This book is devoted to the study of children between the ages of zero to seventeen who have arrived in Mexico from the United States since the beginning of the twenty-first century. We specifically discuss two groups of migrant youth: those who were born in Mexico, migrated to the United States, and then came back to Mexico and those who were born in the United States and moved to Mexico. Their experience crossing the border between Mexico and the United States categorizes them as international migrants. This term, “international migrants,” most accurately defines and describes these minors from both a sociological and demographic perspective. This book analyzes multiple aspects of the migratory experience of these children and adolescents, including their integration or reintegration into Mexican society and its institutions.

Why are these children and adolescents in Mexico? Why did they move from the United States to Mexico? Essentially, these migrant children have arrived in Mexico as a result of changes in patterns of Mexican migration: in recent years scholars have documented a decrease in emigration from Mexico to the United States and an increase in return migration (Giorguli and Gutiérrez 2011a). As a result, in 2010 the net migration flow from Mexico to the United States fell to zero and may have even...
reversed in subsequent years (Passel, Cohn, and González-Barrera 2012). Thus, Mexico has transformed from being a country of emigration to being one of immigration and transit. Quantitatively, the proportion of child migrants arriving in Mexico is important and must be considered a social priority.

Why are these children in Mexico? Why are they in a country that historically has been a migrant-sending country? (Fitzgerald 2008). Why are they not living in the United States, which is a prototypical country of immigration? The answer to these questions involves macroeconomic and macropolitical dimensions that we briefly outline hereafter. As previously stated, since 2005 Mexico has transformed into a migrant-receiving country after having been a predominantly migrant-sending country for more than a century (Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2016). The majority of migrants who began arriving in Mexico were Mexican adults who, after residing for several years in the United States, returned to Mexico accompanied by all or some of their family members, including children born in the United States. This information led scholars to identify the macrostructural dimensions (i.e., economic trends, political stance, and legal framework) that caused the reversal of the traditional migratory flows. David Leal, Néstor Rodríguez, and Gary Freeman (2016) defined this phenomenon as the “era of restriction and recession” and illustrated how these macrostructural dimensions were interrelated. In the United States, anti-immigrant political and legal measures were associated with the effects of the Great Recession (2007–9). These measures weighed on the lives of Mexican migrants and their families and generally explain the displaceability to which they have been subjected. It is within this context that hundreds of thousands of children arrived in Mexico from the United States. Inasmuch as these children are sons and daughters of the Great Migration (1990–2005), they are also a part of the Great Expulsion (Boehm 2016; Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2016; Valdés Gardea, Ciria, and García Castro 2017).

This book is devoted to the study and analysis of the migratory experience of international youth migrants who have arrived in Mexico from the United States during the past fifteen years and to their integration into Mexican society. To address these children’s migratory experiences, we take into consideration the geographic, familial, and subjective elements of their migration process, as well as the heterogeneity of their migratory
trajectories. Some of these children return to Mexico (if they were born in Mexico), and others come to the country for the first time in their lives. After revealing the heterogeneity of these migratory trajectories, we address several crucial questions: How many international child migrants are there in Mexico? Has their presence in Mexico increased in number? Where do they come from? For how many years did they live in the United States? How do they explain their arrival in Mexico? How do they experience these transitions and changes? Do their families live in Mexico, or are their families divided by borders? Through these questions we aim to capture the myriad facets of these children’s migratory experiences.

To account for the integration (or nonintegration) of children into Mexican society and its institutions, we analyze the existing data on the transitions, ruptures, and contradictions that children experience when they enroll in Mexican schools. Some of these children enroll for the first time in a Mexican school, while others reenroll because they had previously attended school in Mexico. In all cases school is the mediating institution that can facilitate the social and political integration of international child migrants.

