IRREGULAR CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRANTS: U.S. AMERICANS' LEAST FAVORITE CHARACTERS ON TV

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Key Trends

- Volumizing media depictions and narrative associations with criminality exasperate U.S. American anxieties around irregular Central American migrants.
- Individualized narratives about migrants tend to appeal more to U.S. Americans and allow for the formation of parasocial bonds.
- Negligent misrepresentations of migrants in U.S. American entertainment media have worsened in recent years.
- Negative perceptions of migrants encourage restrictive immigration policies, subsequently legitimizing exclusionary sentiments behaviors, and perpetuating a cycle of discrimination.
- Appropriate representation in entertainment media in collaboration with migrants and migrant advocates can disrupt this cycle.

I.   Introduction

U.S. media have been spotlighting the rise in Central Americans migrants entering – or attempting to enter – the United States in recent years. Anonymizing rhetoric in reporting feeds into American anxieties around Central American migration. This is a known issue that journalists and activists are already working to counteract in the headlines and through "guerilla media." But accompanying depictions in pop culture fail to compensate when viewers flip the channel, with current television trending toward associations with criminality and sheer volume. These failings replicate those of journalistic media and feed

into associations and anxieties which mobilize into discrimination, perpetuating a vicious feedback loop of perceptions and behaviors.

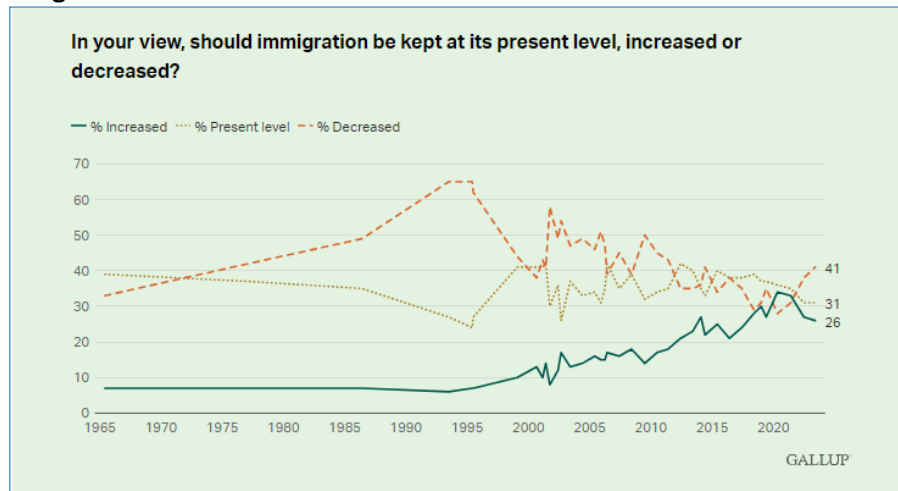## II.   Socio-Political Context
The Metrics of Migration

This policy brief does not contend that there is nothing significant to report regarding Central American migration into the United States. Indeed, according to the Migration Policy Institute, the Central American-born population in the United States grew by 1.5 million since 2000, with 2.1 million irregular Central American migrants residing in the U.S. as of 2019 (Batalova & Ward, 2023). Migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua accounted for 28 percent of encounters at the southern border between late 2021 and early 2023, with encounters in 2023 increasing by 12 percent as compared to 2020 (Batalova & Ward, 2023; Putzel-Kavanaugh & Ruiz Soto, 2023). Central American migration into the U.S. should be acknowledged given the scale of movement and population growth. But attention cuts both ways for irregular migrants.

Opinions of immigration as beneficial to the U.S. trended upward through the 2010s despite charged rhetoric around the America First movement and statements from then-President Donald Trump in the latter half (Kenix & Lopez, 2021). Positive opinions climbed 20 percent in under ten years (Gallup, 2023). U.S. Americans bucked historic trends of reluctance in 2018 when 51% of respondents expressed support for Central American asylum-seekers attempting to enter the country (Kenix & Lopez, 2021;

McCarthy, 2018). U.S. Americans remain widely sympathetic to irregular migrants seeking to enter the country.

