Cross-Country Variation in Deportation Risk: Stylized Facts and a Research Agenda

November 10th, 2025

Christian Ambrosius*
(Freie Universität Berlin)

Marina Luna
(Brazilian Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services)

Abstract

While considerable effort has been devoted to measuring international migration and enhancing data quality on migrant remittances, comparable data on forced returns remain fragmented and uneven across countries. To address this gap, we assembled administrative data from official governmental statistics in deporting countries and complemented them, where necessary, through freedom-of-information requests. The resulting dataset covers 42 deporting countries, including most OECD members, and reports returns by citizenship for 204 origin countries or territories, yielding approximately 7,200 unique pairs of deporting and origin countries, with varying temporal coverage and across different indicators related to enforcement regimes. This research note maps the landscape of enforced returns, highlights stylized facts of enforcement patterns at the level of countries, bilateral corridors, and over time, and discusses the limitations and challenges that arise when comparing data across jurisdictions. Finally, we distill themes and hypotheses from the literature on deportation regimes, laying the groundwork for a research agenda that seeks to explain the large spatial and temporal variation in deportation intensities observed at both the country and corridor levels.

Funding by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation (2022–2025) as part of the project *"Immigration Enforcement Across the World: Drivers and Consequences of Deportation Risk (DEPRISK)"* is gratefully acknowledged. The data used in this note benefitted from excellent research assistance by Justina Lee, Isidora Villegas, Lena Herzog, Laura Ziegler and Leonardo Montel.

*Corresponding author: christian.ambrosius@fu-berlin.de

I. Introduction

Forced returns have come to dominate contemporary debates on migration. Across many destination countries, political leaders have pledged to increase the number of returns. Yet forced return is not a new phenomenon. It has long formed part of states' migration control toolkits. Since the year 2000, the United States has forcible returned more than 6.6 million individuals, while countries of the European Union have issued more than 7 million orders to leave since 2008, and reported the return of more than 2 million over that same period. In some cases, the scale of forced return has been considerable: for the Central American countries of El Salvador and Honduras, the cumulative number of deportees from the United States since the year 2000 is equivalent to about 5% of their resident population; and in the Balkan country of Albania, the number of enforced returns reported from European Countries between 2014 and 2022 amount to more than 5% of the country´s current population stock.

Despite its prominence in the political discourse, forced return remains one of the least studied aspects of migration. We know surprisingly little about its drivers and consequences. On the one hand, deportation studies have few advocates. For enforcement agencies, deportees represent a resolved case; for immigrant advocates, a lost one. Deportees and their families frequently remain silent due to the stigma and social exclusion they face upon return, while policy makers tend to avoid the topic because it complicates one-sided narratives of migration control.

On the other hand, a relative silence within the social sciences is rooted in the scarcity and inaccessibility of data. Considerable effort has gone into measuring international migration and improving data quality on remittances, yet comparable data on forced returns remain fragmentary and uneven across countries. To address this gap, we assembled administrative data from governmental sources in deporting countries, obtained both through publicly available statistics and, where necessary, through freedom-of-information requests. The resulting DepRisk database (Ambrosius and Luna 2025) consolidates data from multiple sources, and covers 42 deporting countries, including most OECD members, with varying temporal coverage. Returns are identified by citizenship for 204 origin countries or territories, yielding approximately 7,200 bilateral deportation corridors—defined as unique pairs of deporting and origin countries.

Creating a dataset on forced returns faced two main challenges. The first was intransparency and lack of systematic data collections or reporting: many governments do not publish data on forced returns. In such cases, we submitted official data requests. In three OECD countries—Israel, South Korea and Turkey —we were ultimately unable to obtain information (Ambrosius, Luna, et al. 2025). The second challenge was heterogeneity in definitions and procedures. The term *deportation* lacks a universal legal meaning and is used to refer to different administrative procedures and terms, including removals, expulsions, assisted return schemes and other returns following an order to leave. Recognizing these differences, we distinguish different types of return to facilitate comparisons across jurisdictions and to acknowledge the variety of mechanisms through which migrants are returned.

The goal of this research note is twofold. First, we map the landscape of forced returns, based on the data introduced and described in the following section. The data mapping includes country level and regional level aggregates, as well as a description of the main bilateral corridors, and presents cross-sectional differences as well as aggregate trends at the regional level. In mapping the data, we also highlight limitations and challenges related to the data. Second, we identify and discuss possible venues for future research to make sense of the empirical puzzle: A considerable variation in enforcement intensities between countries, across bilateral deportation corridors and over time. We summarize the main arguments from the scattered literature on deportation regimes in section four and conclude with open questions and a research agenda.

II. Enforcement Data

Lacking a legal definition, the term “deportations” is often employed colloquially as a broad category to describe different procedures and types of return. Here, we distinguish between several categories of return to facilitate systematic comparisons across jurisdictions.

Enforced Returns. We define *enforced returns* as cases in which individuals have reportedly been removed through state enforcement measures. Such measures may include detention prior to return, police or escorted removal, physical coercion, or compulsory transport arranged by authorities. However, many forms of return that directly or indirectly relate to state enforcement are not captured in this indicator. First, official data frequently omit “quasi-deportees”—such as family members who accompany deported relatives but who have not themselves been formally deported (Hamilton et al. 2023) - or returns that occur preemptively in anticipation of enforcement or in response to threats of deportation. Second, the category of *enforced return* does not include returns via *assisted* or *voluntary return* programs in which migrants formally consent to repatriation, often supported by financial or logistical assistance such as Assisted

Voluntary Return Programs – often with support by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) - or via national or multinational return programs. For us, restricting this indicator to instances only where state or police force has been applied serves as a definitional distinction from other forms of returns. It does not solve the general conceptual difficulty of classifying returns on a voluntary-involuntary dichotomy[1].

Other Returns. We include an additional category, *other returns*, to capture cases not classified as enforced returns. This group primarily consists of returns under assisted return schemes where individuals formally consented to repatriation and no physical coercion was applied. For countries reporting to Eurostat, this category refers to cases in which return was reported following an "order to leave" but did not classify as an *enforced return* following the above definition. This indicator also includes returns resulting from the revocation of residence permits (for instance due to criminal conduct not related to immigration status), when it did not lead to enforcement action in the sense of "enforced returns". It is important to note that this indicator of "other returns" reflects differences in both reporting practices as well as in return procedures. For one, depending on reporting practices, not all those who return without state enforcement actions are registered, reflecting the difficulty of countries to keep track of a mobile population (Wahba 2022). Second, country-specific return procedures and classifications matter. The fact that some countries report a larger share of migrants as "voluntary returns" may reflect countries' priority for 'softer' deportations; but these are often backed up by the threat of coercive measures if migrants fail to consent to an assisted or consented return.

Refusals of Entry. The variable *refusals of entry* refers to the number of individuals denied admission at a country's border, whether by air, land, or sea. While *enforced returns* and *other returns* concern removals from within a territory, *refusals of entry* relate to cases where entry is prevented at the border. The indicator includes all individuals returned prior to entry, regardless of the underlying reason. Certain cases blur this distinction. For example, during the COVID-

---

[1] See, for instance, Leerkes et al. (2017), Kalir (2017) or Cleton and Chauvin (2020) for a critical discussion of dichotomous distinction of voluntary and involuntary return schemes. Migrants' agency in the return process is often constrained through varying degrees of coercion, making "voluntariness" a relative or gradual, rather than absolute, condition.

19 pandemic, the United States activated Title 42 procedures, allowing for the summary expulsion of migrants on public-health grounds, some of which were executed at the border and others after having entered the US territory. For the U.S., therefore, refusal-of-entry figures include Title 42 expulsions for fiscal years 2020–2022, although some of these have been executed from inside the U.S. and should, according to the definition applied above, be classified (see the discussion in Section III and Figure 2 below).

Orders to Leave. The variable *orders to leave* captures the number of individuals formally subject to an administrative or judicial decision obliging an individual to depart from the territory. This variable is not available for all countries, as an order to leave is not always a legal prerequisite for enforcement actions. In some systems, removals may be executed directly under other legal provisions.

