

THE REGIONAL MIGRATION STUDY GROUP

TRANSNATIONAL CRIME IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA:

ITS EVOLUTION AND ROLE IN INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

By Steven Dudley



Woodrow Wilson
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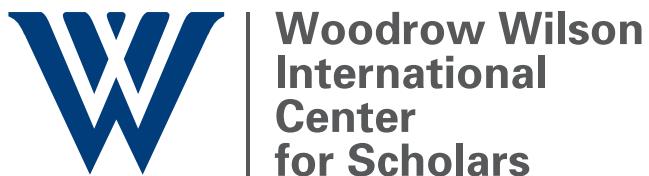
10th ANNIVERSARY

MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE

TRANSNATIONAL CRIME IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA: Its Evolution and Role in International Migration

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November 2012



Acknowledgments

Christopher Looft helped research this paper. The author thanks the members and staff of the Regional Migration Study Group and the participants in the study group's March 2012 meeting for comments on earlier versions of this report.

This research has been made possible through the generous support of the Tinker Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Open Society Foundations.

This report was produced for the March 2012 meeting of the Regional Migration Study Group convened by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) and the Latin American Program of the Woodrow Wilson Center. The Study Group, a three-year initiative, will act as a virtual think tank to the policymakers and civil-society officials in the United States, Mexico, and Central America who manage day-to-day migration relations and other issues related to human capital and global competitiveness. The Study Group's mission, membership, and research can be found at: www.migrationpolicy.org/regionalstudygroup.

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Cover Photo: Modified version of North American map (2725801) – BigStockPhoto.com
Cover Design: Burke Speaker, MPI
Typesetting: April Siruno, MPI

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Suggested citation: Dudley, Steven. 2012. *Transnational Crime in Mexico and Central America: Its Evolution and Role in International Migration*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.



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Executive Summary

The growth of organized crime in Mexico and Central America has led to an increase in violence and insecurity across the region, posing challenges to citizens, public security forces, and travelers. Migrants crossing the region are especially vulnerable.

Many Mexican criminal organizations date their origins to the 1960s when the volume of contraband goods being smuggled into the United States achieved significant volumes. However, as cocaine from South America began transiting the country in the 1970s and 1980s, Mexican criminal organizations grew in importance and complexity. Although the first criminal organizations consisted of small family-based groups, increasing revenues and competition for markets and territory drove them to recruit outside close-knit communities and to develop sophisticated armed forces. Over time, as the costs associated with these private security forces escalated, many became independent of the criminal organizations that had spawned them, achieving operational and financial autonomy. As a result, Mexico's criminal landscape became increasingly chaotic and fragmented.

In Central America, the civil wars of the 1980s laid the groundwork for local criminal groups to establish themselves in the region. Illegal corridors and porous border crossings used by rebel groups to transport contraband during the wars later developed into drug routes for traffickers. The postwar dissolution of state security and intelligence forces left many experienced military officers and officials available for hire, often by criminal groups. Many former guerilla fighters were familiar with the local terrain and began to engage in illegal activities such as the trafficking of weapons, humans, and drugs. At the same time, migrants who had been deported from the United States for participating in street gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Barrio 18 replicated their criminal activities in Central America.

The rise of organized crime in Mexico and the Northern Triangle has dramatically increased the risks that migrants face as they attempt to cross the region. Although the estimates are unreliable and widely contested, according to Mexico's National Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH), about 20,000 migrants are kidnapped each year by criminal organizations; other informal estimates suggest that the number might be much lower, in the hundreds annually. Discouraged by the rising threats posed by Mexican drug traffickers, Central American gangs, and corrupt government officials, migrants are encountering greater risks in undertaking the journey. Those who continue to risk it are increasingly forced to seek the assistance of intermediaries known as *polleros*, or "coyotes." Migrants who are unable to afford a coyote are more likely to be abused or kidnapped, and held for ransom along the way.

The rise of organized crime in Mexico and the Northern Triangle has dramatically increased the risks that migrants face as they attempt to cross the region.