Figure 1.

In your view, should immigration be kept at its present level, increased or decreased?

— % Increased ····· % Present level – – % Decreased

Source: Gallup https://news.gallup.com/poll/1660/immigration.asp

These sympathies begin to decline statistically once a migrant crosses the border and their entering the U.S. ceases to be merely aspirational. U.S. Americans are nearly 10 percent less sympathetic toward irregular migrants already in the U.S. and nearly twice as outright unsympathetic as compared to migrants seeking to enter (Brenan, 2023). As Central American migration into the U.S. has increased, even sympathetic U.S. Americans have problematized it (Brenan, 2023). Gallup polling shows a gradual decline in opinion of immigration as beneficial to the U.S. since its May 2020 height (Gallup, 2023). See Figure 1. There has been a simultaneous 13 percent spike in respondents favoring decreased immigration since its all-time low in May 2020 (Gallup, 2023).

The Media and the Migrant

The least sympathetic reporting on Central American migration prior to entry into the U.S. frequently characterizes it in both images and text as criminal and "horde"-like (Madrigal & Soroka, 2021). There is a distinct emphasis on the volume of caravans

creeping toward the U.S.-Mexico border and authorities preparing for confrontation. Descriptions of Central American migration set these inflows further apart from other immigration patterns, emphasizing the migration of family units as opposed to the single, adult Hispanic male laborer archetype that U.S. Americans are familiar with (Kenix & Lopez, 2021; Flores et al, 2022). U.S. American attitudes decline drastically with *en masse* narratives, reacting far more positively to individual narratives as a rule.
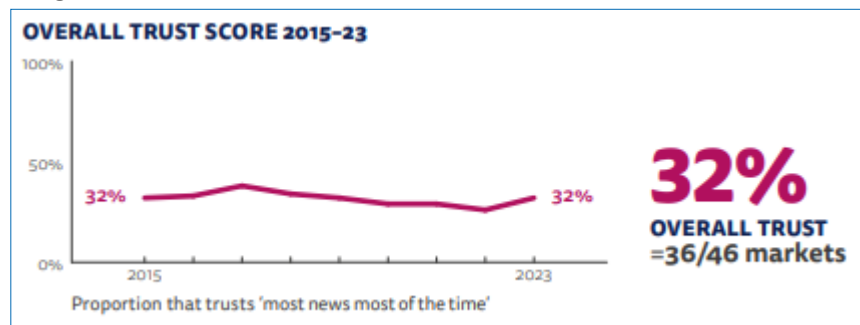
Activists and journalists supportive of Central American migrants can take advantage of this when aiming for sympathy. U.S. American news coverage of Central American migration tends to be emotive and legalistic, but "human interest" approaches gain traction with greater proximity (Kenix & Lopez, 2021). News coverage of migration rises in frequency in absence of information and experience rather than with its abundance, in a way filling a market gap (Kenix & Lopez, 2021).

Anxious U.S. Americans clamor for an image of the incoming unknown. The "horde" caters to anxieties while individual faces soothe them. "Human interest" news coverage can individualize migrants through personal narratives (Kenix & Lopez, 2021; Bleich et al, 2015). Research has shown that "people positivity" generated by individualized news coverage has a significant effect on viewers who are "threat sensitive" and might otherwise be prone to suspicion and distrust toward migrants (Madrigal & Soroka, 2023).

Yet entertainment media, as in largely fictionalized, entertainment-focused television series and films, has failed to give Central American migrants a face in the popular American consciousness. In fact, the proportional representation of Hispanic and

Latine immigrants as a racial category of immigrant on U.S. television has dropped by 16% since 2020 while overrepresentation of criminality among these fictional immigrants has increased (Lowe et al., 2022). Representation of explicitly Central American immigrants, regular or irregular, remains low and stereotypical by extension.
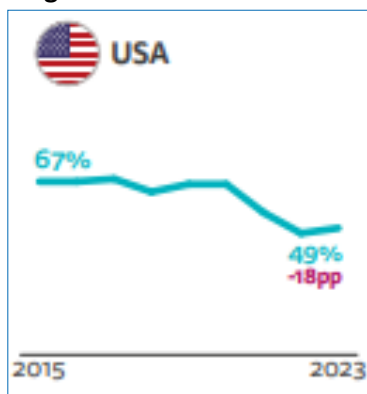
Figure 2.

