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# Trafficking in Persons Along Mexico's Eastern Migration Routes:

## The Role of Transnational Criminal Organizations

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to understand the role of transnational organized crime in human trafficking along Mexico's eastern migration routes, from Central America to Mexico's northeastern border.<sup>1</sup> In this region, drug traffickers are smuggling and trafficking unauthorized migrants in order to diversify their revenue streams. This project analyzes the new role of Central American gangs and Mexican-origin drug trafficking organizations—now known as transnational criminal organizations (TCOs)<sup>2</sup>—in the trafficking of persons from Central America to Mexico's northeastern border.

### INTRODUCTION

The involvement of transnational organized crime in the trafficking of undocumented migrants in transit from Central America to the United States is a key hemispheric problem that has not been well understood, nor appropriately investigated to date. Many researchers and public officials interested in this phenomenon have relied on informants of dubious credibility and on informal sources that have not been appropriately verified nor systematized. Extensive field research is needed to better understand this phenomenon that involves formal and informal transnational actors, generates billions of dollars in profits, and represents a very complex human problem.

\*This study was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Department of State. The contents are the responsibility of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of State or the United States government.

The massacre of 72 migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, Mexico in 2010, and recently documented cases of sex trafficking and labor trafficking (including compelled labor for criminal activities) along the migration routes—that allegedly involve transnational criminal organizations (TCOs)—show the extent of the problem, expose serious limitations of the justice systems in our continent, and reveal the need to further investigate these phenomena.

The present project tries to determine the extent to which the involvement of TCOs in trafficking of migrants is opportunistic or is more premeditated and systemic and if TCOs (including drug cartels and transnational criminal gangs) have moved into the business of trafficking. This research helps to create a more nuanced, theoretical understanding of human trafficking that takes into account the range of activities that lead migrants into situations where they are coerced into performing activities without compensation by TCOs.

While the phenomena of “human trafficking” and “migrant smuggling” are clearly delineated legally in both the United Nation’s Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants—particularly along Mexico’s eastern migration routes, the law often operates on a highly subjective framework that fails to incorporate the multiple and immense types of coercion people face. By conducting interviews with migrants who may or may not have been in situations where these types of pressures may have been applied, it is possible to achieve a clearer understanding about how these situations develop and how different people react to these high-impact crimes.

This brief report shows some of the key findings, maps, conclusions, and recommendations related to this project. Such information was obtained through an 18 month J/TIP research grant that involved extensive field research to understand the role of transnational organized crime in the trafficking of migrants in the “Northern Triangle” of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) and along Mexico’s eastern migration routes.

## **PROJECT STATEMENT**

As the clandestine organization of migrants along Mexico’s eastern migration routes, from the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) to Mexico’s northeastern border is now controlled—or influenced to a large extent—by TCOs, the abuse of migrants, and more importantly, their vulnerability to trafficking, is becoming increasingly evident. Events such as the brutal massacre of 72 migrants on August 25, 2010 in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, and the discovery of dozens of safe/stash houses (a house where weapons, drugs and undocumented migrants are kept) along Mexico’s northern border in the past couple of years demonstrate that drug trafficking, migrant smuggling, and trafficking in persons are becoming inextricably linked in unprecedented ways (Correa-Cabrera and Garrett, 2012).

<sup>1</sup> This project uses the legal definition of trafficking in persons from the Trafficking Victim Protection Act, which states that “severe forms of trafficking in persons” means: (a) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or (b) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. The term “sex trafficking” means the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act (TVPA, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The term “drug trafficking organizations” (DTOs) has recently fallen out of use to the more updated term of “transnational criminal organizations” (TCOs). Hence, we will use this last term in the present project to describe the various drug cartels vying for hegemony in Mexico.

The newly evolving relationship between undocumented migration, human trafficking, and Mexican-origin TCOs has been understudied by academics and government officials. Scholars, journalists and government authorities report that TCOs (such as the Zetas, the Gulf Cartel, and the Knights Templar), have expanded their repertoire of illegal revenue generating activities to include extortion, migrant smuggling, and human trafficking for the purposes of labor, sexual exploitation and bodily organ harvesting (McAdams, 2009; Risley, 2010; Shirk and Webber, 2004; Texas Attorney General's Office, 2011; U.S. Department of State, 2012 and 2013).

