



American dream, Mexican nightmare: A Michigan mom's life after deportation.

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On a cool September evening, Maria Garcia Juarez paced along a rural road at dusk, wringing her hands.

Every so often, she looked over her shoulder. She didn't want anyone to see her watching paramedics kneeling in a cornfield.

Her face flushed pink. It wasn't the dull pain in her back from the E.Coli she contracted in Mexico or the dusty breeze that made tears pool in her eyes.

It is Mexico itself, Juarez said, that scares her. Once again, a dead body was found near her home in broad daylight.

Juarez spent her entire life in the United States after her mother smuggled her across the border when she was eight months old. Now 23, the former chiropractor's receptionist never became a citizen and was deported from Detroit in May because she stole two cars when she was 17.

As she tries to adjust to a country she's never known, her American husband, Erick Orozco, remains in Detroit suffering from leukemia and caring for their 2-year-old son, David.

Next year, thousands more young immigrants like Juarez could find themselves back in Mexico. Unless Congress passes a new law, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that protected them will expire March 5, making 800,000 young immigrants, including 6,400 in Michigan, eligible for deportation.

Juarez never qualified for DACA protection because of the car thefts. But her story of loss, fear and estrangement illustrates what can happen after deportees leave home.

Looking past the yellow crime-scene tape, Juarez stole another glance at the paramedics. They were crouched over a person swaddled in a bedsheet on the side of the only road leading into Maravatio Del Encinal, the tiny town in central Mexico where Juarez lives with relatives.

The person was leathery, bloated and dead.

Police weren't talking. Passersby didn't ask questions.

They know what they know.

A drug cartel is conducting what it calls a "limpiando," or a clean-up in the state of Guanajuato, killing anyone associated with a rival gang.

The cartel hung banners on freeway overpasses announcing the planned massacre. Over the past year, government officials have blamed the limpiando for an uptick in murders. Graphic photos of bloodied victims with gunshot wounds appear regularly in local newspapers.

Police officers who arrived at the cornfield crime scene held assault rifles and wore black masks. The masks hid their identities from cartel informants, a reporter at the crime scene from La Bandera Noticias newspaper said.

Crime in Guanajuato is at historic highs: The area near Juarez's home had about 140 murders in the past three months, while murders in the state of Guanajuato quadrupled last year to 961, according to press reports. The decomposing corpse was the second dead person found in the area that day.

The town of about 3,400 people where Juarez lives is roughly halfway between Mexico City and Guadalajara. Cartels pass through the area en route to larger cities, said José Herlindo Velázquez Fernández, mayor of the nearby town of Salvatierra.

Juarez was deported from Detroit, which FBI crime statistics say is the most violent city in the United States. It has nothing on Mexico, she said: Two of her relatives were shot dead this summer within a few feet of a toddler, and two other men were murdered as they walked out of one of her cousin's homes in Maravatio.

"I'm scared to be here. People might see and think I'm talking to the police," Juarez said, walking away from the cornfield.

"This is what the United States sent me to."

More on this story

Bridge Magazine and its reporting partner, Detroit Public Television One Detroit, have reported on Maria Garcia Juarez since spring. The Detroit resident was deported in May, and her story could hold lessons as Congress debates the future of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that protected from deportation young immigrants who were brought to the United States as children. The law expires March 5, making nearly 800,000 young people, including 6,400 in Michigan, eligible for deportation.

Facts about DACA

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program was launched in 2012. It was President Barack Obama's attempt to address a longtime quandary: What to do about the children of undocumented immigrants who illegally entered the United States?

Here are facts about the program.

- **800,000** young people applied and were entered into the program. It shielded them from deportation and allowed them to get work permits. Some 6,400 are from Michigan.

