

Trayectos Study

Community and
Policy Oriented Monograph

Héctor Carrillo, DrPH
Jorge Fontdevila, PhD
Jaweer Brown, MPH
Walter Gómez



Trayectos de Estudios Comunidad y política orientada a monografía

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inside front cover

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Acknowledgements

Text to come later. Sexual migration among these men, however, cannot simply be interpreted as meaning that they left simply because they could not be gay in Mexico—an assumption that seems common in the United States when thinking about gay men who migrate from poorer countries. Although some men certainly felt that they had to leave because they were unable to be gay in their places of origin, for most the story is more complicated. Most often than not, the immigrant men in *Trayectos* had led open or semi-open gay lives in Mexico. Although they imagined that gay life in U.S. cities is more open than in Mexico, they were also aware that Mexican cities, particularly the larger ones, offer options for gay and lesbian people. For a majority of these men, sexual migration implied a combination of sexuality-related and economic motivations. They saw leaving Mexico as having the advantage of providing both, economic opportunity and the opportunity to live a more open gay life and in a place where they could be anonymous, and where their families would not be affected by their sexual orientation. This was the case even when the men's families knew openly that they were gay. Sometimes their families themselves had encouraged them to leave, in part to protect them from stigma, and in part to protect themselves.

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Introduction

In current political debates about immigration in the United States, immigrants typically are portrayed as working-class, Mexican men who cross the U.S. border seeking jobs in order to be able to send money home. Although we all know that new immigrants are more diverse than just this one group—in terms of gender, national origin, and the reasons for moving to the United States—Mexican immigrant men have become the archetypal representation of contemporary U.S. immigration. As such, these men also are typically assumed to be heterosexual. But not all of them are.

The purpose of this monograph is to highlight the experiences and HIV prevention needs of a subgroup of Mexican immigrant men who self-identify as gay or bisexual. This monograph is based on data from the *Trayectos Study*, a large ethnographic study of sexuality and HIV risk that Dr. Héctor Carrillo and his research team conducted in San Diego, California. The *Trayectos Study* was funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the National Institutes of Health.

We have published this monograph with several goals in mind. First and foremost, we seek to help gay and bisexual immigrant men reflect about their sexual lives and the contexts and situations that put them at risk for HIV transmission. Second, we aim at providing information to health educators that may assist them in creating more effective programs to reduce the risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections among gay immigrant populations. We highlight the importance of going beyond approaches that focus solely on individual behaviors, and instead we propose that taking into ac-

count the contexts in which HIV risk takes place is crucial for effective HIV prevention work. Third, we draw attention to the potential role that changes in existing policies may play in promoting sexual health in immigrant populations, and the role of policy makers in supporting HIV prevention work. Finally, we aim at promoting greater awareness about sexual diversity within immigrant populations, as well as a better understanding of how sexuality, migration, and health are linked.

The Trayectos Study

The *Trayectos Study* is based on in-depth interviews with 150 self-identified gay and bisexual men in San Diego, California, as well as ethnographic observations in a variety of places where Mexican gay and bisexual immigrant men socialize. Some of the study participants self-identified as both gay and transgender. Seventy seven of the men who participated in interviews had been born in Mexico, and most lived in the San Diego metropolitan area.¹ A few of these men crossed the international border between Mexico and the United States on a regular basis.

The remaining men interviewed for the study were born and/or raised in the U.S. Thirty nine were Latinos (most Mexican Americans), and the rest were U.S.-born men of other ethnic/racial origins (White, African American, Asian) who had sexual or romantic relations with Mexican/Latino men during the previous year.² We included these two additional groups in the study so that we could compare immigrant men with U.S.-born men, and also to analyze the dynamics of cross-cultural sexual and romantic relations.

We stayed in touch with participants for a 12-month period after their interviews, at which point we invited them to participate in a second interview. One hundred fifteen of the men returned for a second interview, which allowed us to talk with them about what had happened to them during the year and about the changes they perceived had taken place in their lives. These follow-up interviews also allowed us to clarify issues that were unclear after reading the transcripts of their initial interviews.

