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## 'IT WAS A SHOCK': RAISED IN THE U.S., DEPORTED TO MEXICO

*Young, undocumented immigrants who grew up eating hamburgers, speaking English and rooting for the local baseball team face hardships over the border*

By David Luhnow  
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Israel Concha broke the law when he was 4 years old.

That's when his parents illegally took the youngster across the Rio Grande into Texas. Three decades later, after going to college and setting up his own taxi company in Corpus Christi, he was deported back to Mexico, a land he barely knew.

"Thirty years of my life down the drain," said Mr. Concha in fluent English, recalling the day in 2014 when an immigration agent put him on a bridge in Laredo, Texas, and told him to "go home." He carried what were left of his belongings in a burlap bag.

Mr. Concha's trauma could now happen to roughly 1.8 million undocumented migrants who were brought to the U.S. as children and face deportation if Congress and the Trump administration fail to agree on a broad immigration plan now under negotiation.

The group, known as Dreamers, enjoy widespread sympathy in the U.S., with a Pew Research poll showing 74 percent of Americans favor granting them some legal status. President Donald Trump last week proposed a pathway to citizenship for them if Congress agrees to other tough immigration overhauls.

The issue is highly charged, with a vocal minority of Americans and lawmakers against granting Dreamers what they consider to be amnesty. Political wrangling over the group – which includes some 700,000 people shielded temporarily from deportation under an Obama-era program known as DACA, or Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals – sparked a brief U.S. government shutdown last week. DACA is set to expire March 5 after Mr. Trump ended the program.

Deportations have fallen under the Trump administration, reflecting a yearslong drop in illegal border crossings. But the U.S. is now arresting more people from the interior of the country who, like the Dreamers, have generally been in the U.S. far longer and have set down roots. In addition to forced deportations, hundreds of thousands of others have returned to Mexico and elsewhere voluntarily to join deported family members.

José Manuel Torres was 5 when his parents sneaked him and his 1-year-old brother across the border near Nogales, Ariz., in 1998. Coming to the U.S. meant many firsts for the boy: his first airplane ride, his first hamburger.

In 2011, after graduating from Meadowcreek High School in Atlanta and playing free safety on the high-school football team, Mr. Torres was on a plane again, heading to Mexico to follow his father, who had been deported three months earlier after a routine traffic stop. His mother didn't want to leave Mr. Torres's father, a diabetic, alone.

"As we took off, I realized this may be the last time I ever see this place again," Mr. Torres, now 25, said, wearing an Atlanta Braves baseball cap backward.

Another large group of people who aren't Dreamers are also vulnerable, people who were born in the U.S. to undocumented immigrants. Mexico is home to hundreds of thousands of U.S.-born minors who joined their parents after they were deported or decided to return.

"Not everyone is a Dreamer. There are a lot of U.S. citizens who have returned, and many other Mexican-born people who aren't categorized as Dreamers," said Ariel Mojica, an academic in Mexico who studies migrants who return.

All those different groups spent most of their childhoods in the U.S. and think of themselves as American, sharing experiences like rooting for the local baseball team, going to their high-school prom and hanging out at the mall.

The return to Mexico is often traumatic. They jump from the world's most developed economy to a nation where half of the population is poor. Many returnees speak broken Spanish. Many have had trouble getting into public schools or using public hospitals because they can't prove their Mexican identity.

They return knowing more about Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War than Emiliano Zapata and the Mexican Revolution. For them, independence day is July 4, not Sept. 16. They measure with yards and pounds, not meters and kilos.

"It was a shock," said Dulce Rosario, a 15-year-old who grew up in Houston and returned to Mexico in the second grade, following her father who was deported. "I knew 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' not the Mexican anthem."

Joseph Ambríz, 15, was born in North Carolina and moved to Mexico, a land he had never seen, four years ago when his grandmother became ill and Joseph's mother wanted to see her.

Joseph, who is dyslexic, struggled at a local public school. His accent and clothing made him stand out. One day a student tried to choke him. His mother complained to the principal, who responded by suggesting she pull Joseph from school. He is now at a private school, and refuses to speak English anymore.

Mexico has no equivalent of the U.S.'s English as a Second Language programs to help students get up to speed.

"The same thing that happens to migrants who go north—who have to learn a new language, a new culture, who face rejection – happens to them coming south," said Mr. Mojica, the academic.

In late 2015, Mexico's congress passed a law that made the paperwork easier for returned children to enroll in the public school system. Despite that, one study found that nearly a third of those who returned struggled or missed a year or more of school.

U.S. officials have started trying to identify and help American-citizen minors—helping returned citizens get their U.S. passports and other documents.

"We began to realize there was a severely underserved population of American citizens," said Roberta Jacobsen, the U.S. ambassador to Mexico. "This was a large cohort that could be 'lost' to both countries."

Mr. Concha, 38, has now set up a group called "New Comienzos," or "New Beginnings" that helps deportees get settled and find work. The group's motto is "El sueño Americano también en México se puede lograr," or "The American dream can happen in Mexico, too."

Many returnees eventually make peace with Mexico. Yetlanetzi Alvarez, 18, was taken to Atlanta when she was 1 year old and returned to Mexico age 15 after her father was deported. Back in Mexico, she met a grandfather she had never known, is now finishing high school and applying for college.

"People here are friendlier and there's less discrimination," she said. "My parents feel safe here because they don't have to worry about the police all the time."