- **Eligibility:** Those who entered the U.S. before they were 16, lived there since 2007 and be younger than 31 in 2012. High school students, graduates and military veterans were eligible, but not those with felonies or serious misdemeanors.
- **President Trump** announced in September it would end March 5 and challenged Congress to come up with a solution. The move came as attorneys general from 10 states threatened to sue to end the program.
- **Quote:** "I do not favor punishing children, most of whom are now adults, for the actions of their parents. But we must also recognize that we are a nation of opportunity because we are a nation of laws," President Trump.

‘They don’t feel Mexican’

Juarez’s identity crisis and worries are common, said Fernández. He said tens of thousands of the state of Guanajuato’s 5.5 million residents were deported from the United States.

“The terror she is feeling is normal,” Fernández said, speaking in Spanish in his office last month. “She comes from a country where safety is a given,” he said, referring to the United States.

Mexico is bracing for the possibility of the return of even more emigres if the DACA expires, Fernández said. About 618,000 DACA recipients in the U.S. were born in Mexico and could face deportation, data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services show.

Fernández said deportees are safe because cartels don’t target random people. The newcomers’ biggest problem is fitting in, he said.

“They don't feel Mexican,” Fernández said. “We are ready for them with temporary jobs, national programs, we have resources coming to us as well as the state.”

The United States has a history of conducting mass deportations of Mexicans. In the 1930s, during the Great Depression about 1 million people of Mexican descent, including some American citizens, were rounded up and sent across the border.

Deporting those with DACA protections – often referred to as Dreamers – would cost the U.S. government about \$7.5 billion, while the loss of those workers could cost the economy about \$280 billion in lost wages and economic growth over the next decade, according to a study by the Cato Institute, a Washington D.C.-based libertarian think tank.

Another study, from a progressive group, the Center for American Progress in Washington D.C., estimates ending DACA would reduce the U.S. gross domestic product by as much as \$460 billion over the next decade.

“These 800,000 DACA recipients are also consumers,” said Tom Jawetz, vice president of immigration policy at the Center for American Progress. “Immigrants are a net positive to economic growth and opportunity because they’re purchasing goods, going to the grocery store, starting businesses.”

DACA provides young adults who were brought to the U.S. as children a renewable two-year protection from deportation as long as they go to school or work and stay out of trouble with the law.

President Donald Trump on Sept. 5 rescinded DACA, but urged Congress to come up with a solution before the program expires. In the meantime, Trump's administration is targeting 3 million undocumented immigrants with criminal records for deportation.

Since Trump took office, the U.S. has tripled the number of arrests of undocumented immigrants who have no criminal history, leading to an overall increase in arrests by 43 percent this year compared to last fiscal year. Also, the number of people trying to sneak across the U.S. southwest border each month is down by about a quarter, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. However, deportations are down to about 211,000 this year from about 240,000 last year, Immigration and Customs Enforcement data show.

Juarez said she didn't apply for DACA after it was approved in 2012 because her lawyer told her she wouldn't qualify. She was, however, able to get an American driver's license, Social Security number and pay taxes after she applied for asylum five years ago during her effort to avoid deportation.

Juarez was denied asylum last year. On May 26, an armed officer from ICE put her on a plane to Mexico.

Since she arrived, Mexico was hit with three powerful earthquakes, including two that killed about 300 people.

In Mexico, Juarez said she stays close to her family's home because she fears being mugged by crooks who may recognize that she is a pocho, or an Americanized Mexican, and assume she has money. And she is afraid of being kidnapped like one of her church members whose hand was chopped off in a ransom negotiation.

"In Detroit, I worked, I loved working. I dedicated my life to my son and my husband. I just had something to do, I had someone to care for," she said.

"In Mexico, I'm nobody. I want to go home."

The family left behind

Crime isn't Juarez's only fear. She's haunted by anxiety that her son could grow up with no parents.

Four months before she was deported, her husband, Orozco, 23, was diagnosed with leukemia for the second time in his life. The chemotherapy he underwent to fight the cancer took his ability to work, his hair and his energy.

When his wife was home, she would help him clean the port that stayed lodged in his arm for chemotherapy treatments. But after she was deported, it got infected.

