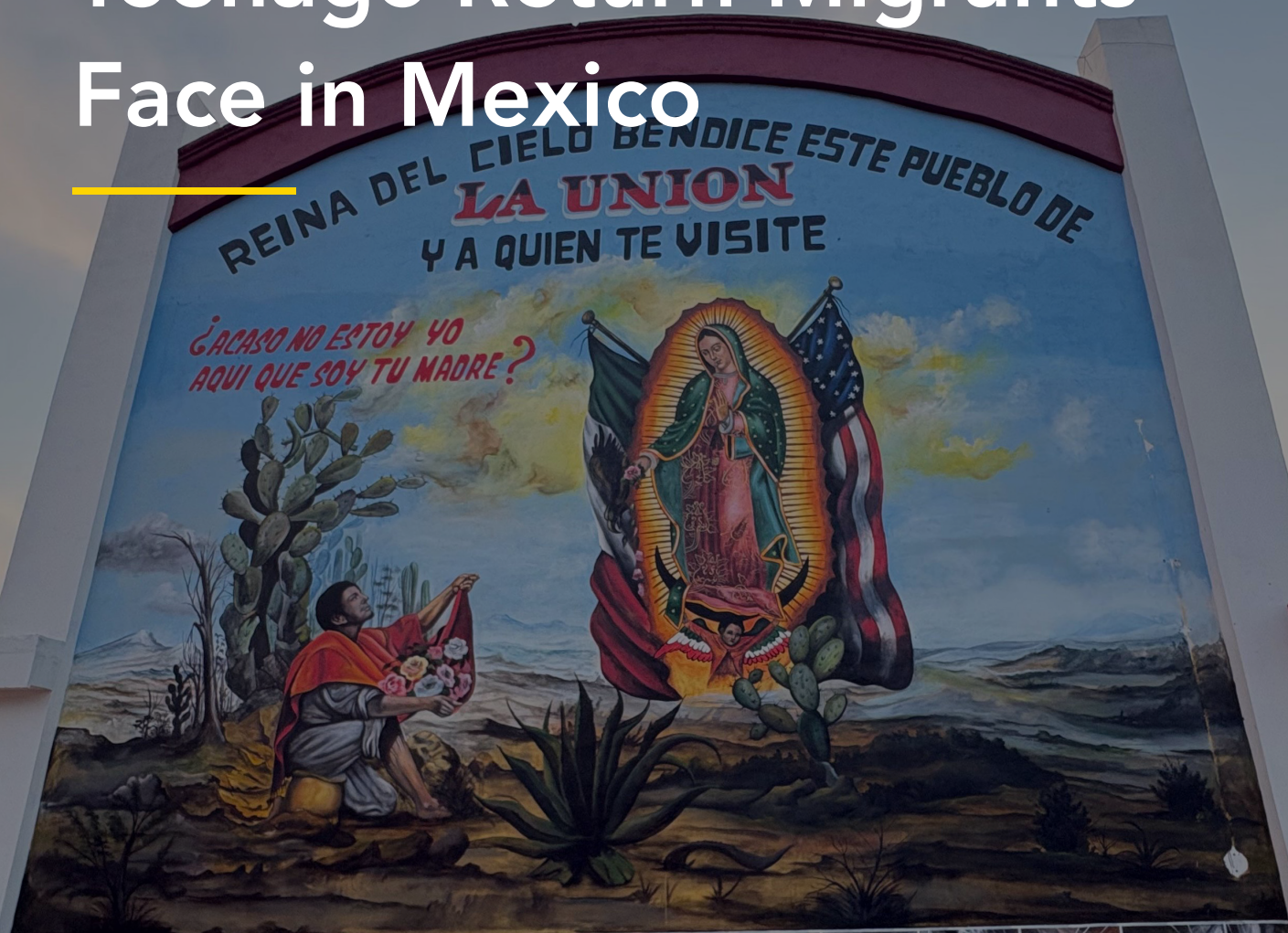


Rebuilding a Future: Educational Barriers that Teenage Return Migrants Face in Mexico



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Note: Authors are listed alphabetically with the faculty mentors listed last.

Cover photo: A church mural in the town of Piaxtla, Puebla, featuring the Virgin of Guadalupe, the supreme symbol of Mexican faith, to whose protection millions of people entrust themselves, flanked by the Mexican flag on the left and the United States flag on the right (photo by Ximena Sandoval Ruiz)



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Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this work, we used generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools to assist with literature organization, technical coding, and structural design. NotebookLM was used to summarize and organize the academic literature and compile the bibliography. Claude helped us to generate Python code used in Google Colab to produce the research visualizations and graphs. And ChatGPT helped us outline the overall report structure. We manually read all referenced literature, reviewed and executed the generated code, and edited all structural outputs to ensure academic depth and contextual accuracy. All factual claims and citations have been carefully verified against the primary research data and original sources, and the authors take full responsibility for the final content of this work.

In memory of Lic. Elias Camarena Hernández, member of the team at the Directorate for Attention to Migrants of the Undersecretariat of Human Rights of Jalisco

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Figure 1. The research team with a community leader in Piaxtla, Puebla, who facilitated access to interviews (photo by Valeria McMillan)

Executive Summary

Thousands of adolescents returning to Mexico each year after living and studying abroad face a new set of challenges. Students with transnational educational backgrounds face administrative barriers such as unfamiliar enrolment processes, inconsistent documentation requirements, and difficulties adapting to the language.

We examine the educational reintegration of return migrant adolescents aged 14 to 19 in Jalisco and Puebla, Mexico. Drawing on interviews with students, families, educators, public officials, and civil society organizations, alongside an analysis of legal frameworks and existing literature, this project identifies the barriers that continue to prevent educational inclusion despite strong legal protections that are supposed to guarantee it.

The research highlights an important institutional gap. The greater need is not new legislation, but stronger coordination among institutions, improved dissemination of existing regulations, and integrated information systems capable of identifying returnee students, monitoring educational trajectories, and evaluating interventions. We recommend strengthening interinstitutional collaboration, improving training for educational personnel, expanding academic and psychosocial support for returned students, and developing disaggregated information systems that make this population visible within educational planning. Educational reintegration is not only a matter of guaranteeing access to school but also an opportunity to recognize the bilingual, bicultural, and transnational strengths of returned migrant adolescents and transform return migration into a driver of inclusion and development rather than exclusion.



Figure 2. Interview with a representative of SIPINNA Jalisco (photo by Javier Contreras Arreaga)

The Barriers that Mexico's Returned Youth Face

When she returned to Mexico after growing up and studying in the US for almost all her life, Linda, a 16-year-old binational student, arrived at a public high school with her academic record from the United States.¹ However, instead of finding a place for herself in the classroom, she encountered requests for documents she didn't have, unfamiliar enrolment procedures, language difficulties, and uncertainty about whether she would be allowed to continue her normal life in a country that was both hers and foreign to her. In theory, her migration journey had ended — she had arrived in a place her parents called home — but her integration was just beginning.

Her story reflects the reality of thousands of teenaged returnees who relocate to Mexico each year following a family member's deportation or

their own, family reunification, or other forms of involuntary or voluntary return driven by rigid migration policies. Between 2014 and 2018 an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 of these youth returned accompanying a deported parent, an exile that causes emotional rupture and an abrupt disconnection from the institutions designed to educate and protect them.²

“

Mexican law formally recognizes every child's right to education regardless of nationality or migration status, prioritizing the best interests of children in all state decisions. However, migrant children and adolescents are the most excluded group from Mexico's national education system, with only about 18 per cent attending school.

Since the beginning of the 2010s, Mexican migration policies have been shifting toward a reintegration approach. Today, the national strategy called “México te abraza” (literally “Mexico embraces you”) aims to guarantee a dignified return and facilitate the social and labour market reintegration of Mexicans who have lived outside the country. Mexican law formally recognizes every child's right to education regardless of nationality or migration status, prioritizing the best interests of children in all state decisions. However, migrant children and adolescents are the most excluded group

¹ “Linda” is a composite character based on the traits, experiences, and testimonies of several real people.

² Erin Hamilton, Claudia Masferrer, and Paola Langer, “US Citizen Children De Facto Deported to Mexico,” *Population and Development Review* 49, no. 1 (2023): 175–203.

from Mexico's national education system, with only about 18 per cent attending school.³ Much of the existing literature and institutional attention treats this population as a homogeneous group, with a predominant focus on younger children. Comparatively little attention has been given to adolescents. As a result, the unique challenges faced by return migrant youth in upper secondary education remain overlooked, leaving an important gap in both research and public policy.

This issue is particularly urgent because return migration to Mexico has increased significantly over the past two decades, though educational systems have not adapted to the needs of this growing population. Adolescence is a pivotal stage in which young people's decisions about education directly shape their future. Without effective educational reintegration, return migrant youth face a greater risk of school dropout, labour market exclusion, and long-term marginalization, representing not only a violation of their rights but also a missed opportunity to harness their bilingual and bicultural potential for Mexico's social and economic development.

Context: "Returning" to a Place They've Never Been

Migration has been culturally, socially, and economically embedded in Mexico's dynamics. However, many long-term demographic trends result

from restrictive US immigration policies enforcement, which recently have led to an unprecedented return of Mexican nationals.⁴ The dynamics have evolved from temporary returns of working adults to more complex family movements that include temporary and permanent relocation of multiple generations to their country of origin, including over half a million US-born children who have to navigate immigration to a country they have never known, a *shadow migration*.⁵ This growing influx of "returned" minors demands crucial attention and reconfigured migration policy that supports internal social integration.