OVERALL TRUST SCORE 2015–23

32%
OVERALL TRUST
=36/46 markets

Proportion that trusts 'most news most of the time'

Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023

These depictions, while fictionalized, should not be underestimated in their significance. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, overall trust in the news still sits at just 32 percent among U.S. Americans despite small gains in 2023

Figure 3.

Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023

(Newman et al, 2023). See Figure 2. Avid interest in following the news declined by 18 percent since 2015 and only recovering slightly amid COVID-19 and the 2020 election cycle (Newman et al, 2023). See Figure 3. Entertainment media serves as a valuable alternative for exposing U.S. Americans to accurate information about and individualized narratives around irregular Central American migrants. It does more harm than the good it is capable of when misrepresentations are allowed to persist.

Hate Crime and Community Health Outcomes

Negative depictions of migrants in media promote distrust and exasperate exclusionary behaviors (Conzo et al, 2021). Not necessarily hate crimes. Negative depictions of migrants increase exclusionary behavior in everyday societal interactions like conducting business transactions or working alongside others. This is a feedback loop. But hate crimes have been on the rise in the United States. In 2022, Hispanic and Latine victims accounted for 12.2% of race-based hate crimes, making this demographic the third-largest reported victim pool (FBI, 2023). The true number may be higher.

Hate crimes against immigrants go underreported to authorities due to lack of trust in law enforcement and fear of reprisals. Only 8% of Latine victims reported incidents to authorities irrespective of immigration status (National Institute of Justice, 2022). The National Institute of Justice found that anti-immigrant sentiments have been a "substantial driver" of race-based victimization of Latine and Hispanic, regardless of immigration status, in recent years (National Institute, 2022). These incidents contribute to negative mental health outcomes in victims for years afterward, including struggles with depression.

Hate crime has a ripple effect in communities. It has been observed to undermine a sense of safety, sense of belonging to the wider community, trust of the perpetrator's population, and self-worth in individual members of affected demographic (Perry & Alvi, 2012). Even a perceived rise in victimization of a vulnerable demographic drives members of that demographic to take precautions. These measures often entail withdrawing from shared public spaces (Perry & Alvi, 2012). Exclusionary behavior (like hate crimes, but also

housing, employment, and financial discrimination) in itself can drive hidden populations like irregular immigrants further into the shadows and exasperate the lack of information that precipitated the initial acts of exclusion (Conzo et al, 2021).

III.   Spotlighting Migrant Narratives

Media depictions of irregular Central American migrants are not the end-all-be-all to combatting prejudice against Latine and Hispanic communities in the United States. Certain classifications of migrants face fundamental structural barriers to the entry and integration into U.S. American society. Where media depictions of irregular Central American migrants can make a difference is in the disruption of patterns of negative perception, exclusionary behavior, and restrictive policymaking.

Perceptions, Discourse, Policy, and Perceptions, Again

Research supports a link between anti-immigrant legislation and observable public sentiment toward immigration (Flores, 2017). Arizona's restrictive immigration measure SB 1070 was meant, in part, to assuage the public's discontent with irregular immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border. Analysis of English-language social media activity found that the legislation actually fueled public discontent with irregular immigration at the border, encouraging further negative commentary on immigration into the U.S. rather than alleviating it and calls for yet more restrictive policies.

Discourse leading up to the implementation of SB 1070 emphasized narratives of criminality associated with irregular migration into the U.S (Flores, 2017). Upon its passage, the law normalized that perspective, tarring the Central American and Mexican migrants undertaking this migration pathway with the same brush. SB 1070, a hard power

measure against immigration, also had a soft power effect. It promoted exclusionary behavior against not only irregular migrants crossing the border but also against the broader Latine and Hispanic communities within the United States (Flores, 2017).