All indicators are provided on an annual, country-by-country basis. The term *deporting country* refers to the state issuing an order to leave or conducting an enforcement action, while *country of citizenship* refers to the state to which the individual is returned. In most cases, the country of citizenship coincides with the country of return. The variable *year* corresponds to the calendar year in which the return occurred; for the United States, data are reported by fiscal year[2]. Temporal coverage varies by indicator and country, for most countries and indicators the first available year is 2008; for some that data goes back to the year 2000.

Primary data sources include Eurostat, complemented by administrative statistics and official releases from national immigration and interior ministries, as well as responses to freedom-of-information requests submitted by the authors. Details on data sources, definitions, and decisions in the construction of variables are documented in Ambrosius et al. (2025).

III. Mapping Deportation Risk

The following section maps patterns in different enforcement regimes/intensities. The first section focuses on country and regional aggregates; and the second section on the main bilateral pairs of deporting and receiving countries.

---

[2] Fiscal year in the U.S. ranges from October 1st to September 30th.

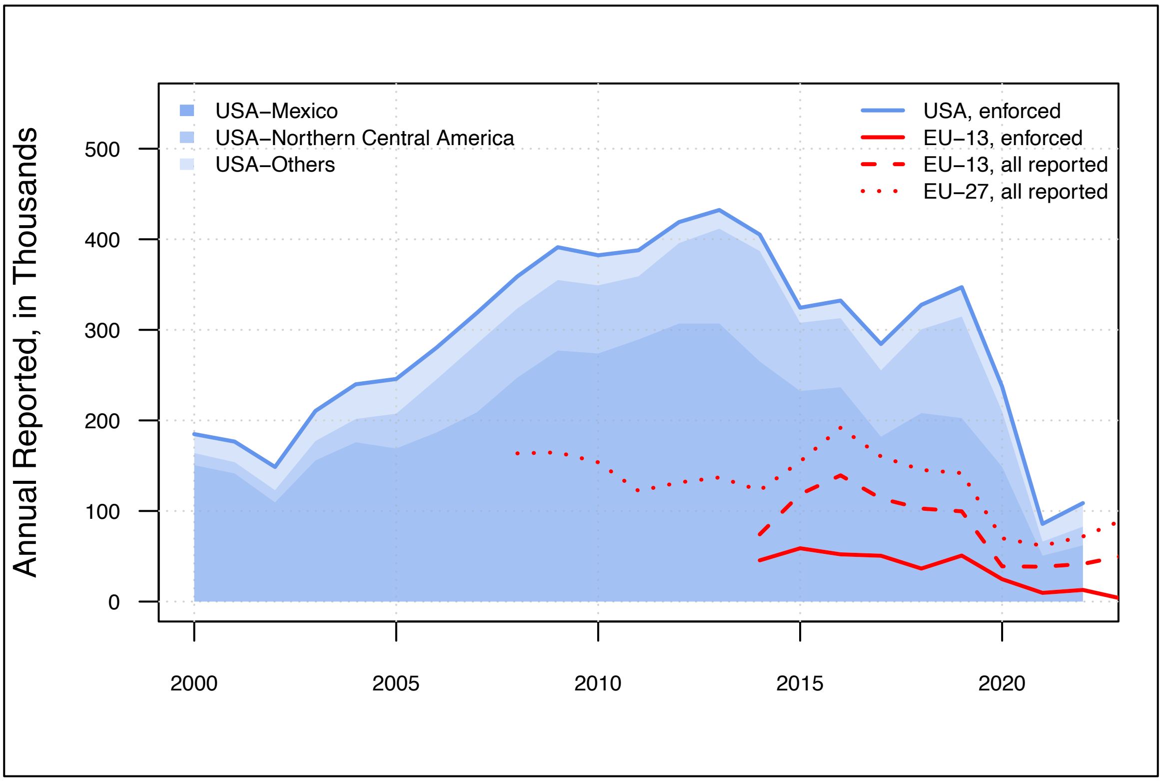
Country-Level Variation in Deportation Risk

Most of the total numbers of deportations covered in the data are originating in the U.S. and Europe; with the U.S. clearly dominating total numbers. Figure 1 shows trends in the number of enforced returns from the U.S. (all those classified as "removals" under U.S. reporting) and compares these numbers to an aggregate of EU countries, obtained from Eurostat. Only after 2014 is data usually given separately for „enforced returns" and distinguished from other return schemes (assisted return schemes or others returning after having received an order to leave); and not all countries report consistently over all these years. Figure 1 therefore provides aggregated trends for enforced returns for a subset of 13 European countries (Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Denmark, Spain, Estonia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Sweden) and for the period starting in 2014. The total population size of both these groups is similar: 347 million in the U.S.; and approximately 357 million for the group of EU-13. In addition, we also report data on *total returns*, including the registered return of all persons who have previously been given an order to leave. This data covers 27 European countries (approximately 450 million people, EU-27).

Several patterns in Figure 1 are worth highlighting: First, enforced returns from the U.S. – and, for this matter, enforced return in the entire dataset presented here – are dominated by only four corridors. The dark blue area refers to all removals towards Mexico, equivalent to 69% of all enforced returns from the U.S. between 2000 and 2022. On top, a slightly lighter shaded area refers to the sum of three other large corridors from the US towards the countries of Northern Central America: El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. The latter three made up 21% of all the forced returns (removals) from the U.S. over the period.

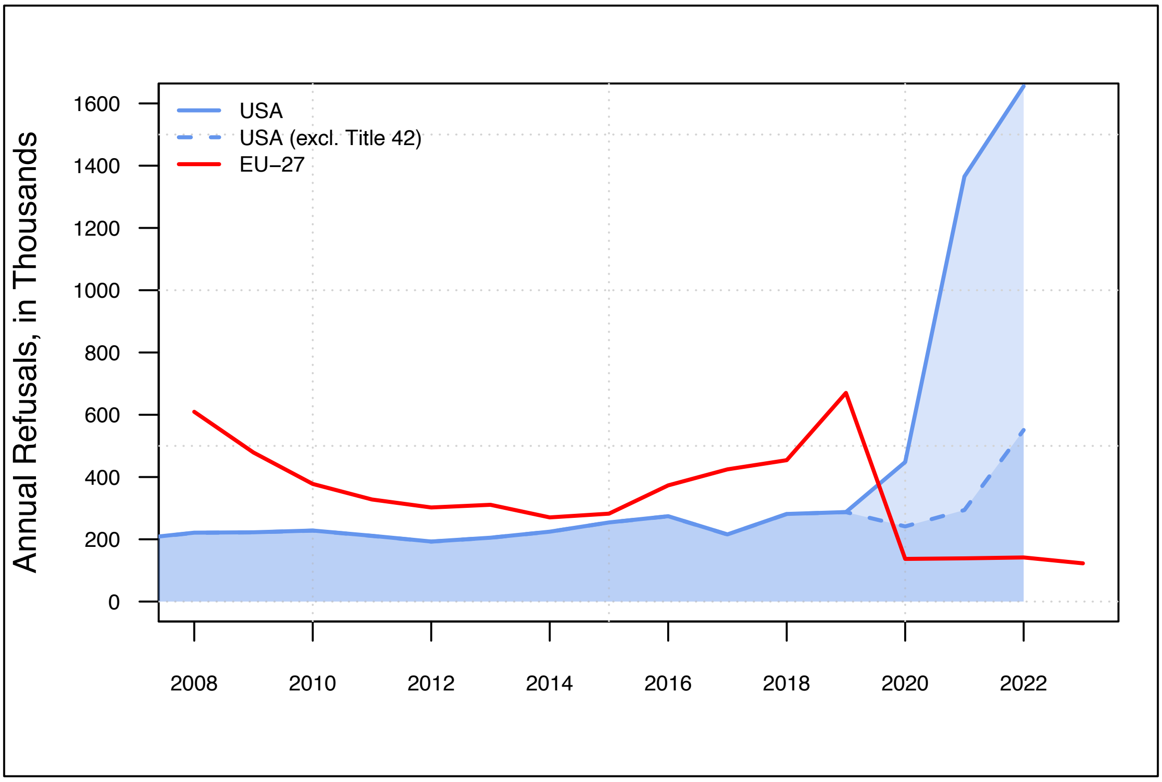
Second, U.S. removals outweigh enforced returns from European countries by a large margin: Forced returns from the U.S. peaked at 432 thousand in 2013 during the Obama administration. Forced returns from the U.S. then declined. In Europe (EU-13), enforced returns were highest in 2015 with 59 thousand annual enforced returns; and lowest in 2023 with less than 3 thousand. Total reported returns peaked at 139 thousand in 2016 in the same group. In both the U.S. and Europe, enforced returns registered a drop during the pandemic years and rose again after. Data for the second Trump administration had not been available at the time of data collection and are not included.