**International Child Migrants in the United States and Mexico**

We find it essential to define the category of “international child migrants,” especially because this concept can lend itself to different interpretations. In their introduction to *Children of Immigration*, Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco (2001) explain that the categories of “children of immigrants” and “immigrant children” are not interchangeable, and they delineate clear distinctions between the two. The first category, “children of immigrants,” refers to children born in the destination country to immigrant parents. The literature on migration refers to these children as the “second generation” (Portes 1996). In many countries children of immigrants are granted birthright citizenship by jus soli, the rule that the place of children’s birth determines their citizenship. This is the case of the children of Mexican immigrants who were born in the United States. Their birth on U.S. soil granted them citizenship, and, as such, they
are U.S. citizens, not immigrants. The children are considered members of the second generation of immigrants, while their parents belong to the first generation. It is important to reiterate that, in this context, the children of immigrants are not immigrants.

On the other hand, “immigrant children” are immigrants just like their parents and relatives. These children participated in migration: they moved to a different country than the one in which they were born, just as the adults did. In the literature on migration, these children are referred to as “second-half children” (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958) or as members of the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2004; Harklau, Losey, and Siegal 2009; Rojas-García 2013). Scholars emphasize the fact that age matters—and it matters a lot—when trying to understand the phenomenon of migration and the social integration of migrants. Migrants who arrive in the destination country at an early age undergo a process of primary socialization known as the internalization of social worlds (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Simply put, immigrant children were first educated in their parents’ country of origin and, after they arrive in the destination country, they restart their primary socialization process. This happens first when they come into contact with the new social environment and then, predominantly, when they enroll in school. Once in school, they undergo a new socialization process that aims to transform them into both national and local members of the receiving society, the country to which they were brought by their parents or relatives.

The most visible element in this new socialization process is language. Children often arrive in a society in which the dominant language is different than their parents’ language (Spanish or Indigenous languages), which they spoke on a daily basis when they were living in their countries of origin. In the case of Mexican children who arrive in the United States, the acquisition of English as a second language—or third or more language—is a highly complex process (Hamann, Zúñiga, and Sánchez García 2022). Children continue to use Spanish at home with their family, and many had already started learning to read and write in Spanish while in school in Mexico. In other words, they already have the ability to communicate with their parents, siblings, relatives, and other people in their community. They have already developed a complex language system consisting of phonological awareness, morphology, and an enriched vocabulary, among
other skills. When immigrant children enroll in schools in the United States without having any knowledge of English, they face a double challenge: they must learn the English language while they are expected to learn academic content in English (Valdés, Capitelli, and Alvarez 2011).5

Migration scholars have pointed out that age is a central component in analyzing the integration of international migrants into destination societies. Roger Waldinger (2008a) presents both expected and unexpected evidence as to why age is relevant in the process of international migration. For example, it is expected that individuals who move to another country at an early age acquire the dominant language spoken in the destination society and perhaps become as proficient as native speakers. However, it is less expected to learn that migrants who came to the United States as children send fewer remittances to their relatives in countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, or the Dominican Republic compared to those who arrived as adults. Furthermore, this group travels less frequently to their country of origin. To paraphrase Waldinger, migration has a stronger impact on the lives of individuals when they become involved in this process at an early age. In the case of child migrants, it is more likely that the destination society will become their “new home,” whereas the society of origin will gradually grow subjectively distant.

Ruben Rumbaut (2004) proposes even finer distinctions regarding the relevance of age in international migration by nuancing the category of first-generation immigrant. He refers to youth who arrived in the United States between the ages of thirteen to seventeen as the 1.25 generation. These adolescents are likely to enroll in middle or high schools. Those who were between six and twelve years old when they arrived in the United States are considered part of the 1.5 generation and enroll in elementary schools. Lastly, migrants aged zero to five who arrive in the United States belong to a generation that is very close to the second generation: the 1.75 generation. While they were not born in the United States, these children arrived at a very early age and essentially underwent the entire primary socialization process in the destination country, first as members of their families and later as students in schools (often beginning in preschool). Within all of these categories, these children are international migrants.6

None of the aforementioned categories—1.25, 1.5, 1.75, or second generation—accurately describes the children we study in this book. Our
subjects are child migrants who have the right to Mexican citizenship based on the principle of jus soli or the principle of jus sanguinis. As previously stated, they are international migrants because they have crossed the national borders at least once, if not more. To shed light on these children’s situation and to capture the distinctive features of this new migratory flow, we put forward the concept of the 0.5 generation. The term “0.5 generation” seeks to grasp the characteristics of this particular type of mobility to Mexico as a destination country and highlights the fact that the children who move from the United States to Mexico cannot be included in any of the established generational categories used in the literature on migration.