In addition, experts have documented that Mexico is a source, transit and destination country for trafficking in persons. Trafficking patterns in Mexico have to some extent been documented (ABA-ROLI, 2009; Acharya and Stevanato, 2005; Acharya, 2006; Mc Adams 2009; Clark, 2012; ECPAT, 2004; Protection Project, 2010). No studies however, have provided any information on the recent role of drug cartels/TCOs in the trafficking of persons. Moreover, little attention, has been given to this phenomenon along Mexico's eastern migration routes, which are becoming increasingly important. What is more, no quantitative analyses exist on the subject in the specific case of Mexico.

While increasing attention has been paid to the phenomenon of migrant smuggling (Castro, 1998; Spener, 2009; Izcara, 2012), trafficking in persons and organized crime, most of the existing literature makes claims about organized crime involvement without providing sufficient supporting evidence. In fact, researchers and policy makers have little understanding or reliable knowledge regarding how these phenomena are linked (Bruckert and Parent, 2002; and Kangaspunta, 2003; Gozdiak and Bump, 2008; and UNDOC, 2010). The existing literature lacks empirical data and policy makers often make broad estimates of the scale of involvement of TCOs in human trafficking and migrant smuggling without providing much supporting evidence (i.e. Hodge and Lietz, 2007; Risely, 2010; Shannon, 1999).

Of the more well-documented published studies that explicitly address the relationship between organized criminal groups and human trafficking (i.e. Caldwell, et. al., 1999; Zhang and Chin, 2004; Finckenauer, 2001) the focus has been on Russian or Chinese organized crime and there has been almost no analysis of the involvement of Mexican-origin TCOs/ drug cartels. The proposed research is extremely relevant precisely because the existent literature on human trafficking and organized crime does not consider Mexican drug trafficking organizations that have greatly expanded their scope of activities and geographical outreach to become transnational criminal organizations.



## PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The present research was based on the following two goals and six objectives:

### Goal 1

To identify the role that Mexican TCOs play in labor and sex and trafficking in order to improve government authorities' interdiction of traffickers.

### Objective 1

To determine which Mexican-origin TCOs have expanded their repertoire of illegal revenue generating activities to include human trafficking for the purposes of labor and forced prostitution.

### Objective 2

To assess the percentage of migrants that have been forced by TCOs to participate in criminal activities or prostitution.

### Objective 3

To identify the linkages between Mexican TCOs and labor and sex trafficking rings.

### Objective 4

To better understand the phenomenon of "forced labor for criminal activities" along the migration routes (among these activities are: production, transportation and sale of illicit drugs, execution of violence, and surveillance activities for these organizations).

### Goal 2

To assess the level of collaboration between Mexican-origin TCOs, transnational criminal gangs and other paramilitary groups in compelled labor and forced prostitution to improve international and intra-national efforts to combat trafficking of migrants in Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> A recent report by U.S. Customs and Border Protection published by the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) notes that apprehensions of non-Mexicans in the United States has tripled between 2011-2013, with the epicenter of migration shifting from Tucson, Arizona to the South Texas border (Isacson, 2014).

### Objective 1

To determine which specific transnational criminal gangs (e.g., El Salvador's Maras) and other paramilitary groups (e.g., Guatemala's Kaibiles) collaborate with Mexican-origin TCOs (such as the Gulf Cartel and the Zetas in sex trafficking, forced labor for criminal activities, and other forms of labor trafficking).

### Objective 2

To determine which specific activities these other groups perform in the dynamics of human trafficking in these regions and to identify the routes in which they operate (maps were attached in last report).

## **METHODOLOGY**

Due to the inherently hidden nature of organized crime, and the great limitations in quantifying and analyzing illicit activities, qualitative and ethnographic methods provide greater insights into these activities than other methodological approaches. Data was collected through individual interviews with migrants in key shelters, prisoners charged with human trafficking crimes, and other relevant actors along Mexico's eastern migration routes. Interviews were also conducted in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras to understand the connections between Central American gangs (or other paramilitary groups like Guatemala's Kaibiles) and trafficking in persons.