And with the loss of income from the job Juarez worked as a receptionist, Orozco soon returned to working 12-hour days at a construction job to pay bills and send his wife money. Relatives and babysitters help with childcare of their son.

Orozco stopped going to chemotherapy and postponed a July stem cell transplant that doctors said is the best chance to save his life.

Juarez said she wants Orozco to get the transplant. But a wife can only sway her husband so much when they are 2,200 miles apart. The two have been married less than two years.

It's hard to be married across so many miles.

"She's lonely," Orozco said. "And I'm here struggling to take care of my son."

Weeks before Juarez was deported, David was diagnosed as speech delayed. He now says some words in Spanish and English.

Juarez missed his second birthday party, but was sent photos of him blowing out candles. She calls often. She doesn't want David to forget her.

"My son motivates me for everything. I don't want him to grow up without his mama," Juarez said. "If it wasn't for him, I probably would've given up by now."

It will be 10 years until Juarez can apply to return to the United States, according to deportation laws. An exception is a waiver based on the hardship her deportation causes for her sick husband and son. That process that could take a year or more.

"There's no day and night (Maria) doesn't fall asleep crying," said Juarez's older sister, Mayra Juarez Trujillo, 27.

"She's taking sleeping medication now from the stress."

Both sisters know the struggle of children without parents. Growing up in Salinas, Calif., their father was never in their lives. Their mother used drugs and was deported several times. The last time happened when Juarez was in middle school, she said, and the family hasn't heard from the mother since.

Trujillo was 16 at the time. She said she quit school to pick strawberries and try to care for her three siblings.

An eviction followed, and then a blur: Stays with relatives, frequent moves to live with family friends to avoid foster care workers. Juarez fell in with a bad crowd, used drugs and went on joy rides, leading to a nine-month stay in a juvenile detention center that set the path to deportation.

Juarez was always positive in bad situations, said Trujillo. When she was locked up, Juarez would tell her how proud she was that the experience allowed her to get a GED and take online college courses, the sister said.

But Mexico is different, Trujillo said. She calls or texts Juarez daily to check in.

"I don't want to think she would make an attempt to do something against her life. I know she's not that type of person, but it goes through my mind knowing what depression does to people," said Trujillo, who lives in Greenfield, Calif.

Deportees can face a host of mental problems from post-traumatic stress disorder to headaches, stomach aches, sweats and shakes, said Shelley Bultje, a therapist at Southwest Solutions, a Detroit-based nonprofit, who works with immigrant families.

Dreamers who are deported could experience similar mental and physical problems as Juarez, Bultje said.

“It looks different on everyone, but the idea of being separated from family is incredibly traumatic,” Bultje said. “You may look on the outside like nothing is going on, but then there’s avoidance of people, places, things. It may be on a spectrum of severity of PTSD.”

Life in Mexico

When Juarez arrived in Mexico, she went to live with her mother’s brother and his family. They had never known her before picking her up at the airport in Guadalajara.

Juarez shared a room with a concrete floor with a cousin in a modest home located on a dirt road.

The sight of the family’s bathroom hit her like a brick, she said. It was a toilet next to an overhead pipe with no shower head dripping cold water. No sink. No washer and dryer.

“There’s no such thing as turning on the hot water. I couldn’t believe it, how people can live in that way,” she said.

“I cried that first week. I didn’t let them see me. It was very hard.”

Yearning for contact with someone from the United States, she moved to Maravatio, the town where her mother had lived. She now lives with her uncle who was deported from Detroit eight years ago, his wife and their two children.

“It was good to see a familiar face,” Juarez said.

Her family has three small houses behind a white steel gate at the end of town. With wi-fi and a solar panel that warms the tap water, their home has more luxuries than others. But when it rains, the compound floods with ankle-deep, excrement-filled water from around the neighborhood, trapping her indoors.

“It stinks, and it’s not ours,” she said of the sewage.

Juarez’s day typically starts with breakfast and pumping water for the day. A machine pumps well water into large bins connected to the houses. They buy bottled water for drinking and cooking.