We investigate the administrative and institutional barriers that returned migrant adolescents face in accessing upper secondary education. Our study also explores the social, cultural, and psychological barriers that hinder their successful integration after complex migration processes. The adolescents included in this research are high-school students between the ages of 14 and 19 years old who reside in the states of Jalisco or Puebla.⁶ They represent different generations, including adolescents born in the United States to Mexican parents and those born in Mexico who migrated to the United States as children and are now returning.

From a legal perspective, Mexican law establishes a robust human rights framework for the protection of minors, enshrining standards that must be guaranteed to all children, including their placement under the state's protective guardianship. However, the existence of this framework does not in itself ensure its realization in the lives of teenaged returnees. Adolescents who return to Mexico can fall within the category of children in the context of migration (CCM), a framework that reorders how the state must see them: first as persons, then as children, and only then as migrants, never the reverse.⁷ This hierarchy carries concrete legal consequences: in any decision affecting them,

3 "Children on the Move and Barriers to Their Education: Participatory Diagnosis on the Barriers to Educational Inclusion of Migrant and Refugee Children and Adolescents" [in Spanish], UNICEF (Mexico: Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia, 2023). [↗](#)

4 Between 2023 and 2025, the total number of events involving the return of Mexican children and adolescents from the United States was approximately 65,000 cases. "Boletines estadísticos," Unidad de Política Migratoria, Registro e Identidad de Personas, SEGOB (Secretaría de Gobernación).

5 Nicole Denier and Claudia Masferrer, "Returning to a New Mexican Labor Market? Regional Variation in the Economic Incorporation of Return Migrants from the US to Mexico," *Population Research and Policy Review* 39 (2020): 617–41.

6 These returned adolescents come primarily from the United States and Canada, and to a lesser extent from South America.

7 The General Law on the Rights of Children and Adolescents (LGDNNA) defines adolescents as individuals between 12 and 18 years of age, while Article 4 of the Constitution obligates the state to prioritize the best interests of the child (LGDNNA, 2014; Constitutional Block, 2011).

their condition as children must prevail over their documentation status, and their developmental stage entitles them to special protection and care.

The state must also guarantee access to universal education, which includes the academic inclusion of CCM and its binational population, meaning barrier-free high-school enrolment procedures.⁸ Despite these protections on paper, a critical implementation gap exists. Transnational adolescents face a

systematic lack of real recognition in the Mexican educational system because local administrators are frequently unaware of federal inclusion public policies and programs. Inflexible requirements for certified transcripts and the lack of Mexican identity documents create administrative barriers, leaving returnees in positions of academic discontinuity, cultural dissonance, and economic vulnerability.

Table 1. How we chose Jalisco and Puebla as places of study

Variable / State	Jalisco	Puebla
Returned migrants (2013–2018)	~85,000 returnees (ENADID 2023) ⁹	~45,000 returnees (ENADID 2023)
Key institutional support	Directorate of Attention to Migrants of the State of Jalisco (DAPM); municipal support programs	Pueblan Institute for Migrant Assistance (IPAM); pioneering returned migrants support protocols
Specific legal framework and public policy	Law on the Protection and Care of Migrants in the State of Jalisco (LPAMEJ). ¹⁰ When formulating public policies, state and municipal public administrations must create conditions for the social, labour, educational, and cultural reintegration of returning migrants for them to achieve personal fulfillment and contribute to improving the living conditions of their families and communities of origin; and facilitate the enrolment of returning migrant children, youth, and adults in basic and upper secondary education. ¹¹	The state of Puebla lacks a local law for migrant protection. Only the city of Puebla has its Municipal Human Rights Program for Migrants in Return Situations. The program generates the Municipal Action Protocol for Assisting Migrants Returning Home, which focuses on groups entitled to priority protection, CCM included.
Contextual uniqueness	Urban complexity with a long tradition of family transnationalism.	High rural-urban return migration and pronounced educational lag.

Note: Data from National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID 2023), Law on the Protection and Care of Migrants in the State of Jalisco (LPAMEJ), and Puebla’s Municipal Human Rights Program for Migrants in Return Situations.

8 Article 3 of the Constitution and the General Law on Education (2021).
9 “Encuesta Nacional de la Dinámica Demográfica (ENADID) 2023: Resultados (versión amplia),” INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía), 29 October 2024. [↗](#)
10 Considers migration flows related to transit, residence, and return. Recognizes the right to public and basic services such as education, health, and social programs.
11 Article 5, sections VIII and IX of the Law on the Protection and Care of Migrants in the State of Jalisco (LPAMEJ).

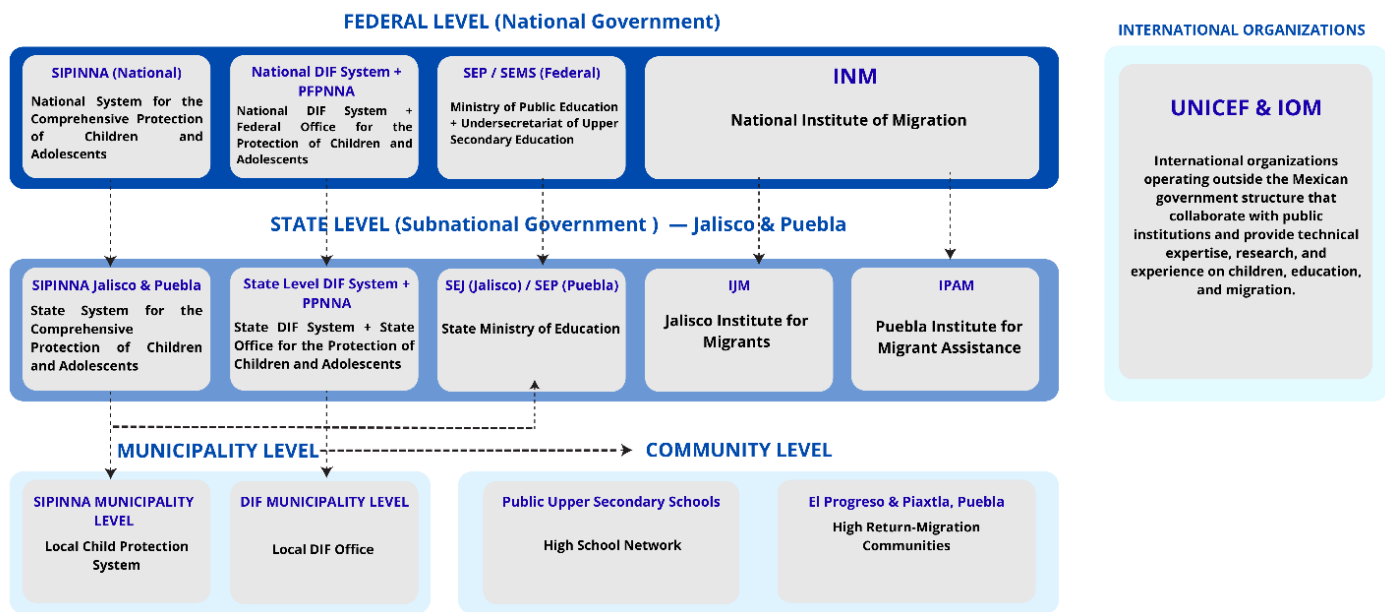


Figure 3. Institutions responsible for youth, education, and migration, depending on level of government

This complex displacement requires an analysis of highly urbanized receiving areas, where the density of institutional frameworks and community networks allows for a rigorous evaluation of reintegration policies. Therefore, our analysis of metropolitan areas, such as Jalisco and Puebla, provides a solid context for studying this phenomenon.¹²

Despite the fact that the right to education is formally guaranteed regardless of migration status, institutional frameworks materially fail to adequately identify, track, and support students in situations of mobility, including returnees.¹³ The lack of clear legal and policy recognition of return migrants as a distinct group further weakens the state's response. Without formal acknowledgment in migration and education frameworks, returnee youth often fall outside the scope of existing programs and face administrative barriers, lack of guidance, and inconsistent application of school admission processes.

As a result, teen return migrants encounter multiple obstacles ranging from documentation requirements and economic constraints to discrimination and linguistic barriers that obstruct their ability to successfully navigate and remain within the

educational system in Mexico. In this context, prior research underscores that the vulnerability of return migrant youth is not incidental but structurally produced, stemming from limited institutional recognition, insufficient data, and weak policy alignment, all of which constrain their educational inclusion and long-term opportunities.

Ecosystem Map: Actors and Systems in Our Research

Mexico's political system is divided into three levels of government — the federal, state, and municipal, operating through the Powers of the Union. One of the powers is the executive branch, made up of the president and the federal public administration, itself

¹² These cities have complex local institutions, migrant assistance offices, and diverse community networks that shape the educational and labour reintegration of returnees.

¹³ "Children on the Move and Barriers to Their Education."

Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) [Federal, Jalisco, Puebla, Mexico City]	SIPINNA [Federal, Jalisco, Puebla]	National Migration Institute (INM)	General Secretariat of Government of Jalisco
College of Professional Technical Education (CONALEP) [Jalisco, Puebla]	Family Development Agency (DIF) [Jalisco, Puebla]	Pueblan Institute for Migrant Assistance (IPAM)	Ministry of the Interior of Puebla
Jalisco State Institute for the Education of Youth and Adults (IEEJA)			National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI)
Mexico City High School Education Institute (Mexico City IEMS)			Institute of Statistical and Geographic Information of the State of Jalisco

Figure 4. Institutions we requested information from

divided into centralized (secretariats) and parastatal sectors. Because of the size of this constitutional structure, the Mexican legal framework has a number of relevant actors involved with children, education, and migration, each with particular obligations, functions, and competence.