In the course of this 18-month study, the research team conducted interviews with migrants (in transit through Mexico and repatriated); prisoners charged with human trafficking crimes; and with law enforcement agents, experts/academics, shelter workers, human rights NGOs/practitioners, and others.

These conversations can be divided into three groups:

- a) Interviews with migrants, shelter workers, and human rights NGOs/practitioners in Tapachula, Chiapas; Tenosique, Tabasco; the migrant routes along the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, Puebla, Tlaxcala, the State of Mexico, Querétaro, Guanajuato, and San Luis Potosí; Saltillo, Torreón, Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila; Reynosa, Matamoros, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas; Monterrey, Nuevo León; and Cancún, Quintana Roo.
- b) Interviews with law enforcement agents, experts/academics, human rights NGOs/practitioners, repatriated migrants, lawyers and prosecutors in Mexico City, Cancún, San Salvador, Guatemala City, Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba.
- c) Interviews with prisoners charged with human trafficking crimes in Tapachula, Chiapas. Interview average duration: approx. 30m-1h.

[Note: the duration of interviews with migrants varied substantially; sometimes migrants were interviewed in groups.]

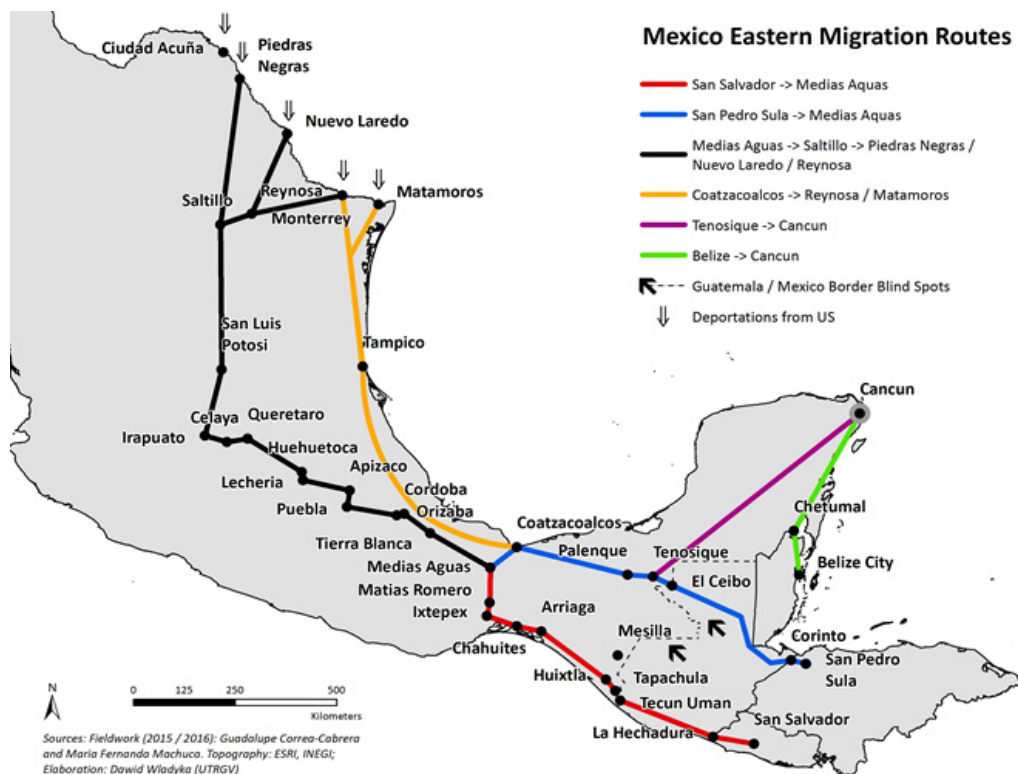
**The researchers visited the following 25 migrant shelters and migrant facilities:**