Figure 1: Trends in Enforced and Total Reported Returns, U.S. and E.U. Countries



While Figure 1 refers to persons returned from within countries' territories, Figure 2 shows refusals of entry at external borders for the United States and the EU-27. In the EU-27, refusals declined up to 2015 and then increased through 2019; they dropped sharply in 2020 with the onset of COVID-19 restrictions, whereas the U.S. series does not show a comparable decline because, beginning in March 2020, the government implemented "Title 42" expulsions under the Public Health Service Act (42 U.S.C. § 265) via CDC orders. Under Title 42, border authorities summarily expelled individuals on public-health grounds without processing them under immigration law or providing standard asylum screening. By contrast, removals shown in Figure 1 occur under "Title 8" (the Immigration and Nationality Act) and involve formal removal orders with attendant consequences such as multi-year re-entry bars and possible criminal penalties for unlawful re-entry. Although many Title 42 expulsions occurred after individuals had already crossed into U.S. territory, they were not processed as removals; we therefore treat them as refusals at entry rather than enforced returns. Also, the data does not distinguish whether individuals had already entered U.S. territory or not. The dotted U.S. line excludes Title 42 expulsions to show refusals at entry absent these public-health expulsions; Title 42 ended on May 11, 2023 with the termination of the COVID-19 public-health emergency.

Figure 2. Trends in Annual Refusals to Enter, U.S. and E.U. Countries



The barplot in Figure 3 shows annual average numbers of enforced returns for all countries for which this data is available; and over the period 2014 to 2022. Color schemes depict regions (North America without Mexico; Latin America; Europe and Others). As already evident from Figure 1, absolute numbers are dominated by the U.S. case: Between 2014 and 2022, total annual average enforced returns from the U.S. were 272 thousand. We include a broken axis for better presentation of the U.S. case next to the 2nd largest value for Germany, with 11,600 annual average enforced returns over the same period (approximately 5% of the annual numbers of the U.S. case)[3].

---

[3] For Germany, we use data reported in response to a parliamentary inquiry. These figures are disaggregated by *country of return* rather than by *citizenship*. We exclude returns directed to signatories of the Dublin Regulation, assuming that these correspond to transfers under safe third-country arrangements rather than to returns to countries of citizenship.

Figure 3: Annual Average Enforced Returns, By Country, Period 2014-2023

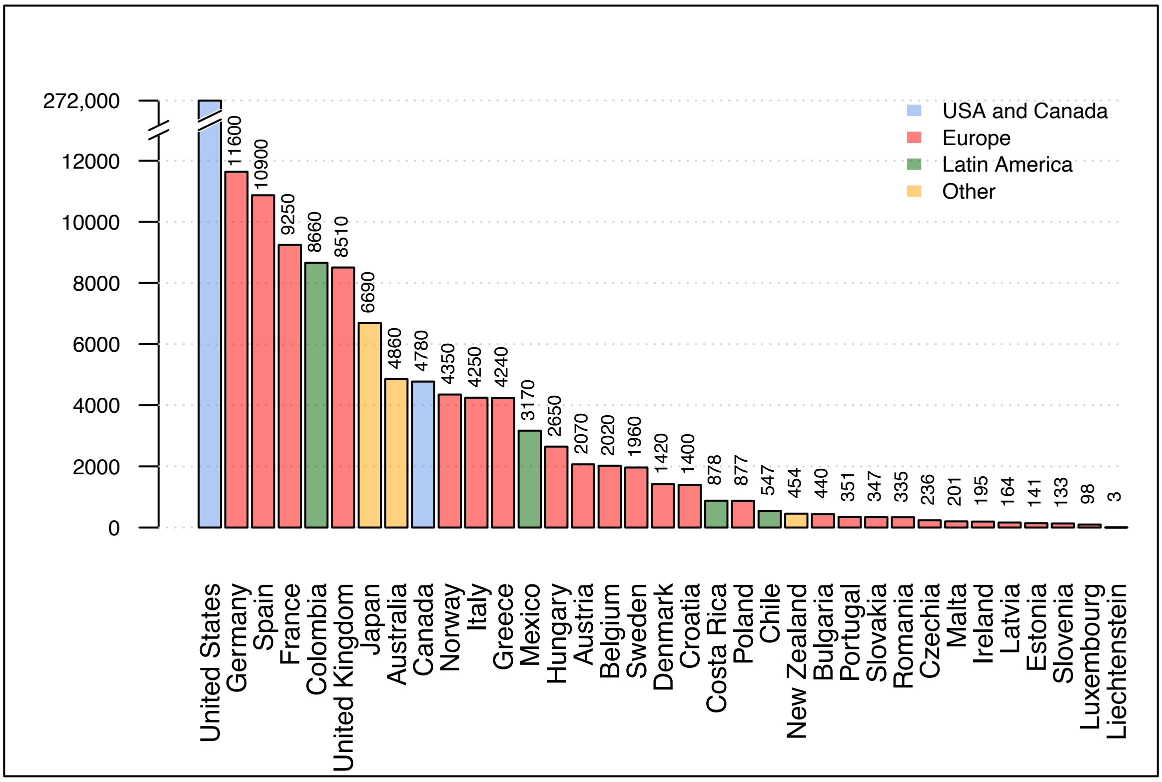


Figure 4 shows the average annual number of returns for the same period (2014 to 2022), but for the indicator of "other reported returns". This indicator refers to all the returns that have been reported but that are of a less coercive nature and do not fall under the definition of enforced returns in Figure 3. These numbers may include voluntary return after having received an order to leave; or assisted return schemes. Two countries report numbers of return under this category that are significantly larger than the rest; and we use broken axis for the purpose of presentation: The U.S. and Mexico. In the U.S., these are typically cases where residence permits have been revoked (for instance due to criminal conduct) and led to a process of "administrative returns" distinct from a "removal procedure"; hence no detention and no physical force was applied. Mexico reported the second highest numbers of annual average returns over this period (119 thousand), classified as consented return. More than 95% of the annual average returns from Mexico were directed towards three countries of Central America that are also among the top targets of enforced returns from the United States: Honduras (49,873), Guatemala (46,415) and El Salvador (17,704). Almost all these returns were realized in the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. This illustrates important challenges in terms of how returns should be compared and assessed across countries: It raises questions, on the one hand, with respect to what constitutes "voluntariness" and the choices being available to those counted as assisted or consented returns. If migrants fail to consent, the default coercive threat is often an enforced return. In that case, the numbers for "consented return" mask what may otherwise turn into an enforced return. A strict dichotomy between "enforced" and "voluntary" or consented forms of return is therefore hard to defend. Rather, migrants face different degrees of coerciveness or capacities to resist return, that shape selection into categories of return (Leerkes et al. 2017; Kalir 2017; Cleton and Chauvin 2020). Second, it raises question to how countries' administrative rules and procedures affect classification into "assisted" or "voluntary" schemes; and how the lack of consent are dealt with in each country.

For the case of European countries, rankings notably differ in Figure 3 (enforced returns) compared to Figure 4. In all three European countries that rank highest in terms of "other returns" (United Kingdom, Sweden and Poland), average numbers for "other returns" are larger than the numbers reported as enforced returns. This reflects country differences in terms of selection of returns into either enforced schemes, or into assisted or voluntary schemes. It may also respond to differences in reporting practices, because not all actual returns are necessarily registered and reported, reflecting countries' difficulties of tracking mobile populations (Wahba 2022).

