Life on the edge at Trump's border

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As twilight falls on the outskirts of Mercedes, 10 miles north of the Mexican border, dogs dodge cars on the road outside a clapboard house. Inside, four mothers in a dusky living room take out their smartphones, as instructed by Maria Cordero, a community organiser who is promising the women a fighting chance of keeping their families together. "We're in a critical situation," she says. "We are very vulnerable." She directs the women to download an app called the Migracam, declaring it will help them to stand up for themselves. "For generations they told us we are worth less than them. That we don't have rights. That we entered illegally and that took away all our protections," she says. "Well, no."

These four women broke the law by stealing into the US undetected 10-20 years ago, but have since acquired homes, put down roots, got married and had children who, by virtue of their US birth, are American citizens. Today they live in fear in a hostile environment fostered by President Donald Trump, who has replaced the indulgence of previous governments with a "zero tolerance" regime that threatens everyone who is in the US unlawfully with deportation.

Nowhere is this felt more sharply than in a corner of South Texas known as the Rio Grande Valley. In the past, getting pulled over here by the highway patrol for speeding or a broken tail light led to a ticket and little else. Officers did not make it their business to worry about people's immigration status. But times have changed. State traffic police have flooded South Texas in a surge that local officials say is "militarising" the region, a deployment enabled by $400m in annual border-security funding from Texas's Trump-aligned Republican leaders. And immigrants perceive a new readiness among police to hand drivers over to uncompromising Border Patrol agents, who enforce immigration law and are referred to with dread as *la migra*.

Cordero shows her audience police dashcam videos obtained by her employer, the American Civil Liberties Union, in which undocumented drivers are interrogated over their immigration status at traffic stops. They were, she says, ultimately deported. One of the women in the group looks flushed and fans her face. As undocumented parents are expelled and American children left behind, families are being broken up. This is where the Migracam can help, says Cordero, a 48-year-old with a sympathetic tone but a hard edge. She asks the women to add the numbers of three emergency contacts to the app — including an immigration lawyer if they know one. If

they are stopped, they should open the app immediately. It will automatically send their contacts a Google map with a pin marking their location. Then it texts these contacts a link to a livestream of their encounter with the police. "It's the difference between them knowing nothing and knowing something," says Cordero.

"I wish you'd come earlier," replies Anai González, who is mother to four US-born children. Her husband was stopped by the police in December 2017. The first she knew of it was when she got a knock on the door from immigration agents. Her husband ended up being deported (he later sneaked back into the US twice, only to be kicked out again). González was also taken into custody and held for almost three months before being released. A friend looked after her children. Today she fights the fear of running into police when she takes the kids to school or goes to the supermarket. Her 10-year-old son, she says, has become fretful about immigration agents. "On Mothers' Day he made me a card and he put, 'I love you Mommy' and all that. Then he drew la migra hauling me off. He put, 'I don't want them to take you away.' And he drew a knife above their heads — to defend me." The image of the knife hangs there in silence. "That's bad," she says. "I know."

The US is home to an estimated 11 million unauthorised immigrants. The vast majority fled poverty or violence in Mexico or other parts of Central America and two-thirds of them have been in the US for 10 years or more, according to the Pew Research Center. They make up roughly 5 per cent of the US workforce, doing jobs on farms, construction sites and in restaurants that Americans often do not want to do, at least not for the meagre wages being offered. Today their immigrant dream is souring.

On the first day of his presidential campaign, Trump declared that Mexico was sending "rapists" to the US. In the first week of his term, he signed an executive order called "Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States". It scrapped an Obama-era policy of limiting deportations to dangerous criminals and recent arrivals, replacing it with a mandate for enforcers to go after all unauthorised immigrants. Trump also ordered the hiring of 15,000 new immigration agents. In June 2017 Thomas Homan, then acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), a sister agency to the Border Patrol, said: "If you're in this country illegally, and you committed a crime by entering [it], you should be uncomfortable. You should look over your shoulder."

The results have begun to show. Between Trump's inauguration day and the end of the fiscal year on September 30 2017, the US deported 61,094 people from the country's interior — a 37 per cent jump from the same period in 2016, according to the Migration Policy Institute. The proportion of people arrested by ICE who have no criminal record is also rising: in the 2017 fiscal year (which included four months with Obama in the White House), arrests of convicted criminals rose 7 per cent from 2016 but arrests of people with no convictions soared by 147 per cent.

"Part of the Trump era is that it's not 'How can we lift them up?', it's 'How can we kick them out?'" says Frank Sharry, an influential immigration advocate in Washington who leads a group called America's Voice. But it would be impossible for the US government to identify, apprehend and expel 11 million people, so instead it comes down to a war of attrition. Can Trump and his allies make life so difficult for unauthorised immigrants that they choose to leave of their own accord? Or do they dig in and wait him out, enduring the hardships because their place in the US is worth it?