Among many other topics, in the interviews for the *Trayectos Study*, immigrant men talked extensively about their lives in Mexico, their experiences of migration to the United States, and their lives upon arrival. The men in the study told us in detail their recollections of their sexual histories, how they learned about sex and homosexuality, and their perceptions of how they came to self-identify as gay or bisexual. They discussed how they learned about HIV and HIV prevention, and described in detail recent sexual encounters, both protected and unprotected. Men who were HIV positive also talked with us about their struggles to survive with the virus and their sexual lives after diagnosis.

PULL QUOTE (PUT WITHIN DOTTED AREA)

This phenomenon, which Dr. Carrillo and other scholars call “sexual migration,” also applies to LGBT people. In the case of gay and bisexual men, the label refers to migration that is “motivated, fully or in part, by the sexualities of those who migrate.” And, among the

In addition to the interviews, our team conducted 51 sessions of ethnographic observations in a variety of places where gay men socialize, from gay bars and dance clubs, to LGBT³ events and community-based organizations (particularly those that provide services to Latinos or attract a large Latino audience). After each of these sessions, our ethnographers took detailed field notes of their observations.

The text of our 265 interviews and our field notes constitute the data for the study. Altogether, our data collection resulted in more than 12,000 pages of text. We analyzed this text systematically, using an elaborate set of steps that involved careful reading and summarizing, detailed coding of all interview transcripts, and thematic searches utilizing a software package for the analysis of large volumes of qualitative data. During the course of the study, we also held periodic analytical team meetings, quarterly meetings with a community advisory group, and a yearly analytical retreat that involved our team and our academic consultants.

Why leave Mexico? Sexual migration

The existing research with Mexican immigrants has established that a majority of them decide to leave Mexico due to economic reasons, in search of better

work opportunities. A second commonly cited reason, which seems more prominently represented among women and children, is family reunification. In regions in Mexico where migration is high, a culture of migration has emerged: The expectation that migration will part of one’s life is widespread, and young people, particularly men, grow up knowing that at some point in their life they are likely become international migrants themselves.

Other reasons for leaving, however, are prevalent among Mexicans who belong to groups that are socially oppressed and stigmatized due to their gender or sexuality. For instance, sociological research with immigrant Mexican women has found that some women are motivated to leave, in part, in search of a kind of freedom that they imagine they cannot achieve in their places of origin. These women see emigration as an antidote to oppressive situations caused by their families and relatives, often by powerful men who play a role in their lives (fathers, uncles, brothers) and sometimes even by their own mothers. This phenomenon, which Dr. Carrillo and other scholars call “sexual migration,” also applies to LGBT people. In the case of gay and bisexual men, the label refers to migration that is “motivated, fully or in part, by the sexualities of those who migrate.” And, among the men in *Trayectos*, sexual motivations prompted many of them to move to the United States.

Sexual migration among these men, however, cannot simply be interpreted as meaning that they left simply because they could not be gay in Mexico—an assumption that seems common in the United States when thinking about gay men who migrate from poorer countries. Although some men certainly felt that they had to leave because they were unable to be gay in their places of origin, for most the story is more complicated. Most often than not, the immigrant men in *Trayectos* had led open or semi-open

gay lives in Mexico. Although they imagined that gay life in U.S. cities is more open than in Mexico, they were also aware that Mexican cities, particularly the larger ones, offer options for gay and lesbian people. For a majority of these men, sexual migration implied a combination of sexuality-related and economic motivations. They saw leaving Mexico as having the advantage of providing both, economic opportunity and the opportunity to live a more open gay life and in a place where they could be anonymous, and where their families would not be affected by their sexual orientation. This was the case even when the men’s families knew openly that they were gay. Sometimes their families themselves had encouraged them to leave, in part to protect them from stigma, and in part to protect themselves.

Sexual migration among some of the men in *Trayectos* also included other related motivations, such as the desire to get away from an ex-lover or partner, or the desire to have a relationship with U.S.-born men, including tourists or visitors that immigrant men had met in Mexican cities and resorts. In contrast to heterosexual U.S.-citizens who, if they meet a romantic partner abroad, could petition immigrant status in the United States for their romantic partner through marriage, these bi-national couples did not enjoy the same rights. This form of social inequality, which we discuss more extensively below, suggests the need for shifts in policy that would not only provide equal rights to LGBT people in the United States, but would also likely have a broader effect on the health and well-being or the immigrants and their U.S.-born sexual/romantic partners.