Figure 4: Average Annual Number of Other Reported Returns, By Country, Period 2014-2022

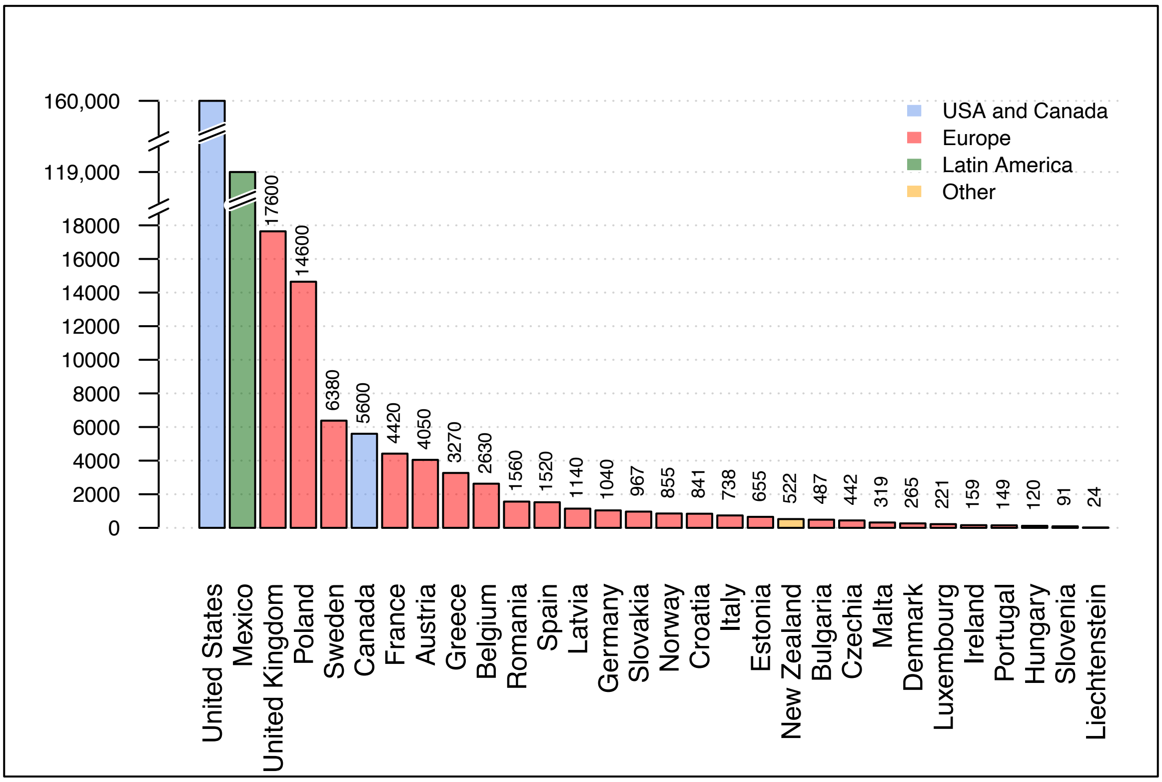
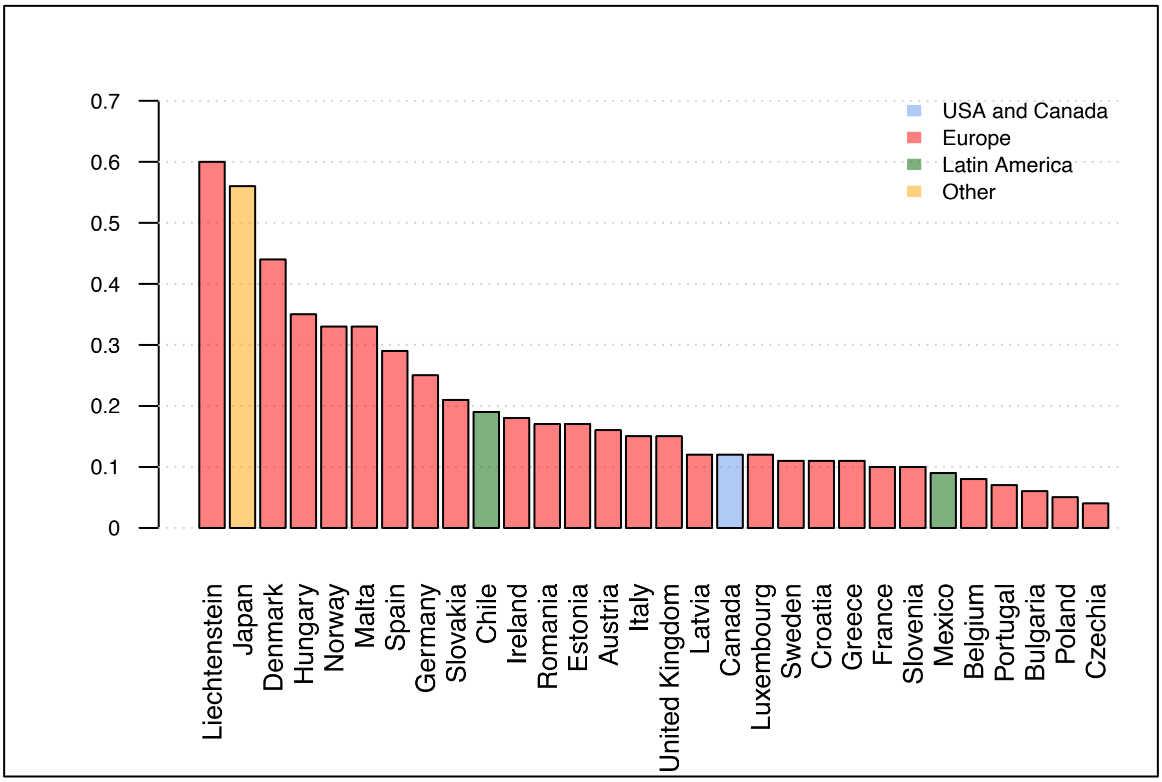


Figure 5 shows what has been coined as enforcement gaps in the litearature (Gibney 2008; Stutz and Trauner 2022): the relation of enforced returns relative to orders to leave, over the years for which data is available. Here, we only report countries who emit and report an order to leave prior to an enforcement action. This allow us to compare those who have been targeted for return to those who have been forced to return. The numerator only includes those who have been exposed to an enforcement action, i.e. it does not include those who returned voluntarily after having received an order to leave; or those who returned under assisted schemes. The gap between ordered and enforced returns varies widely from almost 0.6 in the case of Japan (leaving aside the case of Liechtenstein which reported less than 7 orders to leave per year) and less than 0.1 in Mexico, Belgium, Portugal, Bulgaria, Poland and the Czech Republic.