The landscape of actors includes federal institutions like the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) and the Binational Migrant Education Program (PROBEM), alongside the Federal Secretariat of the System for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents (SIPINNA).¹⁴ For state authorities, we mapped the state protection systems of Jalisco and Puebla, and both Jalisco and Puebla Offices of the Attorney General (PPNNA).¹⁵

We recognize that the government does not always have the resources needed to diagnose and attend to special needs or provide feedback on interventions. We therefore included the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in our "map." Even though they are neither Mexican authorities nor obliged to guarantee rights, they are organisms that guide and support the defence and protection of human rights, alongside researchers in the field of young migrants.

A systematic review of governmental databases and official reports identified where return migrant adolescents are most likely to encounter educational barriers. The 2020 Migration Intensity Index from the National Population Council (CONAPO), the National Survey of Demographic Dynamics (ENADID), state educational statistics, reports published by UNICEF and IOM, direct communication with public institutions, and around 18 information requests filed through the National Transparency Platform (PNT) were incorporated. These data sets guided our selection of municipalities and educational institutions where return migration, educational vulnerability, and institutional capacity converged.

Our regional analysis was grounded in municipal indicators published by CONAPO. Rather than focusing exclusively on states with the largest absolute number of return migrants, we gave priority to municipalities with the highest concentration of households reporting return migration from the United States. Some of the municipalities with the greatest migration intensity were Xochiltepec, Ahuehuetitla, and Piaxtla in Puebla; and Huejúcar, San Julián, Degollado, and Cuautla in Jalisco. We identified communities where return migration is part of the local social fabric, and where teen returnees were more likely to face challenges when attempting to re-enter the educational system. This provided an

14 Sistema de Protección Integral de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes. System created in article 125 of the LGDNNA, as an institutional mechanism for communication, coordination, and decision making among authorities, civil society, and the private sector to guarantee the rights of children and young people (CYP). It establishes institutions and procedures to identify and respond to human rights violations against CYP for the full restoration of their rights. It also serves in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of a comprehensive policy for CYP.

15 "Procuraduría de Protección de Niñas, Niños y Adolescentes." Implements special protection measures and restitution of CYP's rights in particularly vulnerable circumstances such as socioeconomic, cultural identity, national origin, immigration status, or other factors that restrict or limit the exercise of their rights. These measures seek to redress the harm and place children and adolescents in a situation where all their rights are guaranteed.

Table 2. Principal institutions for the research project

Institution	Primary Function	Core Contextual Responsibility
SIPINNA (Jalisco/ Puebla)	Articulative & regulatory	Ensures all agencies communicate, monitors protocol adherence, designs state-wide protection policies and attention routes/protocols.
Migrant Offices (DMA/IPAM)	Operational & socioeconomic	Manages repatriation logistics, handles dual-citizenship paperwork, bridges gaps to local schools.
PPNNA (Jalisco/ Puebla)	Protective & legal	Safeguards child rights, conducts psychological, health and social evaluations, coordinates shelters.

evidence-based foundation for narrowing the scope of the fieldwork while ensuring that the selected sites reflected the realities of communities with sustained migration dynamics.

Thereafter, the mapping process shifted toward the institutional landscape surrounding the youth. We identified institutions according to their ability to provide administrative information, facilitate access to participants, or play a direct role in educational reintegration. Apart from SEP, we selected the different upper-secondary education systems, SIPINNA, PPNNA, Pueblan Institute for Migrant Assistance (IPAM), and the Directorate of Attention to Migrants of the State of Jalisco (DAPM) as key partners because of their close relationship with return migrant families and their knowledge of local migration dynamics. Throughout this stage, the mapping was refined through institutional meetings, formal collaboration requests, responses obtained through the PNT, and recommendations from government agencies and partner organizations, transforming an initial documentary review into a validated ecosystem capable of supporting both the research process and access to the target population.

We prioritized public upper-secondary schools located in the mapped municipalities, while ensuring representation across different educational models, including general high schools, technical institutions, and alternative education programs. This resulted in our selection of the College of Professional Technical

Education (CONALEP), Jalisco State Institute for the Education of Youth and Adults (IEEJA), and the high-school division of the Guadalajara University (UdeG) in Jalisco. In Puebla, the institutional guidance provided by SIPINNA, and local community leaders, led to fieldwork in El Progreso in Piaxtla, where return migration represents a long-standing social reality. Local institutions there facilitated meaningful engagement with participants. This process increased the likelihood of reaching return migrant adolescents while also enabling comparisons across different institutional settings and educational models — strengthening both the depth of the fieldwork and the robustness of our findings.

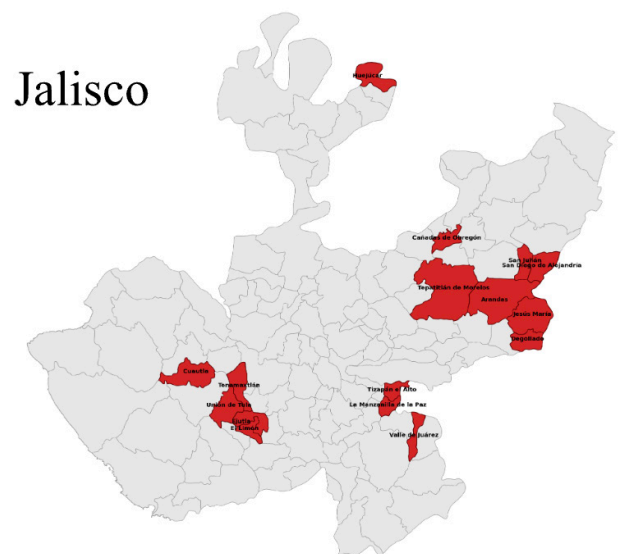


Figure 5. Mapped municipalities in Jalisco (elaborated with data from CONAPO, 2020)

Puebla

A map of the state of Puebla, Mexico, divided into its constituent municipalities. The following municipalities are highlighted in red:

- Cabo de San Lucas
- Coatepec
- Atlix
- Huamantla
- Tehuacan
- San Andrés Cholula
- San Mateo Atlix
- San Miguel Tototihuacán
- San Salvador
- San Sebastián Abasco
- San Vicente
- San Ysidro
- Tepeaca
- Yacahua

The legend indicates that the red color represents the "Municipio resaltado (del CSV)" and the light gray color represents the "Resto de municipios de Puebla".

Figure 6. Mapped municipalities in Puebla (elaborated with data from CONAPO, 2020)

Bridging Data and Stories: A Mixed-Methods Approach

We chose a mixed-methods approach to integrate statistics and data with valuable life stories, such as those offered by teenaged returnees, their families, teachers, researchers, and public officials. This method seeks a broader perspective to bridge the gap between individual experiences and official indicators, while also highlighting systemic deficiencies and improvement areas.

In addition to coding semi-structured interviews, we used a statistical analysis of frequencies between institutional statements and correlations of the stories of testimonies shared. This avoids reducing the experiences to mere quantitative data, recognizing the value of testimonies from individual journeys. It also provides a scalable framework for formulating public policy observations and recommendations that connect real human experiences with structural and systemic barriers, translating into concrete inputs for decision making.

To achieve this purpose, we collected data at multiple levels, from the experiences of adolescents, their families, and communities, to the institutional networks surrounding them. To ensure participants' well-being, we used a non-intrusive, trust-based sampling strategy through community and educational partners. The research adheres to high international ethical standards, ensuring dialogue takes place in respectful and safe environments that prevent revictimization while guaranteeing transparency and the responsible handling of sensitive data.

With this ethical and methodological strategy as a guide, the research project goes beyond observing the phenomenon from a distance. Listening to the testimonies, our research took on a face and a voice so the existing data, as well as what's missing from it, speaks volumes.

“Listening to the testimonies, **our research took on a face and a voice** so the existing data, as well as what’s missing from it, speaks volumes.

Thus, our research intertwines two levels of reality that often run parallel. It documents personal trajectories, uncertainties, and adaptation processes, while contrasting these accounts with the existing institutional response. This dual perspective allows

a precise identification of where interventions are needed, as well as shortcomings in public protocols and the isolated good practices of parents, teachers, communities, and officials who often build bridges where regulations leave gaps.

Addressing return migration from this methodological perspective becomes an exercise in social translation that transforms individual experience into empirical evidence, and empirical evidence into a roadmap for institutional transformation.

Narratives from the Field

| Guadalajara, Jalisco

“When are we going back to school?” This was a recurring question in one family’s home after they returned to Jalisco after 12 years in the United States. For their five children, Mexico was familiar through family traditions and vacations, but they had never experienced the Mexican education system. The parents expected that returning home would simply mean enrolling their children in the nearest public school. Instead, they found an unfamiliar and confusing system that left all five children out of school for nearly six months.

The family’s oldest daughter had been attending high school in the United States when they returned. Eager to continue her education, she accompanied her parents from one public school to another, only to meet with requests for additional documents. Officials repeatedly asked for transcripts, academic records, and paperwork that the family could not immediately obtain after their move. Rather than receiving guidance on how to complete the process, they were referred from one office to another, often leaving without clear answers or timelines. Every visit raised new questions but provided few solutions, turning what they thought would be a simple enrolment process into months of uncertainty. This

was the same for her other two sisters, also high schoolers.