**Methodological Nationalism**

It is paradoxical that international child migrants who are living in Mexico after having been born or having lived in the United States have received little attention in the literature on migration. First, consider the category of “children of immigrants,” as explained by Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez-Orozco (2001). Before coming to Mexico, these children were not considered immigrants because they were living in the country in which they were born—the United States. Once they arrive in Mexico, the children can no longer be considered second generation: their parents are Mexican nationals and no longer considered immigrants because they have returned to live in the country in which they were born. So the children must now be categorized as international migrants because they have moved from one country to another. Next, let’s consider the category of “child migrants”—those who were born in Mexico and migrated to the United States. As explained earlier, when these children were living in the United States, they were categorized as the 1.5 generation. However, once in Mexico they become “return” migrants because they returned to the country in which they were born.

The focal children of this book have long been invisible to migration scholars in countries that historically have been destination countries (such as the United States, Canada, Germany, etc.). The invisibility of these child migrants in the scholarship is surprising because scholars are
acutely aware of the fact that international migration has always included both return and circular migration. It is likely assumed that these migrant children and the children of immigrants arrive in the destination countries and stay there permanently. This book shows that this is not necessarily true. Many children born in the United States (who were considered members of the second generation when they were living there) are now living in Mexico and are being educated in Mexican schools.

This book also shows that numerous children who were considered members of the 1.5, 1.25, or 1.75 generations when they were in the United States are now living in Mexico. These children were born in Mexico and later moved to the United States, usually accompanied by one or more of their parents, and then returned to Mexico as minors. Three important aspects of their migratory identification emerge. First, the categories of “second generation” and “1.5 generation” no longer make sense when these international child migrants arrive in Mexico. Second, these children are underage when they engage in these migratory movements and are still in the midst of the primary socialization process. Third, and consequently, Mexico is increasingly becoming a receiving country for international migrants (Giorguli and Gutiérrez 2012; Hernández-León and Zúñiga 2016), a topic we discuss in more detail in this book.

It is through this lens that we ask the following: Why are these child migrants absent from the research about international migration? Why are these particular migration flows absent, even though migration scholars are aware of the fact that circulation and return have been a constituent component of international migration since the nineteenth century (Perlmann and Waldinger 1999)? To address these questions, we draw on theoretical and methodological frameworks of “methodological nationalism” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Llopis Goig 2007). Scholars who study both the second generation and the 1.25, 1.5, and 1.75 generations of immigrants assume that children and adolescents do not circulate, they do not return, and they do not move from the destination countries. This is likely because they are looking at facts from the traditional destination countries and making interpretations only from those data.

Hence, these authors’ scholarly pursuits—and findings—are limited to domestic issues. Rarely do they show any interest in what child migrants face in their countries of origin, nor do they wonder whether these
children (who are either children of immigrants or immigrants themselves) have lived in their parents’ countries of origin, at least for a period during their childhood or adolescence. For example, scholars in the United States wonder what language these children speak at home, if they are learning English, and if they are doing well in school. They are curious as to whether or not these children identify with U.S. society, if their allegiances lie within the United States, if they’ll get good jobs when they reach adulthood, if they’ll achieve upward mobility vis-à-vis their parents, among other topics. All of these are legitimate academic and political concerns, but they are relevant to the society of the United States, where the specialists in these fields work. If the children leave the United States, what happens next is no longer deemed relevant to the field.