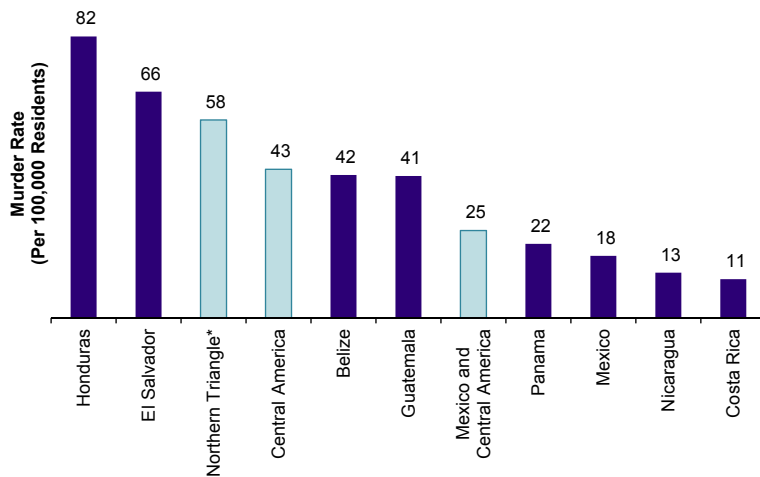


I. Introduction

Mexico and Central America have emerged as one of the most dangerous areas on the planet outside of active war zones. The region is currently confronting unprecedented security challenges from street gangs, the growing presence of sophisticated criminal organizations and endemic corruption at all levels of law enforcement and government. These challenges are not new, but they are growing in intensity and visibility. As the risks to human security increase, so does the vulnerability of migrants who cross the region moving northward toward the United States. The dangers have become particularly vivid in Mexico, where unknown numbers of Mexican, Central American, and South American migrants have been killed or gone missing, presumably at the hands of criminal actors or corrupt public officials. Many more are victims of extortion, rape, and other crimes.

The homicide rate in Central America now stands at just over 40 per 100,000 residents — more than twice the homicide rate in Mexico (18 per 100,000 residents), a country that receives considerably more international media attention for high levels of crime and violence. Most of the homicides in Central America are concentrated in the Northern Triangle countries — Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras — where murder rates average 58 per 100,000 residents (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Murder Rate in Central America and Mexico per 100,000 Residents, 2010



*Northern Triangle comprises El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Source: Murder data compiled by UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “UNODC Homicide Statistics, 2012,” <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=UNODC&f=tableCode%3A1>; population estimates drawn from the Population Reference Bureau.

By comparison, in the United States the homicide rate peaked at 10 per 100,000 residents in 1980 and currently stands around 4.2 per 100,000.¹ The aggregate national statistics, however, hide substantial variation within nations. In the District of Columbia (Washington, DC), the homicide rate peaked at 81 per 100,000 residents in 1991 and in 2010 stood around 22 per 100,000² — higher than in Mexico City, where the murder rate was about 14 per 100,000 in 2010.³ High levels of violence in certain areas — in

1 UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “UNODC Homicide Statistics 2012,” <http://data.un.org/Data.aspx?d=UNODC&f=tableCode%3A1>.

2 Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), “Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics, Crime – National or State Level, Data with One Variable,” www.ucrdatatool.gov/Search/Crime/State/TrendsInOneVar.cfm.

3 México Evalúa, Índice de inseguridad Ciudadana y violencia, Table 1 (Mexico City: México Evalúa, 2011), www.mexicoevalua.org/descargables/d15292_Indice-de-Inseguridad-Ciudadana-y-Violencia.pdf.



Mexico's case, in the border regions — skew national statistics upward.

In both Mexico and Central America, criminal groups seem to have overwhelmed the undermanned public security forces. Controlling illicit activity in rural and border areas, where migrants often cross, is particularly challenging. For instance, Olancho, a Honduran department (similar to a state or province), has a total of 250 police officers to cover an area roughly the size of El Salvador and larger than the country of Belgium or the US state of Maryland.⁴ The Guatemalan government recently ordered 800 soldiers, including 300 members of the country's elite Kaibil forces that specialize in jungle warfare and counterinsurgency, to reinforce local police in the remote Petén province that borders Mexico. Corruption of public security forces — in some instances at high levels — further complicates these challenges.

Mexico and Central America have emerged as one of the most dangerous areas on the planet outside of active war zones.

For decades, Central American migrants crossing Mexico en route to the United States have fallen victim to violent crime. (The same is true for Mexicans in transit to the United States.) Unlike the past, when this situation largely went unnoticed by the public and government, there is growing awareness and attention in the region to the dangers facing migrants crossing Mexico. Despite periodic threats and intimidation, Mexican and Central American media now regularly report on crimes against migrants. Equally important, public officials now acknowledge that the abuse of migrants crossing the region can no longer be quietly ignored or dismissed as an isolated phenomenon.

