carry out their studies and it is a place where I want to resume my career as a rescuer. And yes, and, what, and I am confident that I will be able to do it without any problem, without being afraid, I am going to enjoy my career that way, I think it is the only country where I would be safe.

Similar to Israel, Yuri found comfort in work, but for a different reason. She explained that knowing first aid and rescue had been a great help to her to find strength in life and in interacting with people. From her statement, it is clear how the drive to do something she really cared about helped her have conviction and refuse to give up.

Conclusion

Our findings support the conclusion that although migrants face adversity due to external factors such as poverty and violence, they can still find joy and resilience through internal systems such as spiritual beliefs, personal connections, and work. More specifically, spirituality, community, friendship, family, and self-empowerment help enable joy and resilience. In interviews, religion and spirituality brought comfort to migrants like Leonel and Sabrina; they could also be the foundation of gratitude and positive framing, as in the case of Artemisa. Personal connections could also be a source of joy, support (e.g., emotional, financial), cultural exchange, and community-building. In addition, migrant networks extended people’s access to resources, information, and aid - all in short supply at the border. The sense of fulfillment derived from acts of autonomy such as working, helping others, or a dream career, propelled some migrants like Leonel and Yuri forward despite the tangible and intangible barriers they confronted. In light of recent events at the border, like the fight to rescind Title 42, and migrants’ ongoing struggles for justice, it is especially critical to identify sources of support and well-being.

Research on the experiences of joy and resilience in migrant populations is underdeveloped, leaving a broad opening for further exploration. Future research can expand on this topic by examining how organizations can contribute to migrant well-being by directing resources at previously unexplored outlets such as recreational or creativity-based activities and community building. Alternatively, researchers may be interested in exploring how migrants can harness the power of spaces of joy and resilience as sources and tools of resistance and self-advocacy or perhaps look deeper into the paradox of finding joy in the face of oppression.

References