1. Casa del Migrante Albergue Belén (Tapachula, Chiapas)
2. Centro de Ayuda Humanitaria a Migrantes (Chahuites, Oaxaca)
3. La 72 (Tenosique, Tabasco)
4. Casa del Caminante J’Tatic Samuel Ruiz García (Palenque, Chiapas)
5. “Las Patronas” (Amatlán de los Reyes, Veracruz)
6. La Sagrada Familia (Apizaco, Tlaxcala)
7. Casa del Migrante Frontera con Justicia (Saltillo, Coahuila)
8. Albergue para Migrantes Frontera Digna (Piedras Negras, Coahuila)
9. Casa del Migrante San Juan Diego y San Francisco de Asís (Matamoros, Tamaulipas)
10. Senda de Vida (Reynosa, Tamaulipas)
11. Albergue del Migrante Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe (Reynosa, Tamaulipas)
12. Casa del Migrante Nazareth (Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas)
13. Casanicolás (Monterrey, Nuevo León)
14. Hermanos en el Camino (Ixtepec, Oaxaca)
15. Estancia del Migrante González y Martínez (comedor or soup kitchen; Tequisquiapan, Querétaro)
16. Casa Tochan (Mexico City)
17. Todo por Ellos shelter (Tapachula, Chiapas)
18. Casa de la Mujer shelter (Tecún Umán, Guatemala)
19. Casa del Indigente Nuestra Señora del Refugio (Matamoros, Tamaulipas).
20. Instituto Salvadoreño del Migrante (INSAMI)
21. Asociación de Retornados Guatemaltecos (ARG)
22. Monseñor Óscar Arnulfo Romero International Airport (El Salvador, San Salvador)
23. La Aurora International Airport (building of Guatemala’s Airforce)
24. Centro de Atención al Migrante Retornado, CAMR) (San Pedro Sula, Honduras)
25. Fundación Ciudad de la Alegría (Cancún, Quintana Roo)

## MAPS: MIGRATION ROUTES, SHELTERS, TRAFFICKING OF MIGRANTS

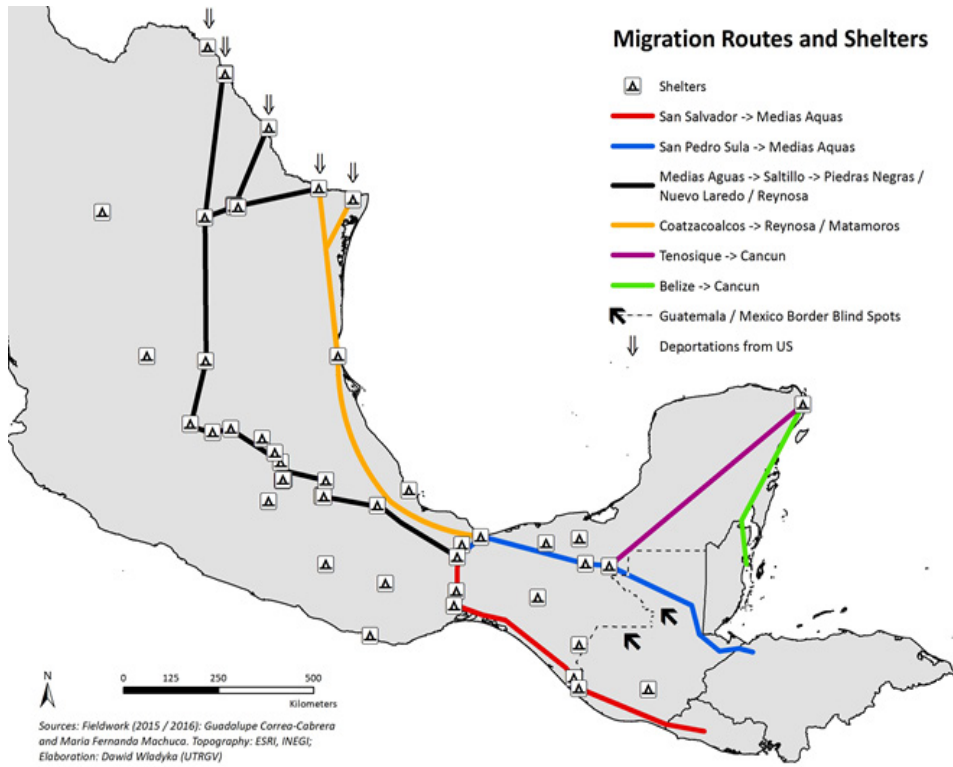
The following five maps identify Mexico's eastern migration routes, migrant shelters along the way, as well as the main human trafficking hubs located along these routes (from the three countries of the Northern Triangle to the Tamaulipas/Coahuila border with Texas). The aim of this exercise is to indicate the specific activities some migrants are forced to perform and the key regions where this happens. These maps differentiate international from domestic human trafficking in Central America and along Mexico's eastern migration routes.