In the Rio Grande Valley, many of the immigrants facing this crackdown are clustered in impoverished settlements called colonias. These began to proliferate in the 1950s as Central American crop pickers bought unregulated plots of land with no public services. The name means neighbourhood in Mexican Spanish and, even today, many of them look like they could have been plucked out of rural Mexico, with their drooping mesquite trees and rust-eaten cars, taco shops and horses tied to chain-link fences. Some 96 per cent of residents are Latino and Spanish is their preferred — and often only — language.

The most basic colonia residence is a mobile trailer parked on a patch of dirt, the starting point for a dream of incremental improvements whenever spare cash is at hand. The first big step is usually erecting a wooden terrace outside. Then comes a plywood annexe with an aluminium roof. For the most successful, the end point is a modest cinder-block abode. But some do not even manage to fix peeling paint on their trailers. "It may not be much, but it's theirs, and it's a work in progress," says Jaime Longoria, executive director of Hidalgo county's Community Service Agency, which helps poor families.

Infrastructure provision is better than it was, notably due to efforts made in the 1990s, when colonias became a cause célèbre for Texas policy makers. But that era is over. Last year Greg Abbott, Texas's Republican governor, shut down a programme that paid for county officials to advocate for colonias; and the state legislature declined to renew funding for investment in infrastructure improvements. Some colonia residents still haul water from wells because they are not connected to a public water supply. Many more are cut off from sewer systems, relying instead on septic tanks that have a habit of overflowing. "There is essentially now no remediation money for the sub-standard conditions which exist in the colonias," says John Henneberger, a fair-housing advocate and founder of the Texas Low Income Housing Information Service.

Colonias have been an obvious place for the authorities to focus immigration enforcement; rough estimates suggest that about a quarter of residents are unauthorised immigrants. So the incentives to abandon them and head north are abundant. Big cities and mid-sized towns elsewhere promise anonymity and opportunity. But foreboding barriers stand in the way. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, 42 per cent of colonia residents live in poverty. Though unauthorised immigrants living here can earn more than in Mexico, they are confined to a black market of employers who are willing to exploit the vulnerability of the undocumented by hiring them for less than the minimum wage.

Leonardo Gutiérrez came to the US illegally 11 years ago and says he used to earn \$500-\$600 a week in a motorboat factory. Under a peach tree next to his trailer, he tells me his hours were cut last December as bosses grew paranoid about ICE, which is carrying out a growing number of workplace raids across the country. It has left his family struggling to make ends meet, let alone save for a fresh start. "I was telling my wife that I have been speaking to God, saying I don't want our children to suffer," he says, lifting up his T-shirt to wipe tears from his eyes. The entire family is sleeping in one bed because they cannot afford to fix a broken window that could let an intruder into the kids' room.

The other barrier to escaping the colonias is physical; the US border is not so much a line as a buffer zone. Sneaking across the Rio Grande only gives you access to a narrow tract of Texas, one that is sealed no more than 100 miles to the north by a separate chain of 34 checkpoints. It is a last line of defence to catch those who slip through the official frontier. "We don't go anywhere near them," Gutiérrez says. "We don't even try." Already confined to a sliver of America they

dare not escape, Trump's tightening dragnet is limiting their freedom more than ever. "Here you can say you live a little better than in Mexico. But I have to be careful. Moving around is a problem. We don't have the luxury of walking in the street," he says. "They say we're like birds here. Prisoners in a golden cage."

At the Falfurrias checkpoint 70 miles north of the US-Mexico border, the hangar-like Border Patrol station is one official exit point from the cage. It would be foolhardy for anyone in the US illegally to try to bluff their way through. Queuing drivers inch forward under the gaze of cameras and scanners as German shepherd sniffer dogs nuzzle their wheels, drawing closer to the moment when an armed Border Patrol officer peers inside their vehicles and asks the mandated question: "US citizen?"

Some lawyers claim such interior checkpoints are unconstitutional for violating the fourth amendment's prohibition on unreasonable searches. Border Patrol has been accused of racial profiling by activists. In October last year, agents at a Texas checkpoint stopped an ambulance taking Rosa Maria Hernández, a 10-year-old with cerebral palsy, to emergency gallbladder surgery at a hospital in Corpus Christi. After finding she was undocumented, they followed her to hospital and waited outside her room before taking her into detention when she was discharged.