Figure 5: Enforced Returns relative to Orders to Leave, Period 2014 to 2022

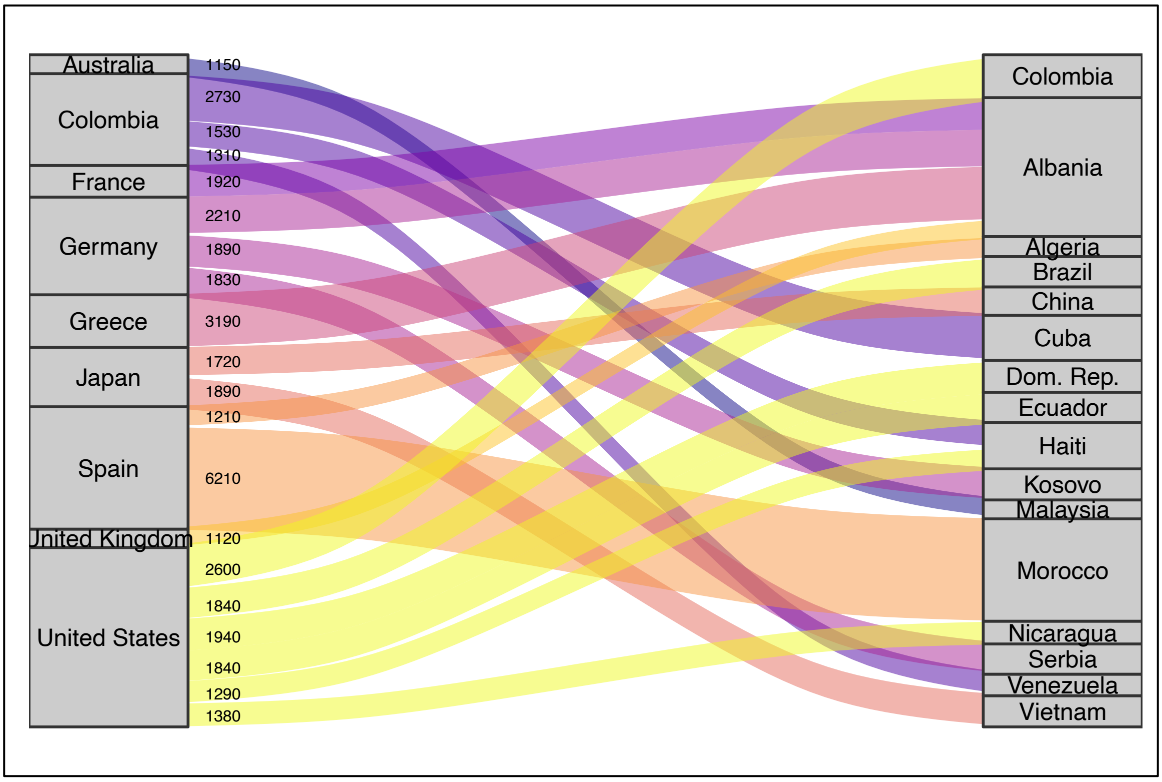


Main Deportation Corridors

Whereas the previous section focused on aggregate numbers for countries, this section highlights patterns for bilateral pairs of deporting countries and countries of citizenship. Here, we limit the analysis to our main indicator of "enforced returns"; and we restrict the section to a description of cross-sectional variation in corridors, not on their temporal dimensions.

Figure 6 shows average annual enforced returns for a selection of top corridors all as average annual rounded values between 2014 and 2021. The top 4 corridors from the U.S. to Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala have already been included in Figure 1 (with time variation) and are therefore excluded from Figure 6. For the sake of comparison: The rounded annual average number of enforced returns in these Top 4 corridors are 176 thousand (Mexico), 33 thousand (Guatemala), 23 thousand (Honduras) and 16 thousand (El Salvador). Their joint numbers of average annual returns are more than 6 times the combined annual average enforced returns of all the 20 corridors shown in Figure 6 (41 thousand). Leaving aside these Top 4 corridors, bilateral pairs between deporting countries and countries of citizenship show a relatively diverse pattern. The Top 10 corridors in absolute average numbers include, in addition to these four, Spain-Morocco (6,210), Greece-Albania (3,190), Colombia-Cuba (2,600), USA-Colombia (1,940), Germany-Albania (2,210) and US-Dominican Republic (1,940).

Figure 6: Flow Chart of Average Annual Enforced Returns along the Main Corridors, excluding the Top 4 Corridors from U.S. to Mexico, Honduras Guatemala and El Salvador



So far, all data presented has been in absolute terms, giving greater prominence to larger countries and corridors. One way to visualize their relative importance is to express the numbers relative to the size of each country's diaspora—measured as the foreign-born population from each origin country residing in each destination in 2020, based on the World Bank's Global Bilateral Migration Matrix—and relative to the origin-country population size in 2020, based on population numbers from the World Development Indicators. Although the foreign-born population does not distinguish by legal status and therefore provides limited insight into the deportation risk of migrants, it allows us to place the absolute numbers into perspective.

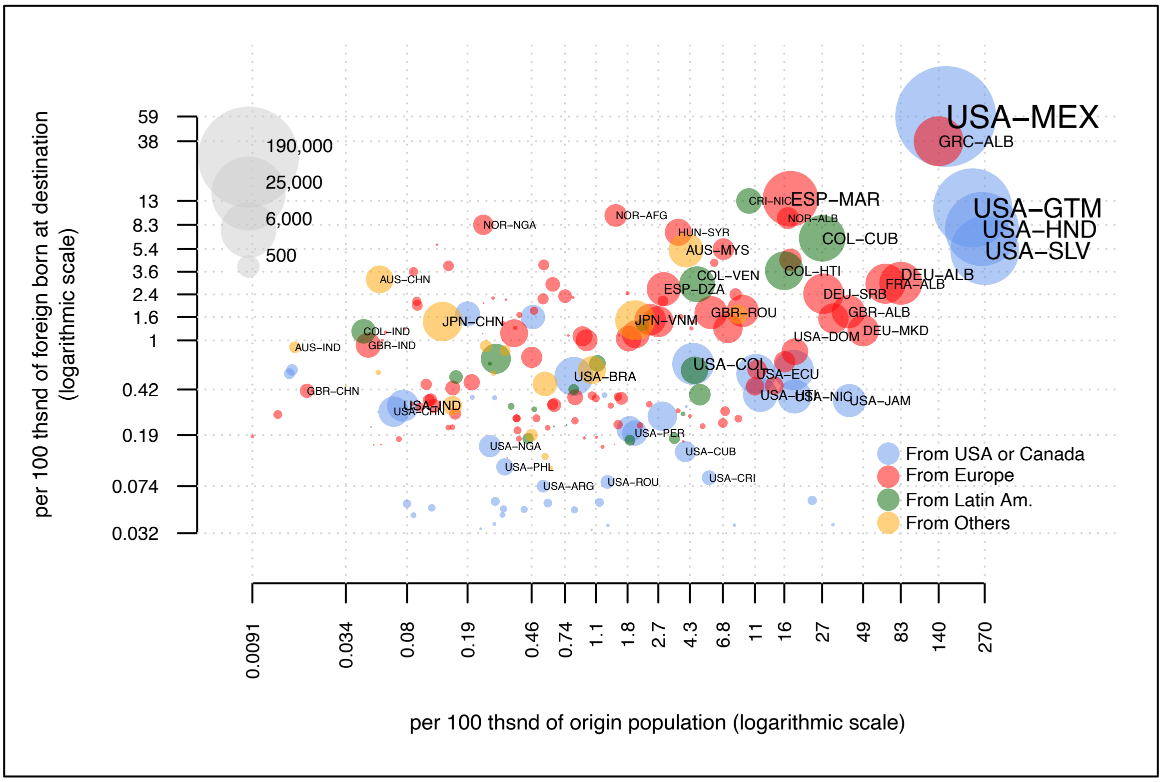
Figure 7 plots the 200 largest corridors of enforced returns according to these two indicators. The vertical axis shows the average annual number of enforced returns (2014–2022) relative to the foreign-born population, while the horizontal axis relates them to the origin-country population size. Circle sizes are proportional to the absolute size of the deportation corridors (the smallest depicted correspond to around 100 annual enforced returns). For clarity of presentation, both axes are shown on a logarithmic scale, which compresses differences between the largest corridors (positioned at the top and to the right) and the rest. Selected corridors are labeled, and the colors of the dots indicate the region of the deporting country.

The graph reveals that the largest corridors in absolute size (the top four) also dominate in relative terms, with the notable difference that the three small Central American countries stand out when measured relative to their origin-country populations. The corridors with the highest ratios of enforced returns per origin-country population are El Salvador, with an annual average of 270 enforced returns per 100,000 persons of that nationality, followed by Honduras (260) and Guatemala (228). It should be noted that these figures relate annual flows to population stocks. To gauge the cumulative scale of forced returns: the total number of enforced returns reported from the United States to El Salvador between 2000 and 2022 (approximately 360,000) corresponds to more than 5 percent of the country's current population of 6.3 million.

Enforced returns to Central America are followed in relative importance by three corridors from European countries to Albania—specifically from Greece, Germany, and France. Combined, enforced returns along these three corridors are larger relative to Albania's population than those from the United States to El Salvador or Honduras, amounting to 290 enforced returns per 100,000 Albanians at origin. The cumulative total of all enforced returns to Albania since 2014 (around 130,000) likewise represents more than 5 percent of its current population of 2.4 million.

The largest corridors relative to diaspora size (i.e. relative to those born in the origin country but living at destination) are from the USA to Mexico, followed by Greece-Albania, Spain-Morocco, Costa Rica-Nicaragua, USA-Guatemala and from Norway to Afghanistan, Albania, and Nigeria. The latter highlights that for corridors that are of relatively small absolute size, deportation risk can still be large relative to the underlying populations potentially vulnerable to enforced returns.