Map 1. Migration routes: Central America and eastern Mexico

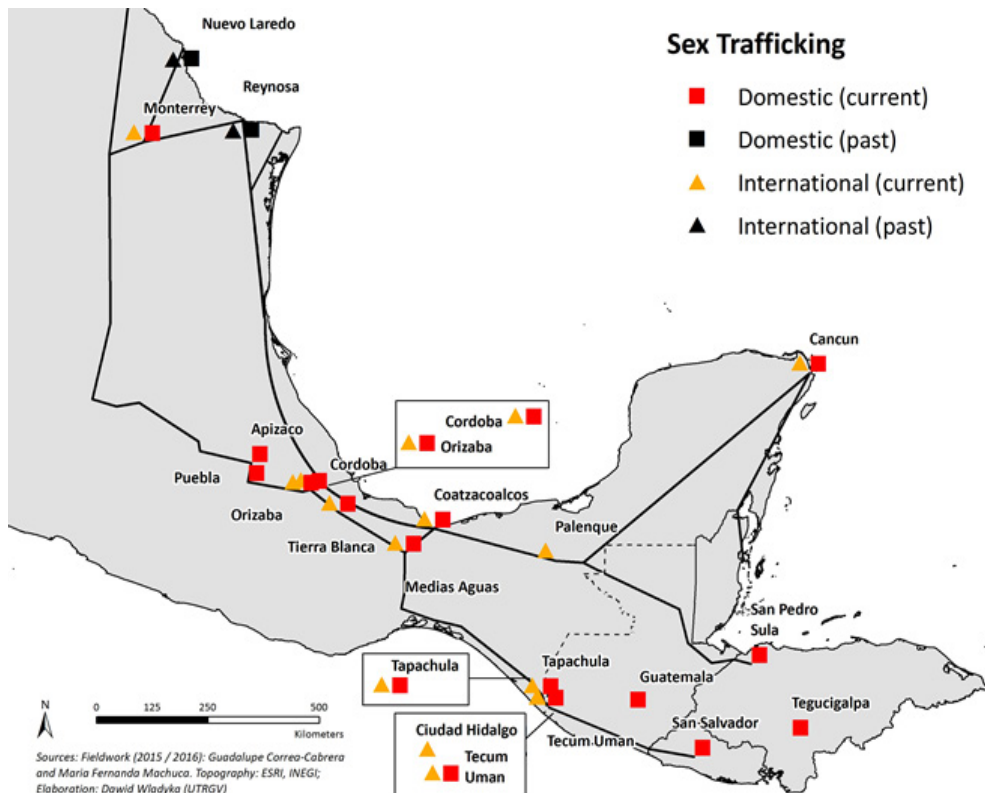




Map 2. Migrant shelters along Mexico's eastern migration routes

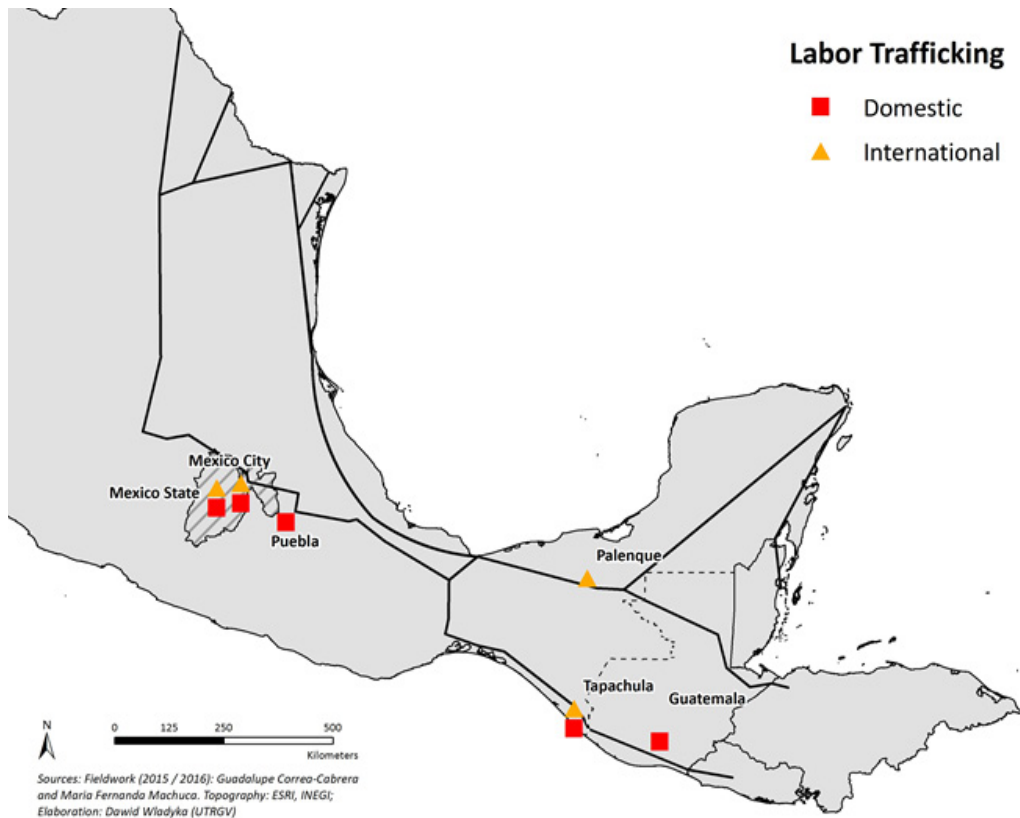