As time passed, the impact of such bureaucratic delays became increasingly stressful. The girls watched an entire semester pass while their former classmates continued their education. Their parents were also worried about the emotional impact of remaining at home without routines, teachers, or friends. Having returned to Mexico only a few months earlier, the family had not yet secured stable employment, which made every additional expense more difficult to absorb. Eventually, they considered private schools, not because they preferred them, but because they appeared to offer a faster and more flexible enrolment process. For a family with five school-aged children and no financial stability, this decision represented a significant economic sacrifice.

After 12 years living in the US, the three eldest daughters had completed their basic education in English. The American school system was the only one they knew. Although they spoke Spanish fluently at home, academic terminology, teaching methods, grading systems, and classroom expectations in Mexico were unfamiliar. The eldest daughter recalled feeling anxious about participating in class because she often understood conversational Spanish but struggled with the technical language used in subjects such as mathematics, history, and science. Beyond the classroom, they also faced the challenge of rebuilding their social identities. Despite being Mexican, they were perceived as “American,” leaving them feeling as they did not fully belong in either country.

Throughout this transition, no public school or government institution provided a formal adaptation process for return migrant students. There were no orientation sessions to explain the Mexican education system, no language-bridging courses for students educated in English, no academic levelling programs, and no social integration initiatives to ease their transition into new schools and communities. Instead, the responsibility for helping the girls navigate a completely unfamiliar educational and cultural environment in a very pivotal stage of life fell almost entirely on their parents, who themselves were trying to rebuild their lives.

Their experience reveals how educational exclusion is rarely the result of a single obstacle. Rather, it is produced through the accumulation of bureaucratic requirements, institutional fragmentation, the absence of transition programs, and limited recognition of the unique realities of return migrant youth. For this family, returning home introduced a new set of barriers that transformed the simple act of going back to school into one of the greatest challenges of rebuilding their lives in Mexico.

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El Progreso, Piaxtla, Puebla

In the Mixtecan region of Puebla, migration is part of life for many families, especially in El Progreso, Piaxtla, and nearby communities. It is common to hear stories of parents who migrated to the United States, came back years later, and then saw their children follow a similar path. In some families, this has happened across several generations. Many young people leave while older family members remain. Because of this constant movement, return migration is often handled within families, schools, and the community itself, with little formal support from government institutions. Young people and teachers who remain have seen firsthand some challenges that return migrant adolescents face when they come back and try to adapt to school and life in Mexico.

Keidy, whose older brother is a return migrant, remembered one classmate, Christopher. He arrived

at Keidy's school halfway through the school year after living in the US. He spoke very little Spanish, which made it difficult to talk with his classmates. He was quiet and he usually wore a sweatshirt with the hood pulled over his head. At first, his classmates did not understand why it was so difficult for him to connect with others — they just saw him as the new shy student who had come from the US.

However, as they got to know him, Christopher started to share how difficult returning to Mexico had been for him, and Keidy remembered that sometimes Christopher would cry at school and openly tell his classmates that he had been happier in the US. He missed his old friends and the life he had there. He even missed the snow, details that may have seemed small but were part of the life he had left behind. For Christopher, coming to Mexico was not simply returning to his family's country. It meant leaving the place where he had grown up — his friendships, his routines, and everything that had been familiar to him.

Over time, Christopher began speaking more Spanish and interacting more with his classmates, but his first months at school showed how difficult this transition can be. He was in a new school, his Spanish was limited, and he had to find a way to connect with classmates he barely knew, while still missing the friends and the life he had left. There was no specific program or transition process to help him with any of this, so he was on his own, with some help from his classmates. His story shows how arriving in Mexico does not mean that a young person immediately feels at home, even when Mexico is their family's country.

In the same town, teacher Juan Carlos is the father of two young migrants who returned to Mexico during elementary and high school. His son, Junior, born in Mexico, crossed the border from the US at the age of nine, with a language he understood but didn't speak fluently. Juan Carlos recalls that the language barrier caused his son to isolate himself from his classmates, who assumed that Spanish comprehension was equivalent to fluency. Junior didn't do well academically during the first two years in Mexico, until he achieved Spanish fluency. Juan Carlos also acknowledges that he was able to enroll

Junior at the appropriate grade level because he taught at Junior's school.

For his daughter, Sharon, the difficulty was different. American born, she had documentation problems because she was registered with only one surname, as is customary in English-speaking countries. They later found out that the Mexican system required two surnames, which complicated her access to public and basic services, a problem that persists to this day. This caused a partial separation from her immediate family because she had to travel back and forth between Mexico and the US for extended periods to be with them and continue her studies until she finished college.

Beyond language and documentation, both Junior and Sharon faced "culture shock." They struggled with the food but their biggest challenge was their social adaptation to unfamiliar social codes that surfaced in everyday moments. "They didn't know how to dance bachata," Juan Carlos says, describing how his children felt self-conscious at town gatherings and family parties. His wife and he responded by giving them dance lessons at home, a community remedy for a deficiency that no institution addressed.

As an educator, Juan Carlos identified the deepest flaw in the school system itself. Mexican schools, he insists, are obliged to accept foreign documentation "as it arrives," but he wonders why online platforms still reject registrations that don't match with national formats. "Why do they require adding another surname if it doesn't exist?" Juan Carlos also mentioned the time he was asked to teach English as part of a national program but left the position because the extra hours went unpaid. He observed that no one wanted to cover the costs. The program, he told us, collapsed due to lack of funding, but "if teachers were trained, they could address these students differently." Finally, Juan Carlos pointed out the absence of mechanisms for identifying and providing differentiated support for returnees, and migrants in general, inside classrooms, highlighting

that, in practice, academic inclusion of these teenagers relies entirely on the teacher's abilities and goodwill, without any institutional support.

Our Findings

The lack of data, efficient policies, and interinstitutional communication affects not only the educational lag of a group that requires reinforced protection, but also the welfare and mental health of teenage returnees, their families, and communities. These experiences are symptoms of a system that fails to guarantee the right to education and identity for children and young people (CYP), failing to adapt to the human needs of migration.

Factors ranging from the invisibility of the migrant returnee population to the omission of teenagers in migrant children protection policies come from ambiguity in the norms that establish each government authority's competence. Such ambiguity should lead to a pro persona interpretation, given the constitutional obligation of all authorities to act for the welfare of all people, especially through affirmative action for children and groups in vulnerable situations, such as migrants.

In the case of children in the context of migration (CCM), their educational inclusion is partially considered in the *Learning Paths: Management Manual for the Educational Inclusion of Children and Adolescents in Migrant Situations*, derived from the Study Plan and Programs 2022 published by SEP.¹⁶ This manual offers a range of existing data on returnee children from UNICEF and the National Institute for Migration (INM), recognizing some of the barriers they face, their causes, and the relevance of considering their realities in decision making.¹⁷

While authorities discuss whose responsibility it is, teen returnees continue to have unmet needs, clearly shown by their responses to the information

16 "Caminos de aprendizaje. Manual de gestión para la inclusión educativa de niñas, niños y adolescentes en situación de migración," Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), 2024. [↗](#)

17 The protocol allows enrolment at any time of year, even without official identity documents or prior certificates. However, it excludes upper-secondary education.

requests we uploaded to the PNT as part of the mapping of actors.¹⁸ The data we requested focused on documentation about educational inclusion of migrant, returned, and repatriated CYP over 12 years old, specifically upper-secondary education, covering inter-institutional coordination, identity document regularization, and specific actions to improve the school's capacity for supporting CCM since 2022; yearly metrics from the Educational Information and Management System (SIGED) from the last four to ten years, disaggregated by gender, migration status, revalidated foreign studies, and accompaniment status; and effectiveness evaluations of current inclusive education policies, along with the upper-secondary equivalents of basic education enrolment rules and migration access protocols.

At the federal level, most answers were deficient. Although one of SIPINNA's powers is to create a national information system with disaggregated data to monitor children's rights (SIGED), meant to be shared with other national information systems, federal SIPINNA offices declared themselves incompetent and redirected the request to INM, which limited its response to the immigration procedures microsite at their official website, and the UPM statistical bulletins website.

The National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI) claimed incompetence to answer the request about CCM data because INEGI doesn't record or keep track of this information and refers the matter elsewhere. This raises the question of whether it acknowledges its own lack of competence to generate statistics on returnees, even though they are Mexican nationals. Federal SEP shared the upper-secondary equivalents of basic education enrolment rules and migration access protocols but failed to provide the statistics and inclusion actions we requested.

In Jalisco, the General Secretariat of Government refers to its state SIPINNA, which shares diagnoses and protocols for the academic inclusion of CCM that focus on only basic education, leaving out teenagers. The Institute of Statistical and Geographic Information of the State of Jalisco (IIEG)

shares tabulations containing data of migrant CYP disaggregated by municipality, age group, and gender, but only for foreign migrants, meaning they don't consider returnees.

The Jalisco State Family Development Agency (Jalisco DIF) shared information about a project on preventing child labour and support to working children, acknowledging that although migrant children and adolescents may be among its beneficiaries, there are no specific programs for the migrant population, nor mechanisms to identify their migratory status.

Jalisco CONALEP did share that, since 2017, it has followed instructions to admit foreign or repatriated students who enroll by signing a commitment letter promising to submit documentation proving their legal stay. Eight students have enrolled under this modality since then, though CONALEP mentions no training on serving CYP in migration contexts.