Within two months of arriving in Mexico, Juarez said she began vomiting, lost her appetite and had pains in her back. Eventually, she was diagnosed with an infection from E.Coli bacteria that could have been caused by contaminated food.

She now knows what her mother meant when she would tell Juarez and her siblings that they lived in “glory,” crammed in a one-bedroom duplex in California.

Living in Mexico has meant that Juarez has gained a new family that embraces and supports her. But she says she is losing herself. The Maria Garcia Juarez who has worked since she was 15 years old now depends on a family of strangers for support.

She has not yet summoned the courage to leave her gated compound to go to another town to look for a job. She has earned some money selling some of her American clothes at an outdoor market held every week in Maravatio, but gets money wired from her family in the U.S.

“That’s the biggest struggle. I don’t like depending on people. I have never have liked depending on people and now that I do, it doesn’t seem like it’s me,” she said.

“It's not Maria.”

Uncertain future

Maravatio is about a 20-minute bus ride from Salvatierra, which has services that Maravatio does not, such as banks, government offices and hospitals.

Salvatierra is known as the “granary of the nation,” for its seed production, said Fernández, the mayor. With well-preserved colonial-era buildings and popular festivals, Salvatierra is billed by the country’s tourism department as one of the 11 “pueblos magicos” or magical towns.

And it has a program to help people who migrate to other countries or who come back. It is coordinated by C. Alvaro Aguilar Quezada.

He helps families to bring back to Mexico people who are sick or who die in America; looks for Mexicans who are missing in the U.S and helps those who return to Mexico to get identification, enrolled in school and job leads.

He was not surprised to hear Juarez was depressed and afraid to leave her house.

On a breezy fall afternoon, he spoke with Bridge Magazine, and then Juarez, from a park bench in the city’s central plaza.

Quezada, speaking only in Spanish, said people who return to Mexico soon learn that Mexicans spend more time with family than Americans do.

Juarez has the word “family” tattooed on her left shoulder.

Juarez opened up to Quezada, telling him about how she had taken some college classes in the U.S. and wants to go to college in Mexico. But she can’t imagine taking a bus to a far away city for schooling. And she fears her grasp of Spanish is not strong enough to allow her to take classes in Mexico.

Quezada nodded his head periodically as she spoke.

Then he leaned in toward her and spoke softly.

He has grown children who all graduated college he explained, in a fatherly tone.

“You should go back to school,” he said.

Juarez looked down at her hands while he talked.

The Salvatierra region probably has thousands of people who have been deported from the U.S. So far, only eight have come forward and asked the city for help, Quezada said. It’s typical for returnees to be afraid to venture out into some parts of the Mexico.

“Fear is understandable,” he told her.

She looked up at him.

“You have to let it go,” he said.

Juarez looked away into the distance at something beyond the pedestrians strolling through the plaza. The worried look on her face was one she gets when she thinks about her son, David. And how how she hopes he doesn't forget her.

Quezada went on.

People leave their native lands for America because they want the dream. Dreams for a better future can outweigh fears and move you forward, Quezada said.

"There's scholarships. I can help you," he promised.

Juarez took Quezada's business card and promised to think about it.

In the weeks since they spoke, Juarez reached out to a nonprofit called Dream in Mexico, which helps deported or returning Mexican young adults to find jobs and college scholarships.

But before she can figure out a way to take college courses, she has to get a battery of expensive medical tests including an ultrasound, she said. The E.Coli bacteria left her with a pain in her kidneys that is not getting better.

She is not sure when she will be able to apply for college in Mexico. And she doesn't know when she will have the time or money to file the documents to request a waiver of her 10-year ban from the U.S.

While her short-term plan is unclear, her long-term plan is vivid. It wakes up with her in the morning and makes it hard to sleep at night.

One day, she said, she will go home to Detroit.

"My plans haven't changed," Juarez said. "I'm going to do everything to go back legally - to be with my son."