Map 3. Sex trafficking in Central America and along Mexico's eastern migration routes

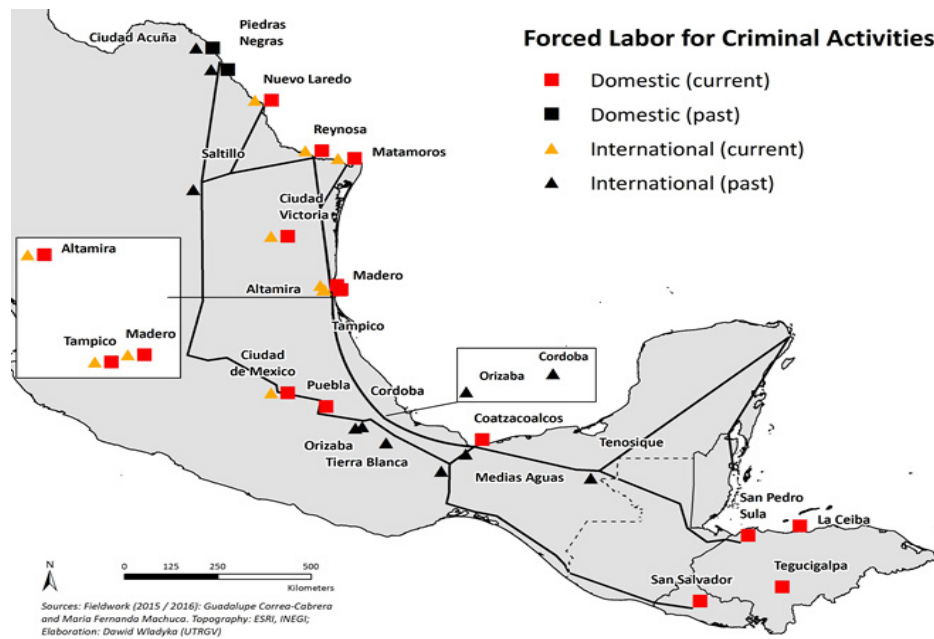


**Map 4. Labor trafficking in Central America and along Mexico's eastern migration routes**

(not including compelled labor for criminal activity)