In Puebla, the Ministry of the Interior claimed that the requested information is not generated or maintained in its records, and redirected us to Puebla DIF, which claimed incompetence and pointed to INM. IPAM answers only with the booklet "*A donde voy, la escuela va conmigo*," a guide for teachers to include CYP in migration contexts within basic education. Puebla SEP declares incompetence and redirects to INEGI, IPAM, federal SEP, CONAPO, and SIGED, and CONALEP Puebla does the same, redirecting to INM and federal and Puebla SEP.

Our outreach with institutions deepened our understanding of the issues. We interviewed ten public servants from six different institutions, all with direct responsibilities for CCM, and all identified crucial areas for improvement while acknowledging their own limitations. All stated that they currently lack specific guidelines or manuals for the care, protection, or reintegration of returning migrant children and adolescents.

18 The requests were based on authorities' obligations, functions, and powers established in law, public policies, and resources like the *Learning Paths Manual*, and UNICEF's "Children on the Move and Barriers to Their Education," which establish institutional commitments to children's right to education and to the inclusion of migrant children in Mexico's education system.

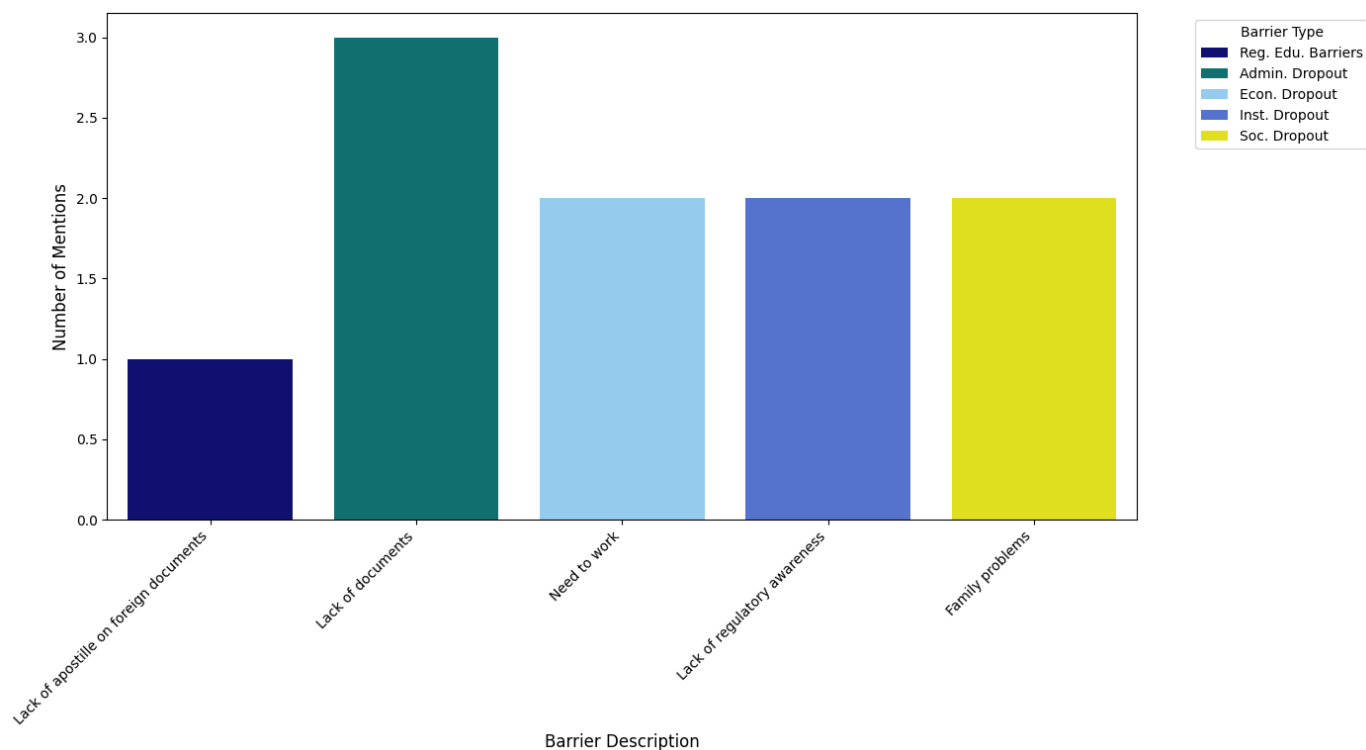


Figure 7. Barriers to educational continuity recognized by institutions in Jalisco

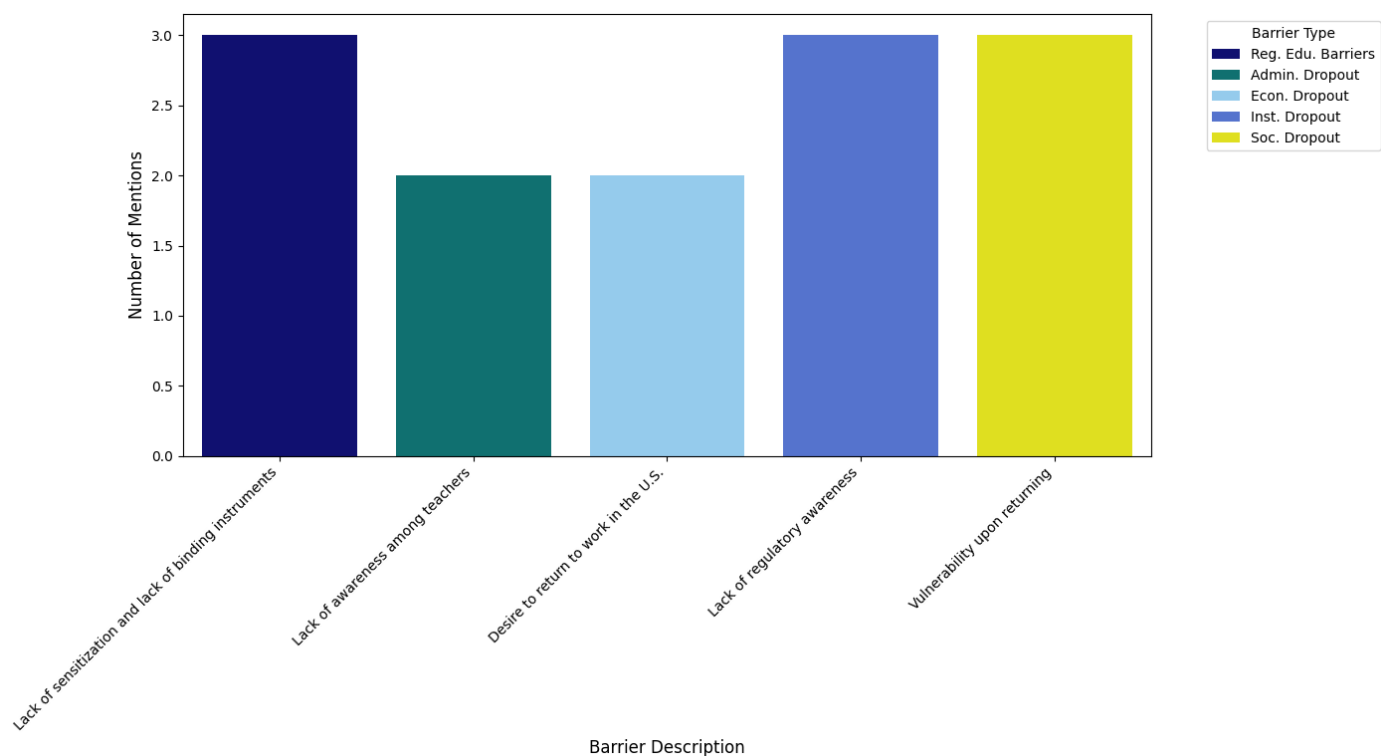


Figure 8. Barriers to educational continuity recognized by institutions in Puebla