This report focuses on how criminal groups in Mexico and Central America's Northern Triangle impact migrants moving northward. It reviews the origins and growth of the main illicit networks operating in Mexico and Central America, then outlines the little that is known about how criminal groups profit from, and in some cases facilitate, the flow of migrants northward. The evidence is based on both field and desk research, including discussions with officials in Mexico and the three Northern Triangle countries.

First, it is important to distinguish between street gangs, organized criminal groups, and transnational criminal organizations:

- **Street gangs**, which have their roots in endemic poverty and widespread urbanization, number in the thousands and have seized upon the illegal economies that flourish in the region's poorest neighborhoods. In Central America several prominent street gangs began in the United States and were brought into the region by deportees. They are composed primarily of young men from marginalized communities; most have violent backgrounds and, often, histories of substance abuse. Street gangs control neighborhoods and local markets where they extract rents in the form of extortion although they also engage in kidnapping, assault, and contract murder. In some instances, as described below, street gangs have subcontracted their services as contraband distributors or enforcers to larger criminal organizations. However, they lack the sophistication and structure of organized criminal groups.
- **Organized criminal groups** are larger and more sophisticated than gangs and, in Mexico and Central America, have their origins in demobilized military, paramilitary, and intelligence forces. They have a larger scope of geographic activity and engage in more lucrative activities than street gangs — primarily the traffic and distribution of drugs and arms. The higher profit margin of these activities has allowed organized criminal groups to build sophisticated

⁴ Olancho's total area is roughly 15,000 square miles, or 24,000 square kilometers; the population was 509,564 in 2010. See Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Encuesta de Hogares a Propósitos Múltiples 2010* (Tegucigalpa, Honduras: INE), www.ine.gob.hn/drupal/node/205.



hierarchical structures. Bolstered by an increasing amounts of illegal drugs moving through Mexico and Central America, organized criminal groups have greater resources, manage more infrastructure, have access to more “soldiers” and weapons, and command greater control over government institutions. These same organizations have also diversified their criminal portfolios, using their organizations and control of illegal smuggling routes to incorporate activities such as human smuggling and trafficking.

- **Transnational criminal organizations** (TCOs) are organized criminal groups that have an operational presence, not simply a transactional presence, in multiple countries.

As governments in Mexico and Central America seek to reduce the corrosive role of criminality in their societies by confronting groups involved in all sorts of illicit activities, their efforts are hampered by widespread misunderstanding and misinformation about the relationship between criminal groups and the movement of migrants through the region. Little is known about the role of criminal groups in trafficking migrants, the organizations that take part in this market, and the extent of abuse, extortion, and murder. Distinguishing reality from myth is extremely difficult. Intelligence on the structure, evolution, and operations of street gangs and more sophisticated criminal groups often relies on vague or dated information from interviews and on-the-ground observation. Concrete evidence to substantiate the views of even the most informed observers is rare. As a result, the arguments presented in this report are unavoidably anchored in anecdote. Nevertheless, they represent the best public evidence on the challenges confronting the region.

Public officials now acknowledge that the abuse of migrants crossing the region can no longer be quietly ignored or dismissed as an isolated phenomenon.

II. Mexico: From Family Businesses to Small Armies

In Mexico the largest criminal organizations trace their roots to the 1960s, when small family-based groups moved contraband, migrants, illegal drugs, and other products across the US border. This core group of smugglers grew in importance when cocaine from the Andes began transiting the region in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The mostly Colombia-based cocaine suppliers used Mexican criminal organizations to receive and ship their product north, where local distribution chains awaited. Initially, the trade flowing through Mexico involved relatively small quantities, but the Mexicans’ role rose as the United States increased law enforcement activities in the Caribbean, forcing cocaine-smuggling activities across the isthmus.

By the early 1990s much of the cocaine entering the United States was passing through Mexico, and some Mexican criminal organizations began commanding a greater share of the profits and establishing their own distribution networks in the United States. These included the beginnings of what would later become known as the Sinaloa, Tijuana, Juarez, and Gulf cartels.

Initially, Mexican cartels were small, family-based organizations that depended on corrupt state security forces to provide protection from prosecution and security from rivals. However, this changed as the



Mexican cartels expanded into distribution, and their operations and profits rose. The high returns led to increased competition among organizations, who in an effort to protect markets and margins, began creating their own security forces. This process forever altered the way these criminal organizations operated in Mexico (and later in Central America), and has contributed to the current proliferation of kidnappings of migrants moving through the country.