**Map 5. Forced labor for criminal activity in Central America and along Mexico's eastern migration routes**



## CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, & NEXT STEPS

### Concluding remarks:

- Cases of sex trafficking and labor trafficking along Mexico's eastern migration routes—that involve Mexican drug cartels and other criminal groups—are intimately linked to migrant smuggling.
- Massive forced displacements of Central American people escaping from violence and extreme poverty significantly increase vulnerability of victims of human trafficking.
- The relationship between drug cartels and independent labor/sex trafficking rings seems to be mainly opportunistic. We have essentially found that human trafficking rings and drug trafficking organizations operate separately, but collaborate. They specialize in certain activities in order to maximize benefits. In sum, these groups collaborate, but are not managed by the same people.
- There are severe limitations of the justice systems in Mexico and Central America that prevent efforts to combat human trafficking (and particularly trafficking of migrants) in this region.

### Recommendations:

- Shorter term: more investigations are necessary in violent and corrupt areas where the rule of law is almost non-existent. Examples of such areas are the cities of Reynosa, Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo in Tamaulipas, where cartels allegedly have forced migrants in transit and deportees to commit crimes, and Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz, where the collusion between organized crime and state and local authorities is evident.
- Mexico hasn't conducted investigations on Cancún's growing organized crime issue. The state and municipal governments refuse to address human trafficking in the city in order to protect its tourism industry.
- Longer term: Mexico must update its anti-human trafficking legislation and bring it up to international standards.
- The United States might want to rethink or rearrange its deportation policy and stop or drastically reduce deportations to cities where deportees are likely to be trafficked and exploited.
- Some migrant shelters might facilitate the operations of migrant smugglers and traffickers. There is an urgent need to further investigate these phenomena.
- The role of certain NGOs, human rights activists and service providers in promoting re-victimization of human trafficking victims should also be further investigated.

### **Next Steps & Further Research:**

A plausible second stage of the present project would be to analyze trafficking of Central American and Mexican migrants in the United States. It would be interesting to investigate the involvement (if any) of transnational criminal organizations (drug cartels and Central American gangs) in trafficking of migrants on the U.S. side of the border and transportation of human trafficking victims from their countries of origin to and within the United States.

The present study can also be enriched and complemented with further information. Due to the changing dynamics along the migration routes, and the increased utilization of smugglers by migrants to traverse Mexico, the information related to trafficking of migrants that can be obtained from migrants at the shelters along the routes is limited. Smugglers do not necessarily utilize shelters; they have their own safe locations along the route. Many of the migrants found in the shelters are those who travel alone.

It would be useful to talk to more migrant smugglers and human traffickers in Mexican prisons. Despite all our efforts, UTRGV's research team was not able to gain permission by Mexican authorities to the prisons to interview a larger number of traffickers and smugglers. It would be also desirable to examine federal trafficking cases in Mexico, selected by Mexican federal prosecutors that have been investigated or prosecuted under the Organized Crime Law. Further efforts to get access to and analyze all these cases must be done.

Also, it came to our attention that the following agencies, DHS: Homeland Security Investigations, Blue Campaign, and CBP are tasked with identifying/tracking victims of trafficking. Their information would complement very well our current findings. In addition, USCIS adjudicates the T visa applications and would certainly have data regarding those who seek T protection; this information would be pertinent to the present study as well.

Regarding the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR): 1) every child who comes into care completes a trafficking assessment with a child care worker/social worker and 2) every child that may have been a victim of trafficking either in home country, in route, or upon entry to the U.S. is referred to the ORR Office of Trafficking in Persons. Lawyers, child advocates, and social service providers – also refer minors to this office who are victims of trafficking. The office, upon referral, determines whether the child is in fact a victim, and if so, issues a T eligibility letter. We tried to approach these agencies to attempt to gain access to this wealth of data, but unfortunately we were unsuccessful in this endeavor. If one has access to this data one might be able to better analyze trends and patterns of what is happening along the migration routes related to trafficking and organized crime.

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For more information on this project, please visit:

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