For anyone prepared to take the risk, there is another escape route from the colonias. Those who choose it fall under the jurisdiction of Benny Martinez, sheriff of Brooks county. A 62-year-old with an ageing rock star's mullet hairstyle, Martinez polices 944 square miles of parched brushland from a wood-panelled office decorated with a cactus statue and a rifle cabinet. This is the territory migrants must cross, sometimes for five or six days in 38C-plus heat, if they want to evade the checkpoints and get out of the border zone. Many make it. But the bodies of 621 who did not have been discovered in Brooks county since January 2009. Martinez and his officers also take immigrants alive, picking up about 60 people a day in recent months, often in large groups. Some are captured by the sheriff's scouts. Others surrender, dialling 911 as they realise they are closer to death than they are to freedom.

"We get the call and we'll hook them up with Border Patrol," Martinez says. Then the challenge of locating them begins. Sometimes the migrants are disoriented; often they have not been paying attention to landmarks they have passed. The authorities ping their mobile phones for co-ordinates, but the technology is only accurate to within a mile or two. "Then they keep walking. They don't stay put," Martinez says. "They call it in, then they move. They call it in, then they move again. They get impatient, right? They get to that point. 'Where is the rescue? How long have I got to wait?' It's only been five minutes."

Martinez is baffled to find people crossing the brush years after they first arrived in the US. "They've been here 30, 40 years but they never became citizens. They never got their permanent residency card. They never made an effort to. And when you ask them, they say: 'Well, I didn't have to. Everything was going well. There were no issues back then. If I got arrested, I just got arrested, did my bond and got out.'" He tells me about a grandfather from Dallas who had lived unlawfully in the US for more than 40 years and was married to an American woman. When he went to Mexico for a family funeral the only way back was to cross the border illegally again, then trek through Brooks county. "His wife and kids were here looking for him. Here in this office," Martinez says. "We met him at the morgue."

The US is a country of immigrants with an ambivalent attitude towards newcomers. Although equality and inclusiveness are enshrined in its founding documents, it has often found it easier to celebrate the arrivals of the past than those of the present. Many who were disparaged when they first reached US shores have gone on to attack the next arrivals with the same fervour.

In Texas, Trump's stance has emboldened hard-line conservatives such as Matt Rinaldi, a Republican who represents part of Dallas in the Texas House of Representatives. He co-wrote the key provisions of a controversial bill known as SB4, the legislation that now allows police to question the immigration status of anyone they detain or arrest.

I ask Rinaldi, whose father and grandfather were legal immigrants from Italy, what concerns his constituents have about illegal immigration. The first is welfare costs. Although unauthorised immigrants are ineligible for most government benefits, he says, "If they have a child that's born within our borders while they are here illegally, the child is a full American citizen and is entitled to all benefits allowed by law. People are very adept at getting access to benefits using all tools they have at their disposal, and one of them is birthright citizenship."

His constituents' second worry is public safety. Rinaldi points to statistics from the Texas Department of Public Safety that show unauthorised immigrants have committed more than 606,000 crimes in Texas since 2011. Two-thirds of those perpetrators had previously been arrested, then released, he says, even though police knew they were in the country illegally. "We're talking about several thousand sexual assaults, we're talking about 1,200 murders, two-thirds of which theoretically could have been prevented. That's why we passed SB4," he says. (Alex Nowrasteh of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank, says the methodology behind the numbers cited by Rinaldi is "fuzzy". His own analysis of police data found that illegal immigrants in Texas were less likely to be convicted of violent crimes than native-born citizens.)

The SB4 bill inspired raucous scenes in the House on the normally festive last day of the 2017 legislative session. Hundreds of anti-SB4 protesters appeared in the gallery with banners declaring they were "here to stay". On the floor below, scuffles broke out between Democrats and Republicans. A Democrat accused Rinaldi of threatening to "put a bullet in one of my colleagues' heads". Rinaldi denied that happened, but was proud of what he had done to provoke the other party: he called Immigration and Customs Enforcement on the protesters. "Our wives were on the floor at the time, our children were on the floor. Many of them did not feel safe," he says. "That is exactly the time when you want to enforce our immigration law."

Amid the drip-drip of anti-immigration policies, it is common for Democrats to frame Trump's crackdown as a battle of identity politics, a contest between white and brown. But the reality is more complex, in part because many Latinos hew to a traditional social conservatism that some Republicans say should make them natural GOP supporters. Trump won 29 per cent of the national Latino vote in 2016 — not a trivial proportion and 2 per cent higher than the 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. In a University of Texas/Texas Tribune poll last October, 36 per cent of Latinos in Texas said undocumented immigrants should be deported immediately.