Figure 7: Top 200 Corridors of Enforced Returns, Relative to Diaspora Size and Origin Country Population, Logarithmic Scale



Summary of Key Patterns and Puzzles

Two main observations emerge from the mapping of enforcement intensities. First, comparing deportation data across jurisdictions remains challenging. The relative importance of returns classified as consented differs substantially, as do the administrative procedures behind return processes. In one case—Mexico—"voluntary" or "assisted" returns far outnumber those classified as "enforced returns," while in several EU countries, the share of "other returns," which are less coercive, also varies widely in comparison to enforced ones. These differences reflect distinct policy choices but also raise important questions about the comparability of indicators across contexts.

Second, deportation risk varies considerably. Enforcement intensities fluctuate over time and differ markedly across countries and bilateral corridors. Four U.S.–Latin American corridors dominate all others in terms of volume: enforced returns to Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador from the United States account for 67% of all annual enforced returns captured in our dataset, on average, during the period 2014–2022 (248,000 annual average enforced returns out of a total average of 371,000 annual enforced returns captured across all countries with available data). Albania is the only other origin country for which returns reach a similar magnitude relative to its population size, though not in absolute terms. When measured relative to the foreign-born population at destination, several other corridors with smaller absolute numbers stand out as having comparatively high enforcement risks. In terms of temporal variation, Figure 1 illustrates shifting dynamics for the United States, but changes in enforcement intensities over time can also be observed for other countries and corridors.

IV. What explains Variation in Enforcement Intensities?

The variation in the intensity and types of enforcement between countries, for different corridors within countries, and over time, poses a puzzle. While a systematic analysis across many cases and periods remains scarce, case studies and comparative research has proposed explanations at three analytical levels: the profile of migrant populations, the characteristics of the deporting state, and the cooperation of origin states (Trauner 2018; Sinnige et al. 2025)

Migrant Profiles: The profile of migrants – legal status, nationality, age or gender - affects their likelihood of being selected into enforced returns through several mechanisms. On the one hand, undocumented migrants or those with expired, denied or revoked residency permits constitute the pool of potential deportees; and the likelihood of qualifying for refugee status, visa programs or residence permits overlaps with migrants' citizenship and demographic profiles. In addition, research has pointed to discriminatory or selective practices in enforcement, showing that deportation regimes disproportionately target certain nationalities and racialized groups, making some migrants more visible and politically expedient targets than others (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Menjívar et al. 2018). On the other hand, citizenship and demographic profiles also affect the likelihood of implementing measures of enforced return. Deporting states may delay or suspend enforcement when returnees would face persecution, insecurity, or inhumane treatment, suggesting that human-rights considerations—

often mediated by the democratic accountability of the deporting state—shape enforcement decisions (Stutz and Trauner 2022); and these consideration interact with demographic profiles (age, gender and family status). In cases where demographic data is available, the profile of deportees is often dominated by younger male adults (e.g. Amuedo-Dorantes and Pozo 2014; Bandiera et al. 2023; Sinnige et al. 2025). At the same time, economic and political conditions at origin also influence migrants' willingness or resistance to return, affecting selection into types of return i.e. whether removal occurs through assisted or forced channels. Individuals who categorically reject return are less likely to participate in "voluntary" or assisted schemes and are therefore more likely to appear among enforced removals (Leerkes et al. 2017; Sinnige et al. 2025).

Characteristics of deporting states: Regarding the characteristics of deporting states, Leerkes and Van Houte (2020, 321) distinguish between enforcement *interests* and enforcement *capacities* of countries. Enforcement interests concern how forced returns relate to core promises of liberal states—security, welfare, and the rule of law—and whether those exposed to deportation risk are perceived as an economic burden, a security threat, or a challenge to national sovereignty.

Declared priorities, however, often reflect dominant migration narratives rather than empirical realities. In the United States for instance, enforcement intensity rose in counties with higher unemployment during the Global Financial Crisis in 2007, when anxieties about labor-market competition with migrants increased (Barrera and Felegi 2025). Yet empirical evidence suggests that undocumented migrant labor supports economic recovery (Borjas 2001; Cadena and Kovak 2016) and that deportations may harm native workers because immigrant labor complements rather than substitutes native employment (East et al. 2023; East and Velásquez 2024). Likewise, heightened immigration enforcement has often been publicly justified as a response to crime; however, studies by Miles and Cox (2014) and Hines and Peri (2019) find no evidence that enforced returns reduced local crime; and foreign-born have a lower incarceration rate than natives (Abramitzky et al. 2023). These findings from the U.S. case suggest that a main motivation behind intensifying enforcement is political signaling—a means to project toughness on immigration—rather than policy responses to objective crime or labor-market dynamics. In line with this interpretation, migration and border control policies have long been described as symbolic or performative responses to native publics' anxieties about migration (Andreas 2022; De Genova 2013). This logic extends to deportations, which have been characterized as spectacles of displaying sovereign enforcement, control, and power

(Mainwaring and Silverman 2017). Deportations thus serve also political purposes, functioning as visible demonstrations of the state's ability to control mobility and uphold the authority of borders (Gibney 2008; De Genova 2010; Leerkes and Broeders 2010). These political incentives to display strength may explain differences between countries, but they may also change over time in response, for instance, to economic variables or a change in political cycles and coalitions.

Next to political signaling, the implementation of enforced returns depends on bureaucratic capacities and the organizational logics of the agencies tasked with enforcement, which can differ across countries (Leerkes and Van Houte 2020) as well as for different subnational units within countries (Leerkes et al. 2013). Bureaucratic actors also have their own interests and routines, which can constrain or amplify political goals. As Ellermann (2005; 2009) shows, variations in enforcement outcomes often depend on how insulated bureaucracies are from political influence and how they mediate between top-down directives and bottom-up pressures, such as local resistance. Migration enforcement is therefore not merely the product of political will or electoral incentives, but also of the institutional infrastructures that sustain, translate, and sometimes resist those directives (Wong 2015). In the U.S., federal programs such as Secure Communities and 287(g) have expanded bureaucratic capacity and coordination between federal and local actors, producing sharp increases in forced returns where implemented (Cox and Miles 2013; East et al. 2023).

Agency of origin states: Finally, the agency of countries of origin plays a decisive role in explaining enforcement outcomes. Deportation is not a unilateral act but a two-sided process requiring cooperation between deporting and receiving states. The effectiveness of deportation regimes thus depends on the willingness of origin countries to readmit their nationals (Gibney 2008; Ellermann 2008; Zanker and Altrogge 2022; Kefale et al. 2025; Zanker 2023). This cooperation is far from automatic: origin states often exercise agency by resisting or delaying enforcement to protect citizens abroad or to extract political or material concessions. While outright refusals to accept deportation flights—such as those by The Gambia in 2019 (Zanker and Altrogge 2022) or Colombia in summer 2025 —represent visible forms of opposition, subtle modes of resistance are more widespread. As Zanker (2023) shows, many governments employ bureaucratic non-compliance, for example by withholding the identification documents necessary for repatriation operations. Such practices constitute forms of bureaucratic resistance or "weapons of the weak" (Qadim 2014), slowing down deportations, increasing enforcement costs, and transforming administrative obstruction into a bargaining tool. Through these tactics, origin states can leverage cooperation on returns to obtain side payments or policy concessions, such as development aid (Ambrosius 2025) or visa facilitation. These dynamics situate deportation enforcement within a broader field of migration diplomacy—the strategic use of countries' control over human mobility as instruments of foreign policy (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019; Tsourapas 2017). Within this framework, migration management intersects with other domains of interstate relations, and origin states—far from being passive recipients—actively shape outcomes through negotiation, delay, and selective cooperation.

These three dimensions to explain variation in enforcement intensities – migrants' profiles, deporting state features and origin country cooperation - are interrelated. For instance, migrant profiles are related to the declared or perceived interest of states in enforcement action, because certain migrant profiles are portrayed as posing a larger burden or threat, and the same holds true to for bureaucratic agency and public opinion within destination countries. Likewise, the behavior of origin states in cooperating—or resisting—return operations is not independent of the behavior or dominant narratives deporting states or the sociodemographic profile of migrant populations who are often important economic pillars for origin countries. Hence, these variables should not necessarily be seen as independent or competing explanations, but part of complementary drivers of enforcement intensities.