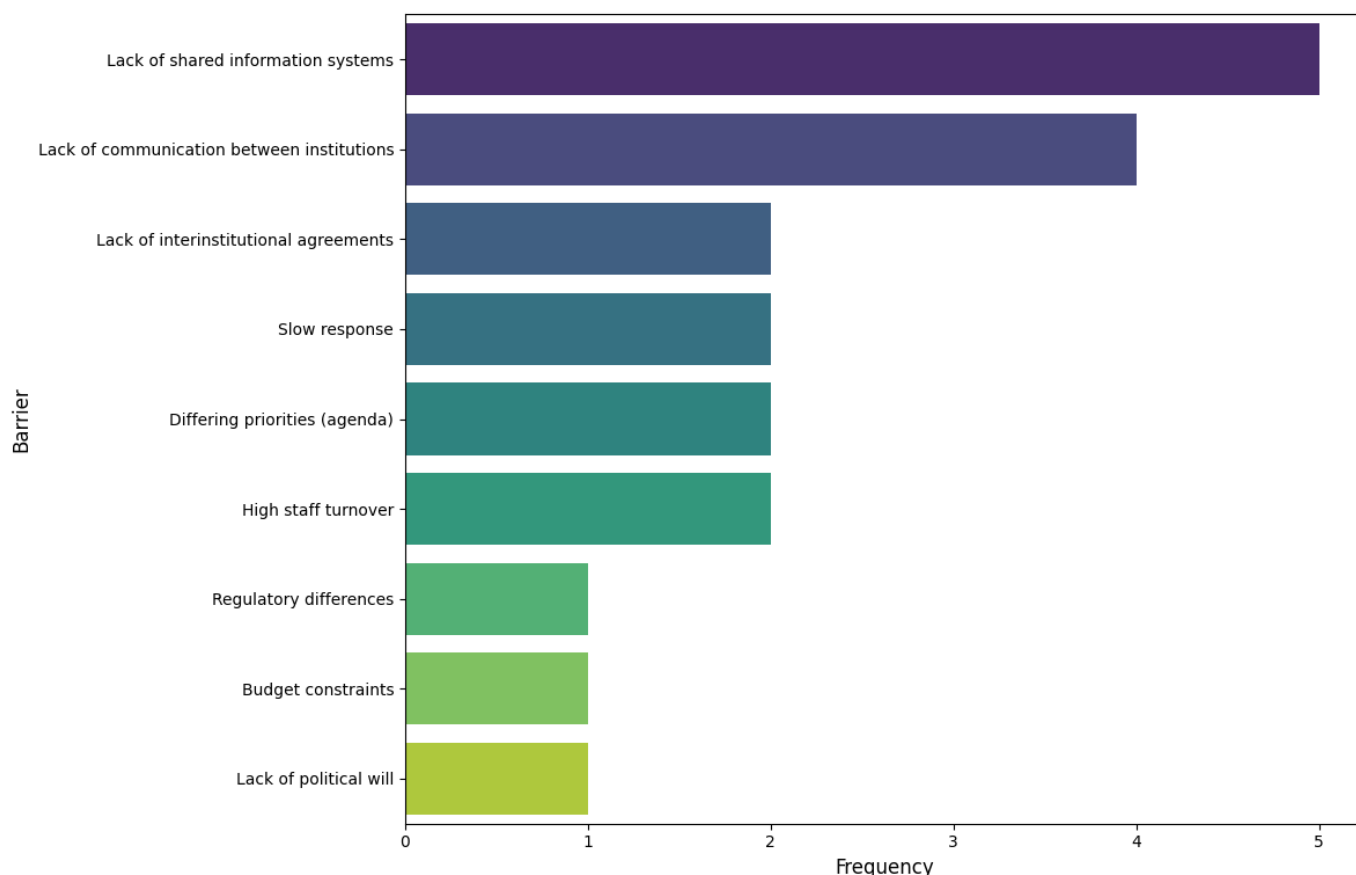


Figure 9. Barriers within institutional coordination in Jalisco and Puebla

In Jalisco, the documentary barrier was the most frequently mentioned by all institutions, meaning the main obstacle is document regularization, a problem that affects access to all services. These barriers range from the authentication of foreign documents, cited by at least one institution, to problems with identity registration due to having only one surname in a system that appears flexible but in practice proves to be the opposite.

A second, more homogeneous group of barriers includes the need to work as an economic factor, and a lack of regulatory awareness that hinders access for populations unfamiliar with the system. Family problems are also a barrier, since CYP may return accompanied or unaccompanied, sometimes arriving with relatives they barely know. Finally, the absence of records resulting from adolescents' exclusion from the educational system reflects a lack of identification and follow-up, and therefore the invisibility of returned adolescents on the public agenda.

In Puebla, in contrast to Jalisco, three barriers tie for the highest frequency across the sample. Awareness of binding instruments is lacking, since despite institutional mandates, protocols function in practice as mere recommendations. The most critical barrier is the lack of regulatory knowledge, which often takes time to reach those who indirectly serve the public, such as school administrators and front-desk staff. A lack of support networks for integrating into Mexico's social and cultural dynamics was also identified, with SIPINNA Puebla sharing that IPAM has observed CYP who return sometimes failing to connect with the culture, feeling like they belong neither here nor there. Finally, officials have observed CYP entering low-skilled jobs due to exclusion or dropout, although no formal records exist.

The full sample also highlighted barriers in coordinating with each other. The determining factor is the lack of shared information systems and communication between institutions, which prevents formal record keeping and monitoring.

In fact, 85.7 per cent of the sample confirm there are no inter-institutional records providing detailed tracking of returned adolescents. And according to 14.3 per cent, the only means of communication are official letters shared when they request support. Information gets lost and misplaced, and needs go unmet due to poor organization within institutions, a problem tied not only to internal operations but also to a systemic lag in digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas.

To a lesser extent, there's a lack of clear inter-institutional agreements (which specific institutions should people turn to?), along with slow responses due to poor staff organization and high turnover. A mismatch in agenda priorities between institutions, given the wide range of responsibilities and problems CYP face in Mexico, is a further internal contributor to these deficiencies in service and reach.

To contrast the institutional narratives, we spoke with two returned adolescents whose experiences provide insight into these institutional processes. While two cases do not constitute a representative sample, the specificity of their accounts makes them a valuable contribution.

The first participant, an 18-year-old with dual Mexican and American nationality, lived in the US for 12 or 13 years before returning to Mexico when he was 13. He rated the difficulty of adapting to Mexico between three and four out of five, closer to the difficult end. He described how a family member arranged his enrolment, a process that took close to a year, and he recalled feeling nervous about mixing up words and not being understood by classmates. He was placed directly into sixth grade after completing fifth grade in the United States, so no academic year was lost, and he rated his ease in using Spanish as easy when speaking, neutral when reading, and difficult when writing.

The second participant, a 15-year-old with Mexican nationality living in Guadalajara, had spent 12 years in the US before her family returned roughly a year earlier — a return she connected to concerns about deportation affecting her household. She rated the difficulty of adapting to Mexico at three out of five and explained that the return process itself was not difficult, since the harder part was simply

getting used to living somewhere so different. She first attempted to enroll in a public school, but turned to her uncle, a school director, and ended up in a private school through that connection. She was placed in the first year of high school after completing ninth grade in the US, so she too did not lose an academic year. She rated her comfort speaking Spanish as easy, though she was not asked about reading or writing it.

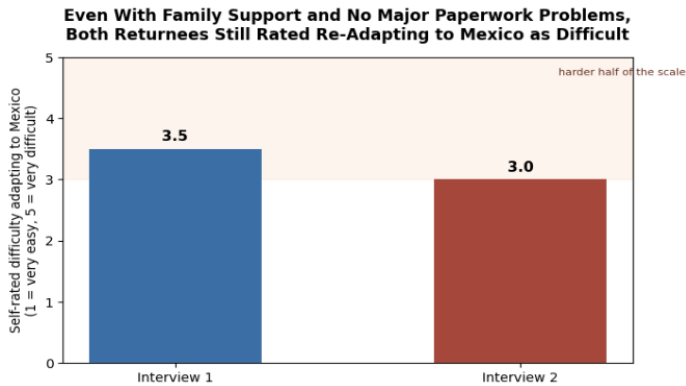


Figure 10. Adaptation difficulty comparison

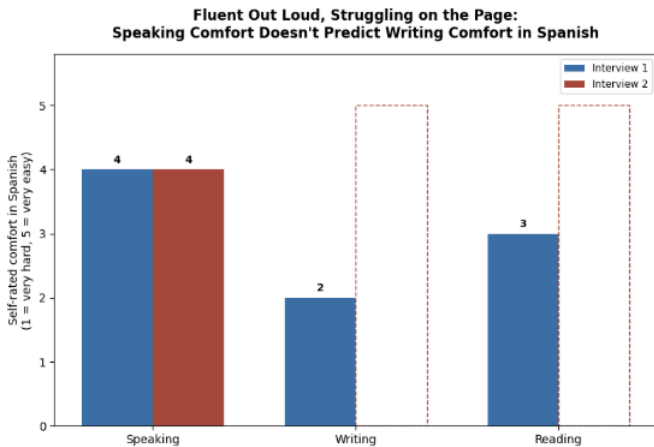


Figure 11. Ease in Spanish speaking, writing, reading

Both adolescents experienced outcomes more favourable than the institutional barriers described earlier would predict, and in neither case was this the result of a standardized process. Instead, a family member with direct access to a school made timely enrolment possible in both instances, and neither adolescent lost an academic year nor faced the documentation delays institutional actors described as common. The gap between spoken and written Spanish reported by the first participant also points to something a simple enrolment interview would likely miss. Overall, favourable outcomes for these

two adolescents appear to have depended on someone personally connected to the school system, rather than an institutional pathway built to produce that outcome for every returnee.

To assess whether this pattern extended beyond the immediate fieldwork in Jalisco and Puebla, we contacted two specialists who observed similar dynamics elsewhere: Eduardo Tapia, a Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México researcher, and Sandra Martínez, a researcher with experience in supporting returnee families.

Eduardo examined this same phenomenon in Nogales, Sonora. He organizes the barriers into three categories: political, cultural, and pedagogical. He explained that adolescent returnees undergo two transitions at once — coming of age and adapting to a new country — precisely when stability matters most. Drawing on a survey of 400 students and interviews with parents, directors, and teachers, he identified a consistent barrier: since public schools generally guarantee enrolment only to students who register months ahead, anyone arriving mid-year is placed on a waiting list with no defined timeline for school entry.

Eduardo also shared both regrettable cases of discrimination that went unaddressed and good practices that rely on teachers' willingness to promote multiculturalism and integration, not on institutional training. He confirmed this when he replicated the same study a decade later in the same city and found that the gap remained unresolved.