Sergio Sanchez, a generously bearded conservative radio host on a Valley station, tells me his father, a Mexican truck driver, had followed the immigration rule book and waited several years to get into the US legally. He says the predicament of unauthorised immigrants is "unfortunate", but the result of decisions they made to bypass the system. "We're talking about making a choice

to not apply for immigration legalisation status, for proper immigration, but to just jump the line," he says. "They live in fear because they know they did wrong. It's not the US separating these families. These are the consequences of poor decisions on someone's part. When the law has to be enforced, that's what happens."

As our car pulls up to a wood-and-concrete colonia home outside San Benito, the place looks vacant. Factory stickers on the windows and planks on the empty driveway suggest a project frozen mid-construction. As we start to drive away, I call Ana López to tell her we've come to the wrong address. "Oh, no," she says. "We're here. Are you in a red car?" A convivial single mother who works as a domestic cleaner, López, 47, emerges from the front porch and ushers us to the rear, where all signs of habitation have been hidden from the road. Two cars are parked out back, one a snarling sports coupé, and behind the kitchen's net curtains are López's four children, aged between 11 and 22.

Sixteen years ago, López came to the US lawfully on a tourist visa from Mexico, but when the visa expired she stayed, becoming illegal overnight. She tells me her children are anxious about traffic stops. "When I drive with them they're always telling me, 'Mommy, you're going too fast.'" I ask her about her sense of identity in Trump's America. "With my roots, I'm Mexican, but now I feel, I don't know, half-half," she tells me. "Because my kids are from here. I have my friends here. I'm studying English so I can understand the Americans better. I'm here. And it's sad to say, but I wouldn't like to go back to Mexico."

Her family has a plan for what to do if López is ever sent back. Rolando, her 22-year-old son, who works at a Target store to pay off the coupé, would take charge and call an immigration lawyer they know. Then he would contact López's parents, who have valid US visas and would travel over from Mexico to look after their grandchildren. But the weakness in the plan is Rolando's status. Though he also overstayed his visa, his place in the US has been secure thanks to a landmark programme introduced by Barack Obama in 2012 to legalise the status of people who ended up in the US illegally as children.

Known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or Daca, the policy depended on Obama flexing his presidential powers because the divided US Congress has repeatedly failed to agree on changing immigration law. However, that left Daca vulnerable to the next occupant of the Oval Office. In September 2017, Trump said he was scrapping the programme, which by then had enabled 800,000 people to start driving legally, go to college and secure work permits. The announcement sparked a flurry of legal challenges that have kept it alive for now, but they have left the future of those such as Rolando mired in uncertainty as courts issue conflicting rulings.

López says the family agonised for two years over applying for Daca in the first place, as it meant admitting to the government that Rolando was in the US illegally. Now all the personal information they handed over is at the disposal of the Trump administration. "I don't know why they want to terrify children," López says. "It's like they're playing with them."

Ultimately, it is the young whose response to Trump will shape his longer-term impact on America's social fabric. In South Tower Estates, a colonia on the outskirts of Alamo, I meet a group of mostly undocumented teenage girls who are lobbying against local pollution. In common with the adults I meet, none is contemplating quitting the US. But they admit their sense of place is blurred. "I kind of feel like we're in Mexico," says Daisy Morales, wearing an orange T-shirt with the group name South Tower Power. "The only thing that's like a little bit

higher is that we get more benefits than in Mexico. But crossing the bridge, the religion and the customs don't change that much."

US history shows that, as generations have passed, many immigrant groups that were once stigmatised have become seamlessly integrated into mainstream society. But will things be different for this generation of children growing up in the poorest areas of the Valley? In addition to the feelings engendered by Mexico's physical proximity, 21st-century technology allows them to foster a much richer range of connections across the border.

Trump's rise is also eroding their faith in American ideals. Abril Castillo, 19, attends college thanks to Daca and dreams of opening a US boarding school for children from Central America. "I feel like [Trump] doesn't understand that in the long run he's going to benefit from these things, from immigrants working, from immigrants going through college, because he's going to pick up all those taxes from those kids," she says. "You're going to get this country to a better place, which means it's a really good investment. I just feel like he's not the businessman he thinks he is if he can't see that."

Instead, Trump is seeking to make immigration a wedge issue again in November's midterm congressional elections. He praised a crowd of immigration enforcers as "great patriots" at a White House event last month and has accused Democrats who want to abolish ICE of being weak. But if his actions do not drive unauthorised immigrants to leave the country, they risk becoming self-defeating. Instead of fostering the assimilation many conservatives want to see, they threaten to isolate people. "I feel like I'm not living in the United States, because the United States I knew was a land of immigrants," says Castillo. "That's how this country was built in the first place. Our president saying he only wants to help those who look American, or who he feels are American, kind of makes me doubt the whole basis of the constitution, and the whole basis of this country."