This is another infinite feedback loop. Negative perceptions of migrants fuel public discourse around immigration policy – policymakers respond to the public discourse – the policies implemented fuel the negative perceptions that motivate further exclusionary behavior. It is impossible to know which stage precipitated the initial cycle with certainty. It simply stands to reason that interfering in one stage interferes with the others.

Proxying Interaction with the Other

Perceptions of migrants are deeply engrained in the U.S. American consciousness as they stand now and are strong predictors of immigration sentiments (Flores & Azar, 2023). There are "archetypes" of immigrants, particularly Latine and Hispanic archetypes, that solicit sympathy and draw ire. They are not necessarily substantiated by factual reporting or in-person encounters.

In lieu of interaction with migrants, media depictions proxy and inform U.S. American perceptions of classes of immigrant. Research into the effect of mass media portrayals of migrants has shown that negative portrayals in mass media have a distinct effect on viewers who have a low probability of interacting with migrants (Conzo et al, 2021). This can encourage exclusionary behaviors against the migrants they do encounter.

By contrast, positive media depictions of migrants encourage positive sentiments and, in turn, positive behaviors toward migrants and immigration (Conzo et al, 2021).
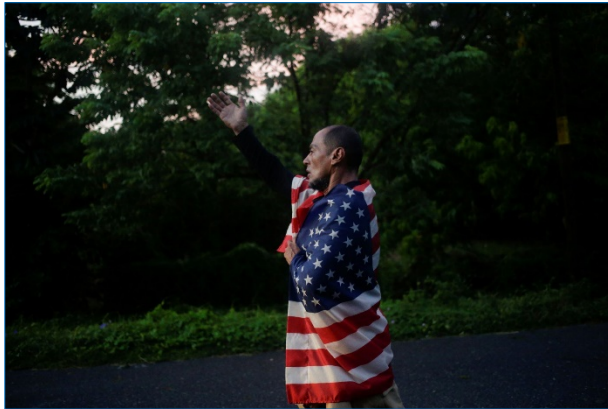
Source: REUTERS/Daniel Becerril (2021)

"Person positivity" in media depictions of migrants has been especially beneficial in this regard, with "person positivity" simply referring to a tendency to assess individuals more positively than their in-group (Madrigal & Soroka, 2023). Research into the selection of news photos used to depict migrants in the media found that individual depictions of migrants received more favorably assessments than photos depicting migrants in groups (such as the caravans).

Source: REUTERS/Daniel Becerril (2021)

News media is attempting to meet the challenge of depicting Central American migrants. Individualized narratives of migration are popular with U.S. American news watchers in their own right and compete with volume-emphasizing images of migrant caravans across a political spectrum of news networks. With shifts in technology, "citizens

journalists" and migrants now have the ability to document and broadcast their own experiences across the internet (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Wright, 2014; Grassilli, 2008). Where Central American migrants are losing ground and what is the chief concern of this brief is their depiction in entertainment media where migrants have even less of a say in their depiction than when interviewed by journalists, much less documenting themselves.

Entertainment Media and Migrant Characters

The line between entertainment media and news media feels paper-thin, at times. This policy brief emphasizes the assumption that the television programming and films discussed feature largely fictional content in order to differentiate it further from journalistic news coverage. This policy brief has elected to examine two of the widest-reaching mediums of U.S. entertainment: film and television series.

Independent Film

U.S. film owes some of its most distinct genres to migration. Early in U.S. American film, immigrant populations excluded from traditional industries found new niches in the burgeoning industry as producers and exhibitors behind the scenes. Immigrant-inspired narratives made their way onto the silver screen by way racialized narratives of "adaptation and precarious assimilation" (Bertelllini, 2013). And so were born gangster movies and gritty westerns.

