

A disconnect between migrants' stories and their health

February 25 2019, by Jeff Grabmeier

While some Mexican immigrants give positive accounts about migrating to and living in the United States, their health status tells a different story.

In a small study in Columbus, anthropology professors Jeffrey Cohen, Douglas Crews and their student Alexandra Tuggle, all from The Ohio State University, found that many migrants celebrated living in Columbus. However, they also experienced discrimination and exhibited physical signs of stress, such as [high blood pressure](#), high blood sugar and obesity.

"There was a real disconnect between the positive narratives they told and the discrimination they felt and the stress revealed by their [health measures](#)," Tuggle said.

The researchers believe the positive narratives were a coping mechanism.

"These migrants are creating their own mental constructs so they can be happy and survive in what can be a difficult, stressful environment," Crews said.

The study was published online recently in the *Journal of Physiological Anthropology*.

The study involved 34 Mexican migrants who had lived in Columbus

between five and 30 years. Several were undocumented. Nearly all said they moved to the United States for economic reasons.

The participants were interviewed about their experiences of migration and settlement in the United States, their life in Columbus and discrimination they faced.

In addition, 28 of the participants underwent a variety of [health](#) tests and completed self-assessments of their health.

The narratives and the health measures didn't match up, Cohen said.

Most participants focused on the positives of living in Columbus. Some mentioned the ability to buy a house and to live near schools for their children among the reasons they were happy.

"Although the narratives were overwhelmingly positive, discrimination showed up in a lot of them. Some people reported physical attacks, there were cases of participants and their children being harassed for speaking Spanish, and there were cases where doctors refused to treat them," Cohen said.

In addition, the health measures for many migrants suggested they were under a lot of stress.

Nearly 80 percent were overweight or obese, according to their body mass index scores. Findings showed 21 percent had hypertension and 25 percent were hyperglycemic.

Nearly half of the sample (46 percent) rated their health as only fair or poor.

"Many of the migrants attributed their poor health to economic changes

in the U.S., living in the cold Midwest, job loss and limited access to health services," Tuggle said.

With the challenges that migrants face in the United States, the positive outlook found in the narratives might be necessary to survive and thrive, according to Crews.

"There's been plenty of research that suggests that our attitudes have an influence on physical health. Migrants may be constructing these positive narratives to deal with their elevated stress and help themselves cope," Crews said.

The researchers noted that this was a small study done only with Mexican migrants in Columbus. The experiences of other migrant groups in other places may be different.

To get a better understanding of the Mexican [migrant](#) experience in the United States, the Ohio State research team is going to Mexico to learn more about the context for future U.S. immigrants. They will interview people there who are planning to migrate, those who have no intention of migrating and those who left Mexico but then returned.

"We hope to learn more about what led to the findings we had in this study, about where it all started," Crews said.

More information: Alexandra C. Tuggle et al, Stress, migration, and allostatic load: a model based on Mexican migrants in Columbus, Ohio, *Journal of Physiological Anthropology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1186/s40101-018-0188-4](#)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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