Sandra has worked with returned and deported families in Jalisco for about 16 years. She shared the story of a mother who was charged around 20,000 pesos (approximately CAD 1,600) in university tuition because her daughter, Mexican by law, was registered as a foreign student because she lacked dual nationality documentation. Sandra noted that some schools still request birth certificates issued within the past year, a requirement with no legal basis. She found that whether a returnee is placed in a grade they've already completed or forced to repeat an earlier one often depends on whether the family knows the right school director, since these practices depend on the discretion of whoever happens to be in charge.

Sandra observed that many adolescents were being raised by grandparents in their seventies or eighties, after the departure of both parents to the US. Given the limited availability of mental health services in these communities, she noted that substance use often fills that emotional void, being more accessible than professional support. Finally, she identified that the most significant drop in enrolment occurs during the transition from upper-secondary education to university, positioning this exact stage as the most critical point for intervention.

Structural Analysis

These obstacles are not isolated events but interconnected systemic failures embedded within the support and service system. Rather than functioning independently, administrative, institutional, economic, social, psychological, and structural barriers reinforce one another, creating a cycle that continuously reproduces educational exclusion.

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Understanding these causal relationships is essential because they reveal that improving educational reintegration cannot rely on isolated interventions or blind protocols without pilot testing and establishing case follow-up procedures. The following analysis examines each category of barrier by identifying its

immediate causes, the systemic failures that sustain it, and the consequences generated throughout the educational reintegration process. In other words, educational exclusion is not produced by the migration experience itself, but by institutional systems that have yet to adapt to increasingly transnational patterns of mobility.

- **Administrative barriers.** The first point of contact between returnee adolescents and the Mexican educational system is one of the most influential determinants of successful reintegration. Administrative barriers arise from inconsistent implementation of enrolment, identity regularization, and revalidation requirements rather than the absence of legal protections. A lack of standard procedures from institutions and varying interpretations across schools delay enrolment, triggering academic interruptions and reinforcing economic and psychological pressures on returnee students.

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Experiences of discrimination, cultural adjustment, and language-related challenges weaken students' sense of belonging, reinforcing psychological distress and academic disengagement.

- **Institutional barriers** stem from uncoordinated efforts and a lack of follow-up through shared information systems between government institutions and educational bodies. Despite strong legal frameworks, capacity building to respond to return migration is still lacking. The absence of standardized protocols, specialized training, and inter-institutional coordination results in inadequate support, leaving significant

gaps in policy implementation. Policy fails to reach administrative staff, teachers, and front-desk personnel in general, rendering federal inclusion mandates more of a fantasy than a reality and allowing administrative obstacles and educational disparities to persist. Furthermore, public programs designed to assist these students often lack sufficient funding and clear federal coordination. Consequently, initiatives like the Educational Assistance Program for the Migrant School Population (PAPEM) lack the resources allocated for effective local implementation.

- **Economic barriers** reflect the financial instability that often accompanies return migration. Indirect schooling costs and the need to generate household income reduce educational continuity, while administrative delays further increase families' economic vulnerability.
- **Social barriers** emerge from the limited recognition of returnee adolescents' bicultural identities within schools. Experiences of discrimination, cultural adjustment, and language-related challenges weaken students' sense of belonging, reinforcing psychological distress and academic disengagement.
- **Psychological barriers** develop as a consequence of repeated institutional, academic, and social obstacles. Anxiety, uncertainty, and diminished confidence reduce students' ability to persist in school, making emotional well-being closely dependent on institutional support.
- **Structural barriers** are the underlying conditions that sustain all other forms of exclusion. Weak policy implementation, fragmented institutional coordination, limited data, and the absence of reintegration frameworks prevent systemic solutions, allowing administrative, institutional, economic, social, and psychological barriers to continuously reinforce one another.

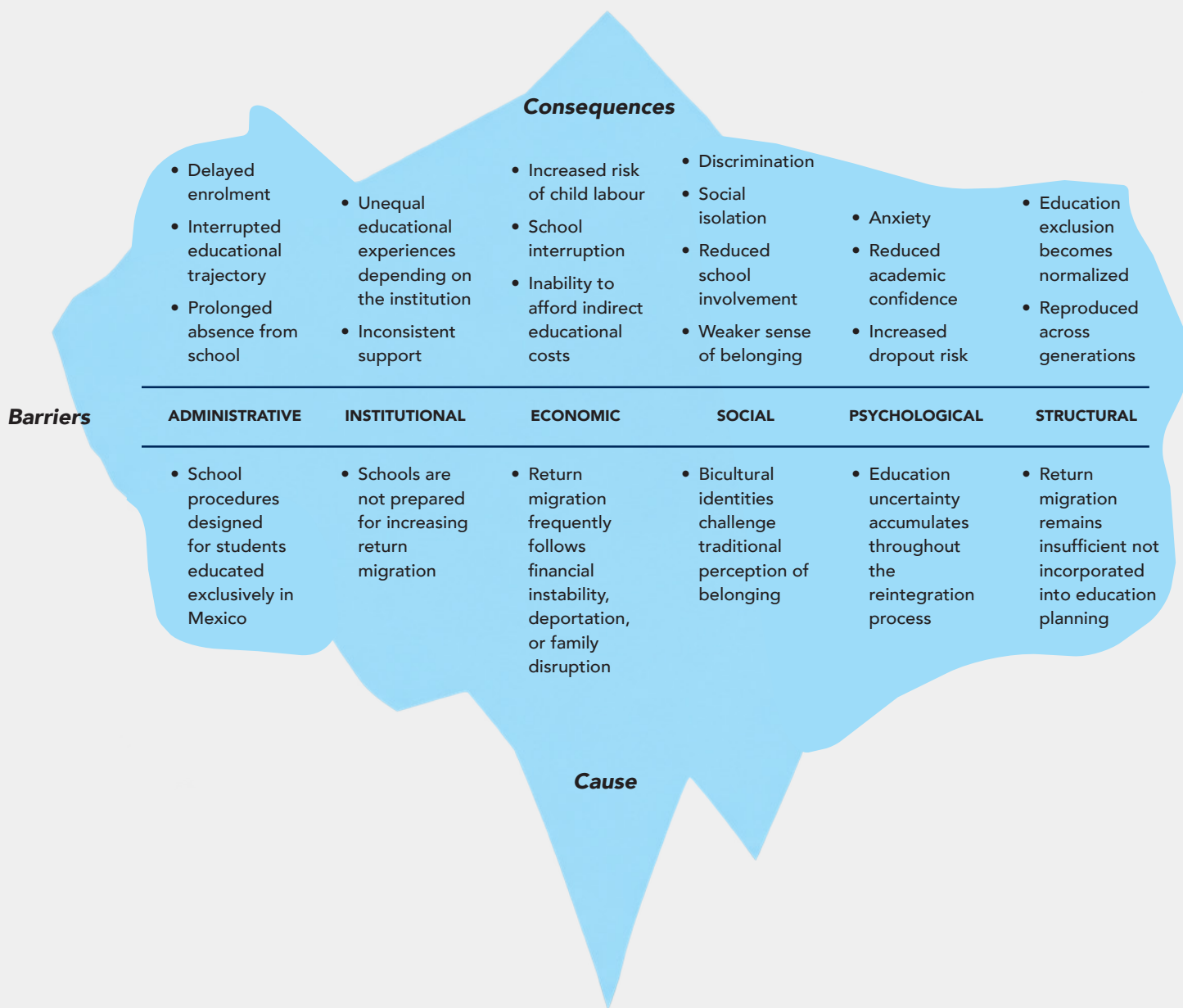


Figure 12. Iceberg diagram of causes and consequences of each type of barrier

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

Mexico does not require new educational rights or additional legislation. Existing legal frameworks already recognize every child's right to education regardless of migration status.¹⁹ However, in interviews public officials, educators, and returnee families consistently revealed that the principal challenge lies in implementation. Despite existing regulations, returnee adolescents continue to encounter inconsistent enrolment practices, fragmented institutional responses, limited