Hollywood and the U.S. government were at one stage in active collaboration on the portrayal of migrants following World War II (Garland et al., 2021). The partnership produced films like *Illegal Entry* (1949) and *A Lady Without a Passport* (1950), which concerned migrant smuggling and the then-new concept of the "refugee". While the U.S.

government and Hollywood studios were the chief beneficiaries of the partnership through publicity opportunities and claims to authenticity in their portrayals using government files, these films did legitimize "refugees" as a class of migrant deserving of sympathy in the U.S. American consciousness (Garland et al., 2021).

Today, in a similar vein to citizen and migrant journalism, migrant filmmakers strive for self-representation. "Guerilla" filmmaking practices enable migrants to combat distorted and stereotypical perceptions disseminated by more dominant media, such as broadcast news or large-scale filmmaking studios (Grassilli, 2008). In this context, "guerilla" filmmaking is defined as an "act of resistance" in itself by managing to produce images of the migration experience outside of dominant filmmaking frameworks. Filmmaking has become a sphere of activism.

For irregular Central American migrants, this activism has so far largely taken place on the independent film circuit as its own sub-genre. These lower-budget projects focusing on the emotional experiences and moral economy of migration in proximity to the border have been popular with Latine audiences and human rights groups (Shaw, 2012). However, their reach with audiences is limited and the narratives themselves are frequently limited to themes of arrival, suffering, and crime.

La Tragedia de Macario (2005) replicates dire U.S. media news coverage of irregular Central American migrants dying tragically near the border at the hands of unscrupulous smugglers (Shaw, 2012). It is a sympathetic depiction of migrants who never arrive that does not frame migrants as potential community members but rather as aspirational victims.

Sin Nombre (2009), a film that achieved international attention, centers its tale of Central American migration to the U.S.-Mexico border in the context of gang violence (Shaw, 2012). The cast includes Honduran migrants hitching rides on trains, including a father who has been previously deported from the U.S. The main characters are chased north by violent drug-trafficking gang members, and the story resolves with arrival at the border like a finish line. This depiction, while sympathetic to its migrant characters and demonstrably successful in reaching global audiences, limits irregular Central American migrants to an arrival narrative and reinforces associations with criminality that feed exclusionary sentiments and behaviors.

Television Programming

Where film depictions of irregular Central American migrants remain limited,

Figure 4.
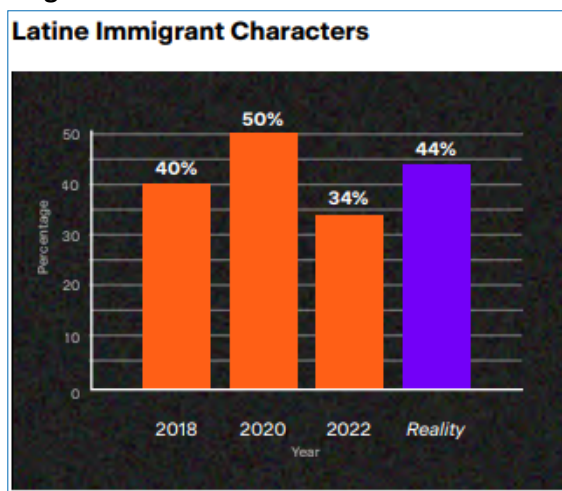
Source: Lowe et al, 2022

Latine and Hispanic immigrants across the board have lost a great deal of ground in television since 2020. Research conducted by the University of Southern California Norman Lear Center's Media Impact Project found that Latine representation among immigrant characters on U.S. television dropped by 16 percent between 2020 and 2022 (Lowe et al, 2022). See Figure 4. Their proportion of representation does not reflect the reality of immigrant demographics in the U.S, turning an overrepresentation issue into an underrepresentation issue.

Overrepresentation remains an issue in other areas. Research also found that U.S. television depictions associating immigrant characters with crime are at "an all-time high" with 42 percent of immigrant characters across the board appearing as either victims, witnesses, or perpetrators of crimes (Lowe et al, 2022). This is a sharp increase from 2020 when the statistic sat at 22 percent. Previous research found that nearly a quarter of immigrant characters were depicted in detention at one point between 2018 and 2019 (Lowe et al, 2022; Blakely et al, 2018). As with film and journalistic media, such depictions reinforce associations in migrants with crime even though studies have shown that migrants offend less than native citizens.