The development of the military side of these organizations is significant for several reasons. First, it represented a break from the smaller, family-based models of the past. The transformation was profound. The new paramilitary armies adopted the terminology and logic of the military and their military trainers, some of whom were foreign mercenaries.⁵ The organizations began designating “lieutenants” to create “cells,” which included various parts responsible for intelligence gathering and enforcement. These new “soldiers” went through requisite training and indoctrination, then joined the fight to keep other cartels from encroaching on their territory. Alongside their new military side, the cartels’ infrastructure grew as well. They managed safe houses, communications equipment, cars, and weapons — the same type of infrastructure needed for virtually any sophisticated criminal act, from robbery to kidnapping to trade in contraband goods.

Beyond securing their own turf, the cartels soon began competing for territory or *plazas*, as they are known. In the Mexican criminal world, controlling a *plaza* means collecting what is essentially a toll, or tax, on any activity undertaken by the multiple criminal groups operating in that territory. The so-called *pisto* supplies a significant revenue stream, as the commanding group takes upwards of half of the value of the contraband moving through its corridor, whether weapons or humans or drugs. Corrupt security forces once had a hand in this part of the business, but over time, the criminal groups usurped that control.

The battle for *plazas* in turn depends on the number of soldiers a cartel maintains. In the case of the Tijuana Cartel, the Arellano Felix family began working with San Diego’s Logan Street Gang, training them in weapons, tactics, and intelligence gathering. The Gulf Cartel hired members of the Mexican Airborne Special Forces Group (Grupo Aeromóvil de Fuerzas Especiales, GAFES), which adopted the name Zetas in homage to the radio handle used by its military commanders. The Juarez Cartel hired current and former police officers to form what became known as La Línea, and later an El Paso street gang known as the Aztecas. The Sinaloa Cartel eventually designated a branch of its group, the Beltran Leyva Organization, to create a mini army to deal with its rivals, supported by a smattering of smaller street gangs where the cartel operates along the US-Mexico border.

The new “soldiers” share one common characteristic: they are not part of the original, tightly knit family structures once at the core of Mexican criminal organizations.⁶ In the past, Mexican criminal organizations were relatively small, mostly made up of relatives from the Sinaloa state, where they had worked in poppy and marijuana fields. Membership came via blood ties, marriage, or neighborly affection — until market forces required that historically close-knit units professionalize and open admission to outsiders in order to remain competitive.

Initially, the leaders of these groups granted such “outsiders” minimal authority or discretion. Some leaders, such as Ramon Arellano Felix of the Tijuana Cartel and Osiel Cárdenas Guillén of the Gulf Cartel, directly controlled their new armies, demanding personal loyalty at all costs. This proved to be a poor model over time, however, since as soon as the strong leader was eliminated (as in the case of Arellano Felix in 2002) or arrested (as in the case of Cárdenas in 2003), individual loyalties disintegrated and

5 According to one law enforcement officer interviewed by the author, one of the trainers for the Tijuana Cartel was called “El Iraquí” for his Middle Eastern origins. Other trainers came from the Mexican military and police circles, according to a former Tijuana Cartel operative. See also Nathan Patrick Jones, “The State Reaction: A Theory of Illicit Network Resilience” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2011).

6 The one exception is the Beltran-Leyva Organization. Even so, this group eventually split from the Sinaloa Cartel after the capture of one its top members, who members believe was betrayed by the Sinaloa leader Joaquin Guzman Loera, alias “El Chapo.”



the armies began to break away from the core cartel hierarchy. Loyalty became a commodity subject to dynamic market prices rather than “family” obligation.

The new private armies were expensive at all levels and cartel leaders began seeking ways to reduce costs, even as they continued to expand and professionalize operations. Though evidence is scarce, reports suggests that starting in the late 1990s, the cartels gradually, reluctantly, and violently shifted financial responsibility and operational control to their lieutenants — a process that only became apparent five to six years later. With newfound autonomy, many cells expanded their operations beyond security services into the extortion of legitimate businesses and, later, kidnapping.