Sexual Lives before Migration

Immigrant men in *Trayectos* grew up in a wide variety of places in Mexico, from large cities such as Mexico City and Guadalajara to small, isolated *rancherías* in rural areas of Mexico. Some of them had lived in their places of origin up the point that they decided to migrate to the United States, but others had engaged in complicated paths of internal migration within Mexico itself before leaving to the United States.

The sexual lives that these men had in Mexico where equally varied and were strongly flavored by the social contexts within Mexico where they took place. The region in Mexico where each man grew up, the size of their particular locations, and their social class and education, among other social factors, influenced how these men understood and integrated same-sex attraction into their lives. The importance of the social contexts in which these men grew up and lived in Mexico was evident as men narrated their recollections of their sexual socialization and sexual initiation, sexual and romantic encounters in various places, specific sexual behaviors and roles, and the kinds of partners that they had.

Depending on their social contexts, some of these men had gained access to Mexican gay communities in urban areas soon after they realized that they were sexually attracted to other men. In the case of Marcelo, a 34-year-old man who grew up in Mexico City, soon after discovering that men sought to meet other men in the city's public transportation, he began to interact sexually and

socially with gay men, which eventually gave him entry into Mexico City's gay communities and to the world of gay activism. Talking about his entry into this world, Marcelo referred to the man who invited him to participate:

One of them, who surely realized right away that I was gay...invited me to a cultural activity, to the 1988 [gay] march. And I agreed to go for the first time and then I accepted the invitation to attend a gay group in Mexico City. ...I was eager to liberate myself in a different way. I wasn't suffering, but I didn't like living a double life so much, and I really needed to meet gay people and socialize with them, not just hook up with them [for sex].

Other men had discovered same-sex sex during interactions with neighborhood friends and relatives, sometimes in the context of forced sex, but other times while engaging consensually in mutual explorations. Typically, these explorations took place in the absence of a sense of a gay identity or specific expectations of sexual roles. And some men, particularly but not exclusively those who came from small towns or rural areas, sometimes had participated in sexual interactions that involved heavily gendered situations. This happened most typically in sexual encounters where masculine older boys or young men (who often identified as *hombres normales*, meaning heterosexual) had identified them as *maricones* or *jotos* (both derogatory words used to refer to effeminate men in Mexico) and had requested sex.

In those encounters, the sexual partners frequently assumed that the man deemed to be more effeminate would perform oral sex or allow himself to be penetrated by the more masculine partners. For instance Gerardo, who was age 32, talks about being approached by non-gay-identified men for sex since he was an adolescent. One of these men, a co-worker, approached him in a bathroom and asked him for sex by saying "I've been told that you like it." Gerardo agreed to have sex, but offered to penetrate the partner, who in turn refused by saying "No, because I am the man." Gerardo explained that this kind of men managed their sense of manhood by not allowing male sexual partners to penetrate them, kiss them, or touch other parts of their body. Gerardo was allowed only to interact physically with the man's penis. As Gerardo and others put it, these men usually wanted simply to obtain sexual satisfaction by receiving oral sex from or penetrating a male partner, with no strings attached, although some men in *Trayectos* had managed to engage in romantic relations with non-gay identified masculine men and sometimes had even anally penetrated them.

This gendered pattern is consistent with the notion of *pasivo/activo* roles identified in the literature on Mexican/Latino male homosexuality since the 1970s. In the U.S. literature, this *pasivo/activo* model frequently is depicted as defining all male homosexuality in Mexico. However, the great variety of same-sex behaviors that the men in *Trayectos* had while living in Mexico strongly questions the assumption that only the

pasivo/activo model is available there, or that what people understand in the U.S. as "gay" does not exist in Mexico. Making such an assumption would negate the existence of contemporary Mexican understandings of homosexuality and gayness—understandings in which all men who are sexually attracted exclusively to other men are deemed to be homosexual or gay, and those who are attracted to both men and women are considered bisexual. It is noteworthy that a majority of the immigrant men in *Trayectos* self-identified as

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gay or bisexual before leaving Mexico and many had found their way into gay communities within Mexico, both in large cities and in smaller places. In Mexico, like in other countries, including the U.S., these contemporary understandings of homosexuality co-exist with older gendered models such as the *activo/pasivo* model.

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