19 Constitution, the General Law on Education, and the LGDNNA.

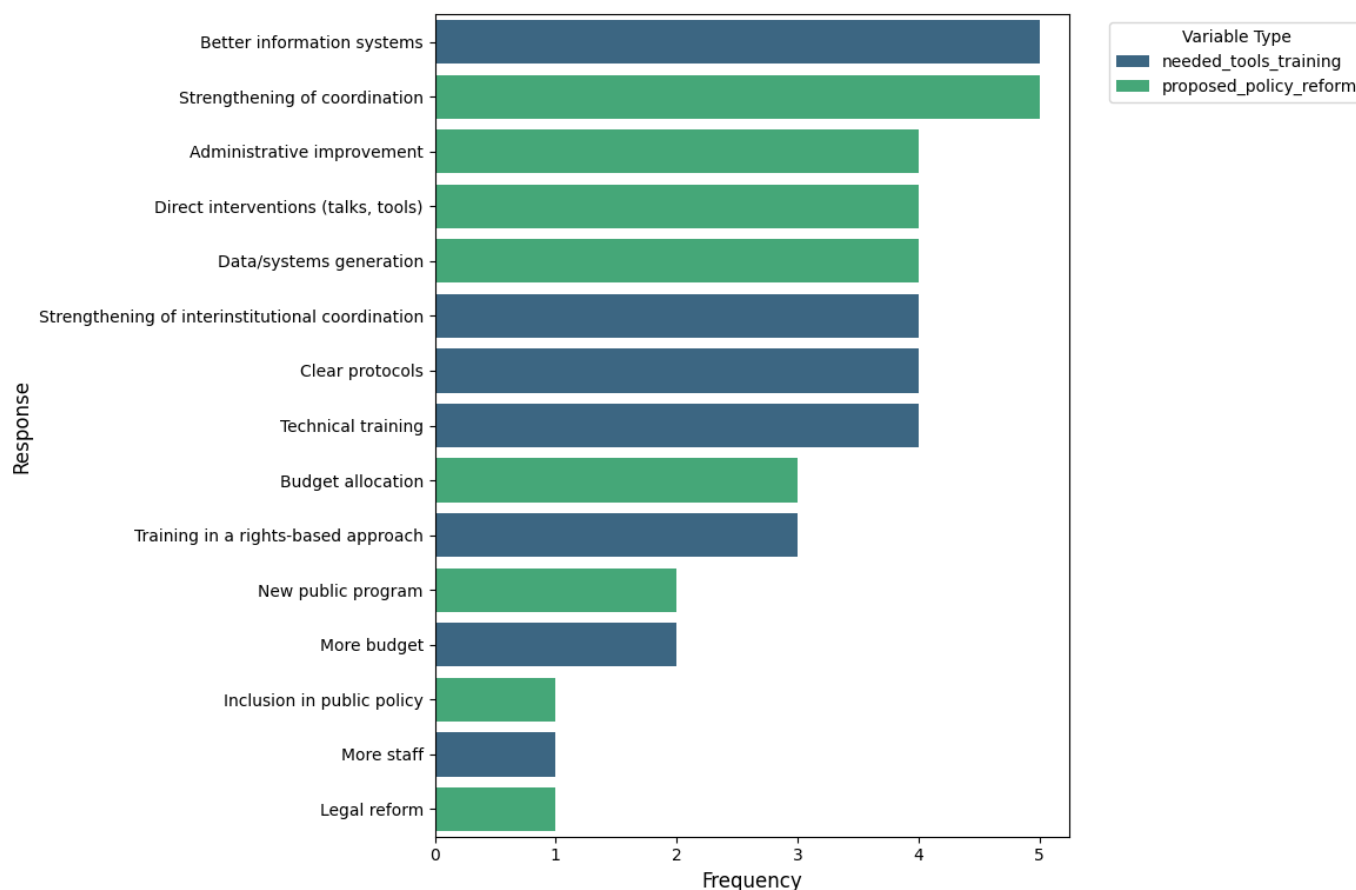


Figure 13. Frequency of needed tools and proposed policy recommendations

knowledge of regulations among school personnel, and the absence of mechanisms to monitor their educational trajectories. These implementation gaps create a disconnect between rights guaranteed in law and rights effectively exercised in practice.

Incorporating an interinstitutional educational reintegration mechanism as an operational add-on to the existing educational and child protection protocols for return migrant children and adolescents would make a difference. Initially implemented as a pilot program in high-return states such as Jalisco and Puebla, this mechanism would complement the current protocols of SEP and PPNNA, strengthening their implementation through coordinated case management, standardized follow-up, and shared institutional responsibilities. Unlike current protocols that facilitate documentation or school enrolment, this mechanism incorporates students from upper-secondary education and aims to accompany each adolescent from their arrival in Mexico along a successful academic inclusion.

The mechanism should strengthen coordination among SEP, SIPINNA, PPNNA, State Migrant Assistance Offices, and educational institutions, while also incorporating civil society organizations and NGOs that already provide complementary services. In interviews with public officials we heard that stronger interinstitutional coordination, not new legislation, is the most pressing need to ensure educational continuity. A coordinated response would expand institutional reach, reduce duplication of efforts, and establish clearer referral pathways for returnee adolescents. Such pillars would not be possible without having clarity about which authorities are competent and are obliged to collaborate, for the simple reason that they exist to guarantee the rights of CYP, especially in contexts of migration.

In the case of teenaged returnees, implementation should begin with SEP, through the creation of a standardized case registration process for every identified returned adolescent. Rather than serving solely as an enrolment record, this

case file would function as a shared tracking tool containing educational, administrative, and social information, allowing participating institutions to monitor each student's educational trajectory. Once a case is opened, SIPINNA, through its existing subcommittees dedicated to the rights of children and adolescents, should activate an interinstitutional coordination process that convenes the relevant authorities responsible for guaranteeing the student's right to education. This mechanism would facilitate timely referrals, assign institutional responsibilities, and ensure that no adolescent is lost within fragmented administrative systems.

Beyond enrolment, each student should receive individualized case follow-up during the first academic year, integrating both educational and psychosocial support. Regular monitoring of school attendance, academic adaptation, language needs, emotional well-being, and family circumstances would enable institutions to identify risks early and provide coordinated interventions before students disengage. In parallel, the mechanism should strengthen existing SEP and PPNNA protocols by incorporating standardized referral pathways, minimum follow-up standards, and shared indicators for evaluating educational continuity, rather than creating a separate regulatory framework.

Finally, successful implementation will depend on strengthening institutional capacity and awareness at the school level. The research identified a significant knowledge gap among school administrators and teachers regarding returnee students' rights and the regulations already in force. For this reason, SEP should incorporate practical training through Technical School Councils (*Consejos Técnicos Escolares*) to disseminate current regulations and clarify enrolment procedures. These efforts should be complemented by school-based awareness campaigns that make visible and contextualize return migrant adolescents' experiences to promote understanding of their bilingual and bicultural backgrounds, and to foster inclusive school environments that support both educational access and long-term belonging. These campaigns should include teenaged returnees in their design, planning, and implementation to share real-life experiences and acknowledge the value of their stories. By focusing on implementation, coordination, and

sustained accompaniment, this mechanism would transform existing legal guarantees into meaningful educational opportunities for returned migrant adolescents.

Lessons Learned

Mexico has an extensive legal framework that guarantees every child's right to education. However, legal recognition alone does not ensure effective access to education. Persistent gaps in institutional coordination, implementation, information sharing, and case follow-up continue to limit the educational inclusion of returnee adolescents, particularly at the upper-secondary level, where specialized guidance remains absent. Families, educators, peers, and community organizations play a critical role in compensating for these institutional shortcomings and supporting adolescents throughout their reintegration process.

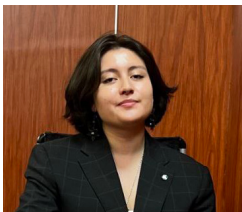
Beyond its policy implications, this research transformed our understanding of return migration. Engaging directly with students, families, educators, and public officials, we found that educational reintegration extends far beyond school enrolment. It is a process of rebuilding educational continuity, restoring a sense of belonging, and ensuring that adolescents can successfully continue their academic trajectories within a system prepared to respond to their needs.

Ultimately, the challenge is not to expand existing legal protections, but to strengthen their implementation. Advancing toward a coordinated, evidence-based, and person-centred system of educational reintegration would enable institutions to move beyond guaranteeing the right to education in principle and toward ensuring its effective realization for every adolescent returning to Mexico.

Research Team



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Ana Cristina Guadarrama Hernández is a ninth-semester bachelor of laws student at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Campus Monterrey. Interested in climate justice, intersectional feminism, arts, human mobilities, biodiversity conservation, and human rights, she has been involved in The Climate Reality Project, TECHO, and the Local Conference of Youth in Mexico. In 2025, she completed an internship at the Legal Coordination of Bosque La Primavera, a protected natural area in Jalisco. In June 2026, she concluded a specialization in strategic litigation with legal assistance for a migration law case, questioning the human right to social security for migrants and refugees in Mexico.



Loretta Michelle Mariaud Hernández is a recent graduate with a BA in international relations from Tecnológico de Monterrey. Her academic and professional work focuses on international cooperation, public relations, coaching, migration, and education. She has partnered in research with the American University through their immigration lab in Washington DC. Her interest in international cooperation has led to work at the West Consular Corps and the FIFA World Cup 2026, coordinating with international stakeholders and supporting cross-institutional collaboration. She is founder of Come Alive, a community-based university leadership program dedicated to empowering young people to lead lives of purpose, foster leadership, and strengthen community engagement through service.



Ximena Sandoval Ruiz is a ninth-semester economics and international relations student at Tecnológico de Monterrey, where she holds the Academic Talent Award. Her work focuses on the intersection of development economics, social justice, and the study of how institutional structures shape the lived experiences of marginalized communities. She has collaborated with GIZ, INPI, and IFRC, producing analyses used as direct inputs by international teams. She believes that meaningful development research requires both analytical rigour and genuine engagement with the people whose lives the data represent.



Javier Contreras Arreaga is a professor at Tecnológico de Monterrey where he has also been the law program director for the Guadalajara Campus since 2022. From 2021 to 2023, Javier worked as an external consultant for the International Organization for Migration of the United Nations (IOM) in different projects related to the protection of migrant children and local government policies for the integration of migrants. He has also been a consultant for international organizations such as UNODC, UNFPA, UN Women, and the ILO. In 2023, he authored the National Strategy to Prevent and Combat Migrant Smuggling for Mexico's Department of State.



Ignacio Ibarra López is an economics professor at Tecnológico de Monterrey in Puebla. He holds a bachelor's degree in public administration from the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), a master's in economics, a PhD in economics from the Universidad de las Américas Puebla (UDLAP), and a master's in big data and artificial intelligence from Universidad Complutense de Madrid (UCM). Notable work includes analysis of income, social interaction, and the use of financial products on insurance demand in Mexico. He is also a leader of the Financial Inclusion Monitor Initiative at the FAIR Center.



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