V. Conclusions and a Research Agenda

Despite its prominence in policy debates, enforced returns are an understudied theme within migration research. Quantitative analysis for a large number of cases has been rare, due to a lack of comparable data. Recognizing this limitation, this research note is part of an effort of advancing quantitative research on forced returns. As a first step within a larger research agenda, we have been mapping available data and identified promising research venues.

While both the consequences and the drivers of forced returns are under researched, the data presented here is more suitable to study deportations as an outcome variable rather than as an explanatory variable. The reason is that for most countries, aggregate deportation numbers are relatively small, making it difficult to identify effects of enforced returns at the aggregate level of countries. Instead, recent quantitative literature on broader deportation consequence has typically used subnational variation in enforcement intensities for cases where such strategies are feasible and has been limited to the study of deportation corridors from the U.S. to Latin American countries. This literature has found unintended outcomes both in the deporting country (the United States) as well as in migrants' countries of origin (Mexico and El Salvador).

For instance, East et al. (2023) find negative effects on the employment of natives for the case of the U.S. because undocumented migrants are a complement rather than substitute to native labor, hitting in particular those reliant on this work such as middle class women who rely on care work provided by migrants (East and Velásquez 2024). Regarding origin country effects, the difficult post-deportation trajectories of migrants has been well documented in the qualitative literature (Brotherton and Barrios 2009; Silver 2018; Schuster and Majidi 2013; Mojica Madrigal 2017; Khosravi 2017). However, research has yet to come to a clear consensus regarding broader impacts in migrants' communities of origin; an endeavor which has been limited by the availability and quality of data[4].

Country and corridor-level data presented here lends itself to studying the determinants of deportations along the variables and levels of analysis that have been outlined in the previous section. So far, most of the literature has focused on single case studies or the comparative analysis of a small number of cases. The data presented in this research note provides an opportunity to test arguments summarized in the previous section on a broader scale; to identify cross-national regularities in return enforcement; and to explain the puzzle that comes from the data mapping: What explains countries' different enforcement intensities; why are some corridors within countries characterized by larger deportation risks than others; and what explains temporal dynamics of enforcement intensities?

Quantitative approaches, however, face two main challenges. First, comparability: indicators of enforcement often differ across jurisdictions due to variations in legal definitions, administrative procedures, and data collection. The data presented here makes a first – though imperfect – effort of bringing different sources together in one consolidated data set. It is limited

[4] Recent quantitative evidence for Mexico and El Salvador has examined three outcomes of deportations: crime, schooling, and labor. In these two cases, crime rose with deportations (Rozo et al. 2021; Ambrosius 2021; Sviatschi 2022; Ambrosius 2024), attributed to the precariousness that comes with enforced returns in context of limited opportunities, weak states and strong criminal networks. Labor effects are heterogeneous: Wages seem to fall where returnees compete for a limited supply of labor (Pearson 2022; Bandiera et al. 2023; Ambrosius, Quigua, et al. 2025), yet other research has found that firms and communities may also gain from human or physical capital brought back by returnees (Bucheli and Fontenla 2022; Diodato et al. 2023; Osuna Gomez and Medina-Cortina 2023). Research for schooling results in Mexico give a mixed picture: Caballero (2022) finds that the loss of income from migrant remittance raises dropouts (Caballero 2022), while others find a positive effect on schooling indicators from higher deportation risks (Bucheli and Fontenla 2022; Gehrke 2024).

by the data being provided in terms of quality and scope. Many important countries and corridors are omitted, including those between countries of the Global South, due to inexistent or undisclosed administrative data.

Second, like all causal analyses, a quantitative analysis of enforcement intensities requires creative research designs capable of isolating cause-and-effect relationships. Return dynamics are shaped by a multitude of social, political, and economic factors that create endogeneity of explanatory variables with respect to enforcement: For instance, economic and political factors at both origin country and the deporting country may affect the size of the deportable populations due to its attractive or repelling forces; but these same factors are also related to the enforcement regimes and policies. Disentangling these mechanisms remains an important task for future research—especially as enforced return is likely to stay a permanent feature of migration policy toolkits yet remains an underexplored topic in migration studies.

VI. References

Abramitzky, Ran, Leah Platt Boustan, Elisa Jácome, Santiago Pérez, and Juan David Torres. 2023. "Law-Abiding Immigrants: The Incarceration Gap Between Immigrants and the US-Born, 1850–2020." Working Paper 31440. Working Paper Series. National Bureau of Economic Research, July. https://doi.org/10.3386/w31440.

Adamson, Fiona B., and Gerasimos Tsourapas. 2019. "Migration Diplomacy in World Politics." *International Studies Perspectives* 20 (2): 113–28.

Ambrosius, Christian. 2021. "Deportations and the Transnational Roots of Gang Violence in Central America." *World Development* 140 (April): 105373. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105373.

Ambrosius, Christian. 2024. "Violent Crime and the Long Shadow of Immigration Enforcement." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, no. online first. https://doi.org/10.1177/00220027241253511).

Ambrosius, Christian. 2025. "Aid Allocation and Deportation Enforcement." Conference Paper.

Ambrosius, Christian, and Marina Luna. 2025. "DEPRISK Deportation Database." With Universitätsbibliothek der FU Berlin, Justina Lee, Isidora Villegas, Leonardo Montel, Lena Wagner, and Laura Ziegler. Freie Universität Berlin. https://doi.org/10.17169/REFUBIUM-48720.2.

Ambrosius, Christian, Marina Luna, Isidora Villegas, and Justina Lee. 2025. "DEPRISK Deportation Database: Methodological Note." With Universitätsbibliothek der FU Berlin. Preprint, Freie Universität Berlin. 103 Seiten. https://doi.org/10.17169/REFUBIUM-48898.2.

Ambrosius, Christian, Juliana Quigua, and Andrea Velásquez. 2025. *Beyond the Border: Labor Market Effects of US Immigration Enforcement Policies in El Salvador*. https://docs.iza.org/dp18135.pdf.

Amuedo-Dorantes, Catalina, and Susan Pozo. 2014. "On the Intended and Unintended Consequences of Enhanced US Border and Interior Immigration Enforcement: Evidence from Mexican Deportees." *Demography* 51 (6): 2255–79.

Andreas, Peter. 2022. *Border Games: The Politics of Policing the US-Mexico Divide*. 3rd

Edition. Cornell University Press.
Bandiera, Antonella, Lelys Dinarte Diaz, Sandra V. Rozo, Carlos Schmidt-Padilla, María Micaela Sviatschi, and Hernan Winkler. 2023. "The Unintended Consequences of Deportations: Evidence from Firm Behavior in El Salvador." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 71 (4): 1331–58. https://doi.org/10.1086/720760.
Barrera, Sergio, and Brianna Felegi. 2025. "Labor Market Shocks, Minority Population Share, and Immigration Enforcement." https://www.aeaweb.org/conference/2025/program/paper/zQeaRAse.
Borjas, George J. 2001. "Does Immigration Grease the Wheels of the Labor Market?" *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 2001 (1): 69–133.
Brotherton, David C., and Luis Barrios. 2009. "Displacement and Stigma: The Social-Psychological Crisis of the Deportee." *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 5 (1): 29–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659008102061.
Bucheli, José R., and Matías Fontenla. 2022. "The Impact of Return Migration on Economic Development." *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, November 15, 1–45. https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_01273.
Caballero, María Esther. 2022. "The Effects of Immigration Enforcement on Educational Investments in Migrants' Source Regions." Unpublished Manuscript.
Cadena, Brian C., and Brian K. Kovak. 2016. "Immigrants Equilibrate Local Labor Markets: Evidence from the Great Recession." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 8 (1): 257–90.
Cleton, Laura, and Sébastien Chauvin. 2020. "Performing Freedom in the Dutch Deportation Regime: Bureaucratic Persuasion and the Enforcement of 'Voluntary Return.'" *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46 (1): 297–313. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1593819.
Cox, Adam B., and Thomas J. Miles. 2013. "Policing Immigration." *University of Chicago Law Review* 80: 87.
De Genova, Nicholas. 2010. "The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement." In *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement.*, Nicholas de Genova and Nathalie Peutz. https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-deportation-regime.
De Genova, Nicholas. 2013. "Spectacles of Migrant 'Illegality': The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36 (7): 1180–98. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.783710.
Diodato, Dario, Ricardo Hausmann, and Frank Neffke. 2023. "The Impact of Return Migration on Employment and Wages in Mexican Cities." *Journal of Urban Economics* 135: 103557.
East, Chloe N., Annie L. Hines, Philip Luck, Hani Mansour, and Andrea Velásquez. 2023. "The Labor Market Effects of Immigration Enforcement." *Journal of Labor Economics* 41 (4): 957–96. https://doi.org/10.1086/721152.
East, Chloe N., and Andrea Velásquez. 2024. "Unintended Consequences of Immigration Enforcement: Household Services and High-Educated Mothers' Work." *Journal of Human Resources* 59 (5): 1458–502.
Ellermann, Antje. 2005. "Coercive Capacity and The Politics of Implementation: Deportation in Germany and the United States." *Comparative Political Studies* 38 (10): 1219–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414005279117.
Ellermann, Antje. 2008. "The Limits of Unilateral Migration Control: Deportation and Inter-State Cooperation1." *Government and Opposition* 43 (2): 168–89.
Ellermann, Antje. 2009. *States against Migrants: Deportation in Germany and the United States*. Cambridge University Press. https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ipThj08R-