Methodological nationalism has paradoxically shaped the field of migration and, specifically, that of the social integration of child migrants. Demographers, who are very much aware of the diversity of migration flows and have highlighted that migration is not and has never been unidirectional, have pointed out that many children born in the United States spend their entire childhood, or part of it, in Mexico. Michael Rendall and Berna Torr (2008) studied cohorts of child migrants and estimated that in the 1985–90 and 1995–2000 cohorts, one in ten children born in the United States to Mexican mothers spent their childhood in Mexico. Thus, the fact that most of the research on the social integration of child migrants does not acknowledge this phenomenon is problematic.

**TWO DECADES OF INDUCTIVE RESEARCH**

We became interested in studying international child migrants living in Mexico when we were in the United States, in Dalton, Georgia, to be exact, in the company of Rubén Hernández-León and Edmund T. Hamann. From 1997 to 1998, we conducted research about Dalton, the most prominent carpet-manufacturing hub in the country, which was—and still is—a destination for Mexican migration (Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005a). We conducted surveys and carried out fieldwork that included site visits, observations, and participation in numerous work meetings in the city of Dalton. During those years our research focused on
schools because the local education authorities were concerned about the rapid changes in student enrollment in their districts. The arrival of large numbers of Mexican children, as well as Guatemalan and Salvadoran children, was completely changing the dynamics and demographic composition of school districts in this region of Georgia (Hamann 2003). Authorities and teachers were going through a difficult period of adjustment and adaptation to effectively working with migrant populations. It was through this lens that we had numerous opportunities to talk with school principals. They often told us, “These children disappear.” We assumed that this meant not that the children actually vanished but that they moved elsewhere—that is, they migrated. One possible scenario is that they moved to a different place in the United States, while another possibility is that they returned to Mexico or went there for the first time, had they been born in the United States. In December 2004 we began our research in Mexico, where we found the “missing” children. And that is where the disappeared children appeared.

Beginning in 2004, a collaboration of scholars has been investigating the migratory trajectories of these focal children. The research group is composed of Eduardo Carrillo (Tecnológico de Monterrey), Michaël Da Cruz (Université d’Aix-Marseille), Edmund “Ted” T. Hamann (University of Nebraska–Lincoln), Rubén Hernández-León (University of California, Los Angeles), Shinji Hirai (Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology), Catalina Panait (Tecnológico de Monterrey), Betsabé Román (University of California, San Diego), Anabela Sánchez (Universidad de Monterrey), Juan Sánchez García (Escuela Normal Miguel F. Martínez), Rebeca Sandoval (Ford Foundation) and María Vivas-Romero (Université de Liège). Our work has spanned several Mexican states over the years, including Nuevo León (2004–5), Zacatecas (2005–6), Puebla (2009–10), and Jalisco (2010–11). The first survey was carried out in Nuevo León due to the access and infrastructure that the state education authorities provided. We continued in Zacatecas because we were interested in doing research in a state well known for its long migratory tradition and high migratory density. In Puebla and Jalisco, we responded to the request of state education authorities.

While conducting fieldwork in Jalisco, the first group of researchers (composed of sociologists, anthropologists, and linguists) asserted the
need to collaborate with experts in the demography of international migration between Mexico and the United States. As we were conducting, presenting, and publishing our research, readers and decision-makers representing public institutions frequently asked us questions like “How many international child migrants are currently living in Mexico?” and “Since when have they been arriving in Mexico?” Our answers to these questions were incomplete because our surveys were based on state-level samples and were limited to data that had been collected in schools. In 2010, within the Binational Dialogue on Mexican Migrants in the United States and Mexico initiative (Giorguli et al. 2021), we began a fruitful dialogue with Edith Y. Gutiérrez (El Colegio de México), Frank Bean (University of California, Irvine), Susan K. Brown (University of California, Irvine), Bryant Jensen (Brigham Young University), and Adam Sawyer (California State University, Bakersfield). Ever since, we have coordinated these two groups of researchers to participate in a continuous exchange of information and ideas. This book encompasses the research that emerged from these partnerships.

