



## Picturing health: migrants' stories in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

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Although Ciudad Juárez, a city situated on the USA–Mexico border, has been affected by femicide, drug-trafficking, and other challenges, migrants from Latin America and elsewhere continue to arrive here hoping to seek asylum in the USA. As a photojournalist focusing on issues related to gender, human rights, health, and migration, I travelled to Ciudad Juárez in October, 2022 to document how lack of access to maternal health care is impacting women along their migration route. For many pregnant women and people travelling with children, this gruelling journey puts them at great risk. Despite these dangers, many migrants choose to flee as a way to escape gender-based violence, threats from gangs, or precarious economic situations at home.

The challenges pregnant women face during migration can cause

complicated perinatal and maternal outcomes. Migrant women can also be the targets of sexual violence, which can lead to unwanted pregnancies. Furthermore, in shelters and detention centres migrants often endure difficult conditions due to unhygienic and overcrowded facilities where access to health care is non-existent or limited. Adequate prenatal and postnatal care, which are vital to maternal and child health, are often out of reach for migrants who are on the move.

Despite the challenges and dangers in Mexico and in their home countries, more than 2 million migrants have been denied entry to the USA without the opportunity to seek asylum under Title 42—a public health order first used by the Trump administration to expel migrants at the border. Title 42

is controversial and widely criticised as a threat to international refugee and human rights law, and it was expected to end in late 2022. But in December the US Supreme Court allowed the order to remain effective temporarily in response to an appeal to keep the policy in place by Republican state attorneys general. Title 42 has also been expanded under the Biden administration. The order will remain in effect until a decision is made by the Supreme Court later this year after oral arguments have been heard. In the meantime, migrants remain in limbo in Mexico.

*Danielle Villasana*

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I received a grant from the VIST Foundation that partly funded my work in Mexico. In the captions for these photographs the names of Rosa and Roberta have been changed to protect their identity.



Danielle Villasana

### Panorama of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

Migrants continually arrive in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, on their journey to seek asylum in the USA. “The number of migrants in the city has never decreased. There’s always a constant flow of migrants”, said priest Francisco García Salinas, who opened the doors of the San Juan Apóstol shelter in 2018 to migrant women travelling while pregnant or with children. “We said we have to work with a dual-eligible population—and not because not everyone is vulnerable. But, there’s another layer of vulnerability. And in this case, that’s women and children”, said Patricia Galarza Gándara, a psychologist and shelter coordinator. The San Juan Apóstol shelter offers women and children lodging, food, educational classes, psychosocial support, and access to medical care.



Danielle Villaseña

**“So much pain”**

Despite being pregnant Reinya decided to leave Honduras due to gang threats. She faced severe difficulties on her migration journey, including being robbed, separated from her daughter, and threatened by a smuggler. As she approached her due date, she finally found refuge in southern Mexico. “I felt so much pain in my belly. I felt like my baby was going to fall out”, she told me. A month after giving birth, Reinya and her children headed towards Ciudad Juárez, crossed the border through a sewage tunnel, and were detained by US Customs and Border Protection officers. She told me about her experience in a detention centre in the Texan city of El Paso: “My son was dripping in poop for 5 hours, they didn’t give me diapers. With a really high fever, my daughter cried and cried. I couldn’t stand it.” After a few days, they were returned to Mexico. While she waits to enter the USA documented with the help of San Juan Apóstol shelter, she says she is happy to have a place to sleep, three meals a day, and access to medical care.



Danielle Villasana

**Waiting**  
This photograph was taken in October, 2022 and shows migrants standing along the banks of the Rio Grande between Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, USA, where many had erected tents and other makeshift shelters. In late November, 2022, Mexican authorities forcibly evacuated migrants from this settlement.



Daniella Villasana

**Crossing**

José, a migrant, helps a family carry their children across the Rio Grande on a journey towards the Texan city of El Paso. The family migrated from Venezuela with their children through the Darién Gap, an area of mountainous rainforest between Colombia and Panama, and Mexico to the US border. Having arrived to Ciudad Juárez after what they said was a “traumatic” experience that they “didn’t wish on anyone”—they told me they had seen dead bodies of people who had choked in the Darién Gap’s rivers—they climbed up the bank to turn themselves in to US Customs and Border Protection officers.



Danielle Villazma

**More than 2 million**  
Migrants cross the Rio Grande between Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, USA, in October, 2022. The past year has been one of the deadliest for migrants attempting to cross into the USA, where many hope to be granted asylum. However, since the introduction of Title 42, a public health policy first used as a way to curb the spread of COVID-19 in the USA by the Trump administration, more than 2 million migrants have been expelled from the country.



Danielle Villasana

#### Separated

Noslen, her husband, and their son migrated through the Darién Gap. Despite the harrowing journey, they finally reached the US border where they were detained and separated. In detention, her son lost weight because of the barely edible food provided. She told me how when she was breastfeeding in the detention centre, a US Customs and Border Protection officer yelled at her. “She asked me why I was a pig and why I was taking my breasts out like that. I went to a corner where she couldn’t see me and cried. It was horrible.” Days later she was returned to the streets of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. “When we saw they were taking us back to where we were, we started to cry. From fear, shock, and uncertainty. We were being deported under [Title 42].” Shielding herself from the rain, a passerby told her about the San Juan Apóstol shelter, where after 22 days of anxiously waiting to hear from her husband he called. “I feel at peace now”, she said. In this picture Noslen holds her son in the kitchen of the San Juan Apóstol shelter.



Danielle Villasana

**"That's nothing"**

Travelling as a single mother with her two young boys, Ada fled Central America to escape the violence she and her brother suffered from her stepfather. At the San Juan Apóstol shelter, she showed me this photograph of herself with a black eye. "That's nothing", she said. While trying to hold back tears, Ada recounted her experiences of being brutally beaten up by her stepfather. Ada and her mother had the courage to report him to the police and he was jailed. But, set to be released soon, Ada, her two children, and mother decided to flee in order to protect their safety since he had vowed to kill them as the police arrested him.



Danielle Vilbiana

**"I did it for her"**

Thinking they were safe in Mexico, far from the gang that forced Rosa's partner to work for them, the family had to flee once again due to threats. But this time, she was pregnant. "I did it for her", Rosa said, as she held her young daughter. Despite having to pay multiple bribes throughout their journey and sleeping in the street, they made it to Mexicali, Mexico, where Rosa gave birth before continuing on to Ciudad Juárez. "It was really difficult [giving birth] because it's not the same as being at home, having your mom look out for you", said Rosa. This image of Rosa holding her 3-month-old daughter was photographed at the Buen Samaritano shelter in Ciudad Juárez while she waited to cross into the USA.





Danielle Villasana

**Bridge of the Americas**

Roberta, who was 5 months pregnant when this image was photographed in October, 2022, kisses her daughter while waiting on the Bridge of the Americas between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso to enter the USA. Months earlier, when gang members threatened to kill and rape her children, she left Honduras with her children, leaving her home and business behind. After riding in cramped trailers for hours, they arrived in the Mexican city of Reynosa where they were kept in an abandoned apartment by a smuggler until it was clear to cross into the USA. "I slept on a small mattress with the kids. The smells were horrible. There was a dog that defecated outside the apartment. We had to eat there, bathe there", she said. Sitting in the small room, she realised she was pregnant. "My world fell apart", she told me.



Danielle Villasana

**A future**

In October, 2022, families crossed the Bridge of the Americas, including that of Roberta, who now looks ahead to her new life in the USA. "I want to work, to help my family, to [have] a future for my kids."