V4C&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq=Ellermann,+Antje.+2009.+States+Against+Migrants:+Deportation+in+Germany+and+the+United+States.+Cambridge:+Cambridge+University+Press.&ots=8_uW_4_kgz&sig=yJoVMpSqlKGiMPWrvQ-BCByuHcU.

Gehrke, Esther. 2024. "Migration Opportunities and Human Capital Investments." Unpublished Manuscript.

Gibney, Matthew J. 2008. "Asylum and the Expansion of Deportation in the United Kingdom." *Government and Opposition* 43 (2): 146–67. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2007.00249.x.

Golash-Boza, Tanya, and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo. 2013. "Latino Immigrant Men and the Deportation Crisis: A Gendered Racial Removal Program." *Latino Studies* 11 (3): 271–92. https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2013.14.

Hamilton, Erin R., Claudia Masferrer, and Paola Langer. 2023. "U.S. Citizen Children De Facto Deported to Mexico." *Population and Development Review* 49 (1): 175–203. https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12521.

Hines, Annie Laurie, and Giovanni Peri. 2019. *Immigrants' Deportations, Local Crime and Police Effectiveness*. https://docs.iza.org/dp12413.pdf.

Kalir, Barak. 2017. "Between 'voluntary' Return Programs and Soft Deportation Sending Vulnerable Migrants in Spain Back 'Home.'" In *Return MIgration and Psychosocial Wellbeing*, Zana Vatha and Russel King. Routedge Resarch in Race and Ethnicity. Routledge.

Kefale, Asnake, Jan-Paul Brekke, and Grete Brochmann. 2025. "The Power Switch in Bilateral Return Migration Management: The Case of Norway and Ethiopia." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 51 (15): 3808–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2025.2452263.

Khosravi, Shahram. 2017. *After Deportation: Ethnographic Perspectives*. Springer.

Leerkes, Arjen, James D. Bachmeier, and Mark A. Leach. 2013. "When the Border Is 'Everywhere': State-Level Variation in Migration Control and Changing Settlement Patterns of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States." *International Migration Review* 47 (4): 910–43. https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12047.

Leerkes, Arjen, and Dennis Broeders. 2010. "A Case of Mixed Motives?: Formal and Informal Functions of Administrative Immigration Detention." *The British Journal of Criminology* 50 (5): 830–50. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azq035.

Leerkes, Arjen, and Marieke Van Houte. 2020. "Beyond the Deportation Regime: Differential State Interests and Capacities in Dealing with (Non-) Deportability in Europe." *Citizenship Studies* 24 (3): 319–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2020.1718349.

Leerkes, Arjen, Rianne Van Os, and Eline Boersema. 2017. "What Drives 'Soft Deportation'? Understanding the Rise in Assisted Voluntary Return among Rejected Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands." *Population, Space and Place* 23 (8): e2059. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2059.

Mainwaring, Cetta, and Stephanie J. Silverman. 2017. "Detention-as-Spectacle." *International Political Sociology* 11 (1): 21–38. https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olw016.

Menjívar, Cecilia, William Paul Simmons, Daniel Alvord, and Elizabeth Salerno Valdez. 2018. "Immigration Enforcement, the Racialization of Legal Status, and Perceptions of the Police: Latinos in Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston, and Phoenix in Comparative Perspective." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 15 (1): 107–28.

Miles, Thomas J., and Adam B. Cox. 2014. "Does Immigration Enforcement Reduce Crime? Evidence from Secure Communities." *The Journal of Law and Economics* 57 (4): 937–73. https://doi.org/10.1086/680935.

Mojica Madrigal, Oscar Ariel. 2017. "Sentimientos Encontrados: Acercamiento a Los Procesos De Reinserción De Migrantes Deportados." In *Experiencias Migratorias a Estados Unidos: Estudios Realizados En Michoacán, Puebla y Guerrero.*, Eduardo Santiago

Nabor, Leticia Díaz y Adrián Urióstegui. Universidad de La Ciénega del Estado de Michoacán de Ocampo.
Osuna Gomez, Daniel, and Eduardo Medina-Cortina. 2023. "The Effect of Immigration Enforcement Abroad on Immigrants' Home-Country Firms." *Available at SSRN 4620336*. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4620336.
Pearson, Thomas. 2022. "U.S. Immigration Enforcement and Mexican Labor Markets. Unpublished Manuscript." Unpublished manuscript.
Qadim, Nora El. 2014. "Postcolonial Challenges to Migration Control: French–Moroccan Cooperation Practices on Forced Returns." *Security Dialogue* 45 (3): 242–61. https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614533139.
Rozo, Sandra V., Therese Anders, and Steven Raphael. 2021. "Deportation, Crime, and Victimization." *Journal of Population Economics* 34 (1): 141–66. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-020-00785-3.
Schuster, L., and N. Majidi. 2013. "What Happens Post-Deportation? The Experience of Deported Afghans." *Migration Studies* 1 (2): 221–40. https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mns011.
Silver, Alexis M. 2018. "Displaced at 'Home': 1.5-Generation Immigrants Navigating Membership after Returning to Mexico." *Ethnicities* 18 (2): 208–24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796817752560.
Sinnige, Michael, Laura Cleton, and Arjen Leerkes. 2025. "Determinants of Enforced Return: A Quantitative Analysis of the Spectrum of (In)Voluntariness Among Rejected Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands." *Population, Space and Place* 31 (2): e2886. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2886.
Stutz, Philipp, and Florian Trauner. 2022. "The EU's 'Return Rate' with Third Countries: Why EU Readmission Agreements Do Not Make Much Difference." *International Migration* 60 (3): 154–72. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12901.
Sviatschi, Maria Micaela. 2022. "Spreading Gangs: Exporting US Criminal Capital to El Salvador." *American Economic Review* 112 (6): 1985–2024. https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20201540.
Trauner, Florian. 2018. "Return and Readmission Policy in Europe: Understanding Negotiation and Implementation Dynamics." In *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of Migration in Europe*. Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9781315512853-24/return-readmission-policy-europe-florian-trauner.
Tsourapas, Gerasimos. 2017. "Migration Diplomacy in the Global South: Cooperation, Coercion and Issue Linkage in Gaddafi's Libya." *Third World Quarterly* 38 (10): 2367–85. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1350102.
Wahba, Jackline. 2022. "The Economics of Return Migration." *Handbook of Return Migration*, 24–37.
Wong, Tom K. 2015. *Rights, Deportation, and Detention in the Age of Immigration Control*. With Wong Tom. Stanford University Press.
Zanker, Franzisca. 2023. "A Typology of Resistance: The 'Hot Potato' of European Return in West Africa." *Territory, Politics, Governance*, April 27, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2198579.
Zanker, Franzisca, and Judith Altrogge. 2022. "Protective Exclusion as a Postcolonial Strategy: Rethinking Deportations and Sovereignty in the Gambia." *Security Dialogue* 53 (5): 475–93. https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106221119598.