Irregular migrants are also overrepresented among immigrant characters on U.S. television. Their proportion of representation has climbed much higher than the proportion of real-life immigrants existing in U.S. society, sitting at 41 percent of depictions of immigrant characters in 2018 and inching higher still to 43 percent as of 2022 (Blakely et al, 2018; Lowe et al, 2022).

Figure 5.
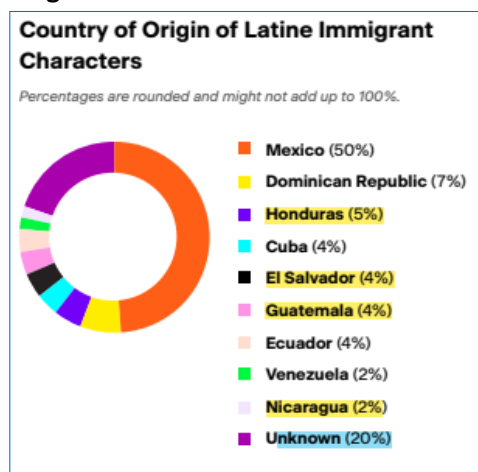
Source: Lowe at al (2022)

This poses a problem for the representation of irregular Central American migrants, given their thin slices of Latine and Hispanic immigrant representation on U.S. television (Lowe et al, 2022). Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Nicaraguan immigrant representation, regardless of legal status, all combined total less than the representation of Latine immigrant characters of

"unknown" origin. See Figure 5. Irregular Central American migrants are subject to volumizing by entertainment media when irregular migration into the U.S. is exaggerated in general; at the same time, they lack individualized narratives on screen that most appeal to U.S. Americans – the types of television depictions that form parasocial bonds.

Research has shown that television that when U.S. American viewers become invested in depictions of "well-rounded" immigrant characters on U.S. television, they "feel comfortable with similar people in real life" and feel as if they have a better understanding of immigrant experiences (Lowe et al, 2022). These results repeated across the spectrum of viewer ideology and immigrant demographics depicted on screen. For example: *Roswell, New Mexico* was a television series that featured a prominent storyline involving the main character's father and his undocumented status in the United States. Fifty-four percent of viewers felt they better understood the sacrifices undertaken in migration after watching as compared to viewers who did not watch the program (Lowe et al, 2022).

Unfortunately, Roswell, New Mexico was cancelled. As have a number of other television series prominently featuring Latine and Hispanic immigrant characters in the past few years, like the *Party of Five* reboot and *One Day at a Time* (Lowe et al, 2022; Goldberg, 2020). The Latino Donor Collective attributes this to a lack of diversity behind the scenes (Lowe et al, 2022). So, where does this leave us moving forward?

IV.   Recommendations

The primary hurdle to addressing issues with representation of irregular Central American migrants is that there is not a substantial sample-size in entertainment media

to identify strategies that have already benefitted this specific population. However, we may draw inspiration from what has benefitted other migrant populations depicted on U.S. television, what we know disadvantages irregular Central American migrants, and past partnerships that influenced perceptions of migrants by U.S. Americans:

- Representations of irregular Central American migrants should avoid disproportionate associations with crime. In this same vein, the proportion of irregular Central American migrants among immigrant characters in entertainment media should be comparable to proportions in real life.

- Irregular Central American migrant characters should be featured in recurring or series regular roles. Depictions should be well-rounded, feature connections with a wider cast of characters, and explore migrant experiences beyond transit to and crossing of the U.S.-Mexico border and/or arrest and detention.

- Complex depictions of irregular Central American migrants are encouraged, to avoid casting migrants in frameworks of "deserving" or "undeserving" of sympathy by viewers.

- Partnerships between production companies, broadcast networks, streaming services, migrant advocacy groups, and irregular migrants lend themselves to authenticity in depictions of migrant narratives and provide structural support to migrant-focused programming behind the scenes. Additionally, strong partnerships and authentic depictions lend themselves to publicity for migrant-centric programming.

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