In 2013, with more robust demographic data about international migrants in Mexico, we embarked on a multisited, longitudinal research project in the Mexican state of Morelos. This project, unlike the previous surveys, no longer attempted to count the number of international child migrants enrolled in schools but rather to depict their life histories. This ongoing project aims to grasp the ethnographical richness of the migratory and education trajectories of ten children and their families.

In a strict, nonmetaphorical sense, this book is the fruit of an empirical and theoretical journey that began in 1997 in Dalton, Georgia. Rubén Hernández-León, Ted Hamann, and Víctor Zúñiga were conducting quantitative and qualitative research that included surveying Mexican and Central American parents whose children were enrolled in Dalton public schools. Additionally, Ted was completing the fieldwork for his dissertation about the demographic changes in Dalton and their influence on educational experiences, which he defended in 1999. During those years (1997–2007), we had regular contact with second-generation children, but more frequently with 1.5 generation children, and began inquiring into their experiences on both sides of the border. Shortly after, our research journey in Mexico commenced in 2004. Throughout these
twenty-five years, our research has followed an inductive approach: we have allowed ourselves to be guided by the methodological principle, as put forward by Ted Hamann, that “we don’t know what we don’t know.” The methodological positioning is useful in any field of study, but it is imperative when it comes to adults studying the experiences of children and, in this case, child migrants.

Traditionally, studies on migrants have relied on adult-centered understandings and perspectives, which is why Madeleine Dobson (2009) urges us to “unpack” migrant children who, until recently, were comparable to “luggage” transported by migrant adults. To unpack these children and overcome an adult-centered perspective, we use the inductive method that invites us to ask provisional questions without having all the answers within reach. From this lens we learn directly from the children involved in migration. While we better understand the contexts that produce, reproduce, and condition these children, we also learn about the decisions that they make as agents and strategists in their own migration process. By invoking methodological humility, we privilege the voices of those who really know and understand the migratory experience: the migrant children (as well as their parents and relatives). As researchers, we must let the children show us the way and refine our preliminary questions in the process, developing new and better questions, creating different and more robust categories, and, ultimately, generating more appropriate research methods.

Four examples demonstrate our inductive approach to research and, at the same time, explain the way in which this book is structured. In our first studies, we noticed that very young children (six to eight years old) not only had difficulties answering the questionnaires but also were often unable to provide accurate information about their migratory experiences. They did know in which country they were born (all children knew this piece of information), but they did not remember or did not know the specific town or state. Often they did not know in which country their parents had been born or in which schools in the United States they had studied. In short, the children, especially those who had come to Mexico when they were very young, did not remember or did not know a great deal of information. Because of this, we made the decision not to ask children to answer a questionnaire and to rule out young children from the interviews we conducted. This was a mistake that we recognized when we ultimately
decided to interview three children, ages six, seven, and eight, in the Mixtec region of Puebla. We found their narratives fascinating: Itzcalli (six years old) was born in the United States but did not remember exactly where; Manuel (seven years old) was born in the suburbs of Chicago; Jessenia (eight years old) was born in some town in New Jersey. These children’s perspectives were captured, analyzed, and ultimately published in a journal article (see Sánchez, Hamann, and Zúñiga 2012).11

A second example of inductive methodology occurred when we were conducting interviews in different municipalities of Puebla. Ted Hamann and Juan Sánchez came up with the idea of using the children’s answers from the questionnaire during the interview to more authentically dialogue with each of the children about their written responses. The interviews were conducted months after the questionnaire was given. When we returned to the schools in Puebla, we had already identified the international child migrants and arrived with the questionnaires in hand for these children. Annexed to the survey were questions created exclusively for migrant children, including the question: Would you be interested in talking to us about schools in the United States? The options were “yes” and “no.” If the children answered affirmatively, their full name was requested. This way we could link the children’s questionnaire with their interview. To our surprise, in many cases we found contradictions between one source and the other but soon realized that this was not the result of the children’s “lies” or “errors” but rather a consequence of the instrument used (questionnaire or in-depth interview). This is how we discovered that using mixed methods (which, in common jargon, is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods) is not a simple task. The pieces of information collected from different methods do not fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle but rather forced us to admit that the views and perspectives of children (and of all human beings) are not necessarily coherent. Together, the quantitative and qualitative data allowed for contradictions, nuances, and tonalities, which were very useful and permitted us to gain a better understanding of what we wanted to know. Hence, the complex findings resulted in an article that was published in 2017 (see Hamann, Zúñiga, and Sánchez García 2017).