This shift in financial and operational decision-making represents a second profound change in the way Mexican cartels operate. Suddenly, instead of one centralized criminal organization, there were numerous cells demanding *piso* on criminal activities such as contraband and human smuggling and competing, often violently, for territory and markets. The revenue from human smuggling is significant. According to United Nations (UN) estimates, human smuggling is a \$6 billion per year business in the Americas alone.⁷ However, for Mexican cartels total revenue from human smuggling is relatively small compared to revenues from the international drug trade, which are probably in the range of about \$15 billion-\$25 billion. The profit margins of the drug trade — estimated at 80 percent of the revenues — are also likely higher than for human smuggling.

The newly militarized organizations had a new mindset, focused on occupying vast amounts of physical space. Their rapid growth prompted a change in financial structure. As operations increased, so did the need to protect leaders from detection. The units of multilayered armies gained more autonomy to delve into multiple criminal activities. This also allowed for the entry of personnel whose loyalties were less connected to the top. The new, decentralized system worked as long as a strong person remained the leader. However, as soon as that leader was eliminated, the organization inevitably began to break apart and in many instances violence flared among competing factions.

*Human smuggling is a \$6 billion per year
business in the Americas alone.*

This process has played out again and again over the past decade. In an effort to increase profits, the divisions within larger organizations have diversified their criminal portfolios, delving into human smuggling, contraband, extortion, piracy, kidnapping, and other criminal activities. Many of these divisions have subsequently broken from their original organizations, including major segments of the Tijuana Cartel, the Zetas, La Línea, and the Beltran Leyva Organization. Authorities still regularly refer to smaller operatives by the names of the larger groups to which they once belonged. This practice may help make sense of the mayhem, but the reality is much more complicated on the ground. InSight Crime, for instance, recently counted 28 criminal groups in Mexico. As described below, these groups often contract smaller criminal units, usually local gangs, thus further complicating the situation and making the job of categorizing the chaos more difficult.

There is limited anecdotal evidence that Mexican criminal organizations have established their own distribution networks in the United States. There have been some arrests of Mexican organized crime leaders and members of their families within the United States, but it is not clear if the organizational structures of these groups have consolidated in the United States. Neither is there convincing evidence

⁷ UNODC, *The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (Vienna, Austria: UNODC, 2010), www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/tocta-2010.html.



that Mexican cartels have a permanent operational presence in drug-producing countries such as Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. The presence of Mexican cartels in the Andean countries seems to be purely transactional, rather than operational or strategic. In this respect, it is unlikely that Mexican criminal organizations have become fully vertically integrated or “gone transnational” as is often assumed.

III. Central America: A Criminal World Forged by War

The development of criminal organizations in Central America has been different than in Mexico. The largest organizations trace their roots to the 1980s, when much of the region was engulfed in civil wars. In many ways, those conflicts laid the groundwork for the current wave of violence and criminal activity.

The most famous and sophisticated of these criminal groups drew their core membership from the guerillas who battled the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador. In the case of Honduras, a counterrevolutionary army fought neighboring Nicaragua’s Sandinista government. The insurgent (and later criminal) groups operated in ungoverned spaces, such as the remote border areas and vast jungles of the region. Guatemala’s Petén province, for example, occupies a third of the country’s territory, yet has just 3 percent of its population and a miniscule state presence along its 400-kilometer (or about 250-mile) border with Mexico.⁸ Honduras’ Gracias a Dios province is largely uninhabited; even in the most developed section of the province, a 40-kilometer (about 25-mile) drive can take six hours.⁹

In order to operate in these regions, rebel groups used illegal networks and trafficking corridors to obtain the provisions, arms, uniforms, and other materials they needed to run their wars against the state. Some of these corridors had been in use prior to the wars. For example, many had been used to bring cheaper duty-free goods — including such nonthreatening items as dairy products — into the Northern Triangle countries from neighboring nations. Others were used to move illegal drugs and other illicit products through the region on the way to the United States. In the 1980s, such corridors began doubling as arms-trafficking routes.

As in Mexico, the core of most contraband networks started out as family and friends. They are locally called *transportistas*, for their role in transporting goods.¹⁰ In some cases, networks now stretch from Panama to Guatemala. They still move all types of products, both illicit and licit, as well as migrants. Some have formed legitimate transportation and/or other businesses (e.g., fishing companies, hotels) to camouflage their activities, and they are generally free to work with various criminal actors seeking to move illegal goods.

Central America’s civil wars indirectly contributed to the later militarization of such family units. During the civil wars, the Northern Triangle governments strengthened their armed forces and police and intelligence services. As these security forces grew in size, they eventually exerted control over numerous government agencies. Their hold on the government was in some cases absolute, as in Guatemala in the early 1980s, when military leaders assumed the presidency.

