

Book Review

- *Deported Americans: life after deportation to Mexico*, by Beth C. Caldwell.
Duke University, 2019

In this timely study, Beth C. Caldwell, formerly a Public Defender in Los Angeles County and now Professor of Legal Analysis at Southwestern Law School, examines the consequences of the policy of mass deportations to Mexico over the last decade and a half of largely undocumented, but often well integrated, long-time residents of the United States, a category that includes border crossers and those who have “overstayed” their visas and may have managed to obtain permanent resident status and green cards.

As both a public defender and professor of law, Caldwell devotes a substantial part of the book to the inadequacies of public policy with respect to immigration law and the gaping holes in the system that make it ever more difficult for those who are rounded up to avoid summary deportation. She details the reforms put in place in 1996 that have led to the apprehension of many more undocumented individuals who were long-time residents in locations far from the borderlands. She also underscores that the reforms led to a woeful lack of court appointed counsellors and severe restrictions on the judicial discretion that had previously allowed ample opportunity for judges to weigh factors such as length of residence in the United States, employment history, dependency of family members on the individual who faces removal, military service, evidence of “good character,” the severity of the crime with which the individual was charged, and the length of time since that offence was committed. In short, today discretionary authority of the judge to grant relief is strictly curtailed relative to past practices.

Mentioned only in passing in a number of places in the book, but peeking from behind the curtain throughout, is President Barack Obama whose eight years in office witnessed the deportation of 3 million people – more than in the previous hundred years of the Republic. As we can see in hindsight, this policy precipitated the deportation of a staggering number of people whose minor misdemeanours were defined as crimes because of the racial bias inherent in sentencing practices. Moreover, it did not produce the softening of recalcitrant

Republican attitudes toward comprehensive immigration reform that Obama's supporters had hoped would come about.

Deploying her professional training in immigration law and a finely tuned ear and eye for the lived experience of the deportees and the families they are forced to leave behind in the United States, Caldwell examines the lives of people who crossed (or were carried across) the U.S.-Mexican border when they were so young that their "primary socialization" occurred in the United States. Thus her research subjects are best described as people who now find themselves in a country that is utterly "foreign" to them, even in the case of those deportees fortunate enough to have grown up in the United States in a household and neighbourhood where Spanish was spoken.

Based on lengthy interviews conducted in Mexico, Caldwell focuses in on the deportees' alienation from their nominal countrymen and women. She explores their feelings that, whatever was the basis for their incarceration in the United States – often no more than possession of a fake driver's license to enable a worker to commute to work – deportees carry the stigma of having been deported for criminal activity and often resort to lying about their reasons for returning to Mexico. And all these complex concerns about acceptance in Mexico play out against the background of feelings of rejection by the United States, the country that, until they were deported, they had always regarded as their homeland.

Caldwell's painstaking observations and interviews with 112 deportees (plus longitudinal study of 15 of these subjects over a period of five to seven years) provide compelling and varied stories. Strikingly, some accounts relate relatively successful adjustments to the unwanted circumstance in which deportees find themselves. We cannot be surprised that the deportees most likely to find work and create new lives in Mexico are the better educated individuals who have completed high school or college and possess more advanced skills to offer potential employers or to start businesses of their own. A particularly interesting finding is that those who find work at modest or higher wage levels often manage this feat precisely because they are more than bi-lingual; they are young and steeped in the language of youth markets, having personal knowledge of fashion and trends of youth culture in the United States and around the world. Deportees who have this background are in high demand as workers in call centres – at the lower end of the pay scale – and at far better pay in more upscale enterprises that serve an international clientele that expects to deal with others fluent in English.

In contrast to these people are those interviewed by Caldwell who report that they have no family ties in Mexico and, as a consequence, have no city, town, or *pueblito* to which they might "return." Others mention the depth of the humiliation they feel at the disdain with which they are regarded by Mexicans (particularly with respect to their lack of colloquial Mexican Spanish). Many mention that they live in constant terror of the drug cartels and those police who work in partnership with them. Perhaps most poignant, substantial num-

bers of Caldwell's interviewees independently reported that upon deportation, having lost all the people and the life they loved in the United States, they felt that they had "died."

Under the circumstances, there is little wonder that Caldwell concludes that a substantial number of the deportees who opened up to her and made this highly significant study possible are at real risk of either descending into deep depression and substance abuse, or risking death or imprisonment by sneaking back across the border to reunite with loved ones. In sum, this meticulously well researched and written book should be read by everyone concerned with immigration reform, in any region in the world but particularly in the United States.

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