The third example of the heuristic potential of this inductive method emerged when we decided to analyze migratory trajectories in detail to
understand how children and adolescents explained their return to Mexico. By doing this, we realized that the initial information we gathered from the children (when they answered the questionnaire, or when we interviewed them) was like a photograph capturing one instant out of the whole trajectory. Certainly, that photograph was accompanied by a story about what they had experienced before, but we were entirely ignorant of what happened after they returned. We regretted the fact that we had no idea of what had happened to many of the children who had shared with us their complex—and risky—experiences as migrants. This is why we decided to change our methodological strategy when we started the project in Morelos.

As mentioned earlier, we selected a small number of child migrants to follow across several years so that we could capture their entire story through adulthood. Through this longitudinal approach, we discovered that the children who were enrolled in schools later dropped out. We also found that these children often returned to the United States, mostly those who have dual nationalities or those who have relatives living there, and that it was not unusual for them to move from one place to another within Mexico, thus combining international migration with internal migration. In a nutshell we discovered that the trajectories of child migrants are much more complex than we had assumed and that only a longitudinal study could holistically capture this complexity. The initial findings of this study were published first in Betsabé Román González’s doctoral thesis (2017) and then in an academic article published in 2016 (see Román González, Carrillo, and Hernández-León 2016).

Last, the fourth example of our inductive research journey can be observed by comparing a paper presented by Silvia Giorguli and Edith Gutiérrez in May 2011 at an academic conference with their article published on the same topic at the end of the same year. The researchers’ initial presentation raised the question: “Is there any evidence of changes in the patterns of Mexican migration to the United States?” The question stemmed from intuition based on the preliminary analysis of data from the Mexican 2010 census (Giorguli and Gutiérrez 2011a). Proceeding in an inductive manner, the analysis went on to compare Mexican and U.S. official data sources, which ultimately allowed the researchers to affirm that “the change in the migratory pattern is illustrated by the sharp fall in
the annual number of emigrants and by the unexpected return of a great number of Mexicans and children of Mexicans to national territory” (2011b, 21). By 2012 the conclusions were firmer and more nuanced because the patterns were combined:

There is a historical process of emigration [from Mexico] that is characterized by the loss of circularity and increased settlement in that country [United States], as well as by the incorporation of women and children into the migration flows. On the other hand, the outflow from Mexico has decreased substantially and, in the last five years, there has been an unprecedented return and entry of Mexicans and children of Mexicans from the United States. (2012, 1)

Consequently, there is not one single answer to the question that Giorguli and Gutiérrez (2012) raised. Rather, this question could be answered in various ways because migration patterns are multilayered, much like sedimentary geologic structures in which layers are juxtaposed against one another. While older layers are hidden underneath more recent layers, they are no less real and must be incorporated in our understanding of migration patterns.

This book is the result of a research journey that addresses the migratory experience of children who move to Mexico from the United States and their process of integration (or nonintegration) into Mexican society and its institutions. These two specific research areas are included in each chapter, although, depending on the subject, in some chapters the migratory experience is privileged, while in others we give priority to the integration process.

Chapter 1 summarizes the conceptual path we followed, guided by the theoretical tools that each of us possess according to our disciplinary backgrounds. This chapter ends with a synthesis of the theoretical perspectives that have guided us for more than twenty years. The remaining chapters present the research findings and are divided into thematic sections. Chapter 2 focuses on the migratory experience of children from zero to seventeen years of age, while presenting the chronology of the migration process from the United States to Mexico. The analysis begins with the 1990 Mexican census, includes the 2000 and 2010 censuses, and ends with the data from the 2015 population survey (INEGI 1990, 2000,