When the wars ended in Guatemala and El Salvador, however, those governments greatly reduced the size of their armed forces and replaced their intelligence services. Out-of-work officers and operatives offered their services to other sectors of government, or sold their expertise to the underworld or private sector.

⁸ See Ralph Espach and Daniel Haering, *Border Insecurity in Central America’s Northern Triangle* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2012), www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/RMSG-NorthernTriangle.pdf.

⁹ Author interviews, Honduras, February 21-25, 2010.

¹⁰ For more on the *transportista* networks, see Steven Dudley, “Drug Trafficking Organizations in Central America: *Transportistas*, Mexican Cartels and *Maras*” (working paper series on US-Mexico security collaboration, Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars and the Transborder Institute, June 2010), www.stevendudley.com/pdf/Wilson%20Center%20Central%20America%20Dudley%2005%2017%2010.pdf.



In Guatemala, for example, a vast network of former military intelligence officials now trades in fake passports, private security, arms, and illegal adoptions.¹¹

The end of the wars also resulted in large numbers of unemployed guerrilla fighters. Some of the more sophisticated rebels entered politics, but others moved into illegal activities such as kidnapping, arms trafficking and, most recently, drug trafficking. Their experience during the wars equipped them with the tools and expertise necessary to excel in extralegal activities. In El Salvador, for example, some members of the Communist Party, who formed the backbone of one of the country's most formidable guerrilla units, became involved in kidnapping, arms trafficking, and car theft.¹²

Finally, the civil wars set off a flow of migrants northward that has only grown in years since, and has transformed the countries of the Northern Triangle. Thousands of refugees and economic migrants fled to the United States and settled in big cities such as Los Angeles. Feeling vulnerable to other gangs in these cities, some members of these new enclaves formed their own gangs. At first fulfilling community needs for protection and security, the activities of such gangs quickly degenerated into crime, including murder for hire, extortion, local distribution of drugs, and prostitution.

Such gangs' emergence in the mid-1990s coincided with state and federal initiatives in the United States that led to longer and higher incarceration rates for gang members and increased deportations of ex-convicts.¹³ The number of gang members deported quickly increased, as did the number of transnational gangs operating in the Northern Triangle. In many cases, the deported gang members looked to replicate their activities back in Central America, where they found willing recruits to fill the ranks of their organizations. Following the end of the civil wars, many youth lacked educational opportunities and found themselves in scarred or dysfunctional families. In addition, rapid urbanization in the region left many families without a solid economic or social footing. The gangs offered disenfranchised youth the lure of quick profits, a sense of community, and ready access to weaponry and experienced fighters to train and arm young recruits.

The deportations accelerated in the 2000s. Between 2001 and 2010, the United States deported 129,726 convicted criminals to Central America, over 90 percent of whom were sent to the Northern Triangle.¹⁴ Honduras alone, a country with roughly the same population as Haiti, had 44,042 criminal deportees during that period. By contrast, during the same period, the Caribbean received 44,522 total criminal deportees.¹⁵

11 Author interviews with former and current intelligence officials, Guatemala City, Guatemala, January 19-February 4, 2010.

12 Douglas Farah, "Organized Crime in El Salvador: The Homegrown and Transnational Dimensions" (working paper series on organized crime in Central America, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Latin America Program, February 2011), www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Farah.FIN1.pdf

