Description: Controlling migrants' time—or stealing it, as some observers suggest—is built into the structure of migration governance. In the United States, the state forces some prospective border crossers to wait years for a visa, asylum, or refugee resettlement, just as it mandates rigid temporal eligibility criteria for deferred action and legalization programs, legal permanent residency, and naturalization for those already here. While less immediately evident, contemporary US border enforcement policy also contributes to state control over migrants' time, in particular for undocumented people, approximately half of whom are from Mexico. Since the mid-1990s, a policy of “prevention through deterrence” at the US-Mexico border has closed off historically-frequented urban crossing points to funnel border crossers to remote, depopulated regions where thousands die in hostile natural environments. Those who manage to cross are sealed in, cementing permanent settlement during a decades-long stalemate on immigration reform. As a result, 83 percent of undocumented Mexicans in the United States have lived here for more than ten years. The largest age group in the unauthorized population today is 30-39—those who came to the US as young adults, have transitioned to middle life, and now ponder old age, all under the oppressive conditions of “illegality.” Centering on three waves of interviews of undocumented and middle aged Mexicans (N=50) between 2016-2022, this talk investigates the social, personal, and political costs of the state’s monopolization of migrants’ time and imposition of waiting for legal status.

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