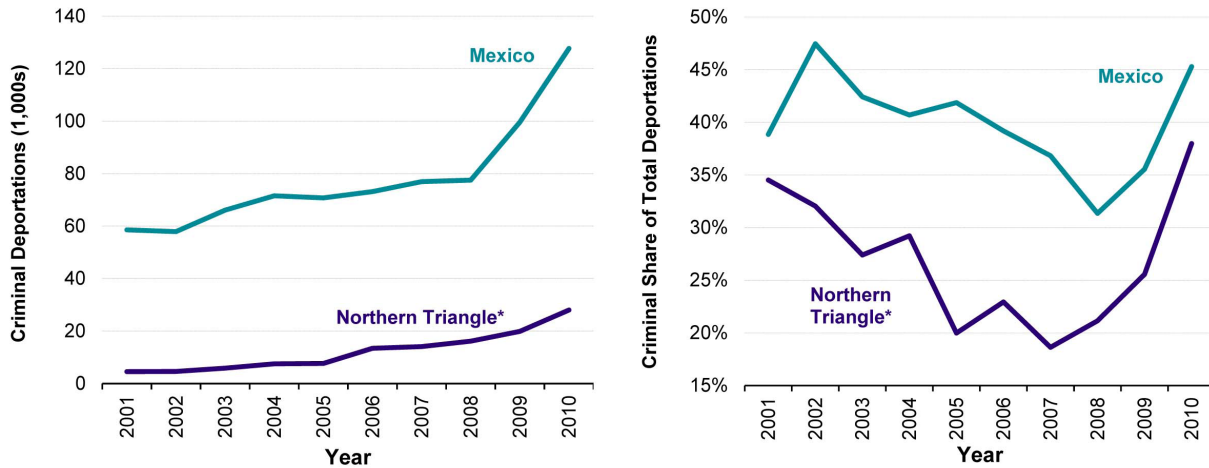
13 The "three strikes" laws significantly expanded prison sentences for recidivist criminals, and the *Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996* expanded the categories for which immigrants could be deported. See Kate Saint Germain and Carly J. Stevens, "Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act," *US Immigration Legislation Online*, 1996, http://library.uwb.edu/guides/usimmigration/1996_illegal_immigration_reform_and_immigrant_responsibility_act.html.

14 The data are for events rather than individuals. As a result, some individuals may be counted multiple times in the data. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office of Immigration Statistics, *2010 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2011), www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2010/ois_yb_2010.pdf.

15 In comparison with some other countries in Central America, the Northern Triangle countries do not receive a high percentage of criminals among their deportees. Nearly two-thirds of deportees to the Dominican Republic and Jamaica, for instance, are criminal deportees, whereas the share for the Northern Triangle nations is substantially lower: about one-fifth to Guatemala, one-quarter to Honduras, and one-third to El Salvador. However, these Caribbean nations receive far fewer criminal deportees than the Northern Triangle countries. See Clare Ribando Seelke, *Gangs in Central America* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011), www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34112.pdf.



Figure 2. Criminal Deportations from the United States, Fiscal Year (FY) 2001-10



*Northern Triangle comprised of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

Source: US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Immigration Statistics, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2010* (Washington, DC: DHS, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2011), www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/yearbook/2010/ois_yb_2010.pdf.

With the deportations, the two most prominent Los Angeles gangs — Mara Salvatrucha 13 and Barrio 18 — quickly became the two largest transnational gangs in the Northern Triangle. By some estimates, the gangs now have between 60,000 and 95,000 members in the Northern Triangle alone.¹⁶

US and Central American gangs are connected by shared names, rules, and dress codes. However, finding empirical evidence that directly links the deportations to criminal activity is difficult. There has been no systematic effort on the part of US, Mexican, or Northern Triangle authorities to track deported gang members and their crime recidivism rates.¹⁷ Moreover, there has been little official communication and information sharing among the countries. US Immigration and Customs Service (ICE) does not categorize the deportees as “gang” members on deportation forms, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) provides criminal background information to partner government institutions only upon request.

Several US government projects aim to increase information flows, including fingerprint records and historical data, on deported gang members.¹⁸ Nonetheless, problems persist. For example, under one of the more recent pilot programs in El Salvador, the FBI released lists of suspected gang-member deportees to a special unit within the Salvadoran national police, which then disseminated the list across the country’s law enforcement agencies. However, according to interviews conducted by the author of this report, the police unit responsible for disseminating the information did not properly communicate, or

¹⁶ Estimations vary widely. UNODC estimates there are 10,500 gang members in El Salvador, 36,000 in Honduras, and 14,000 in Guatemala. In February 2012, Guatemala’s interior minister estimated that 20,000 gang members operate in Guatemala, 40,000 in El Salvador, and 35,000 in Honduras. See Marciela Castañon, “Estiman que 95 mil pandilleros operan en Triángulo Norte,” *La Hora*, February 2012, www.lahora.com.gt/index.php/nacional/guatemala/actualidad/153439-estiman-que-95-mil-pandilleros-operan-en-triangulo-norte.

¹⁷ A 2007 World Bank report touched on this subject with regard to Jamaica in an attempt to analyze the relationship between deportations and crime. According to the report, between 1993 and 2004 Jamaica absorbed 1,200 criminals a year. Eighty-one percent of the deportees from the United States, Canada, and Great Britain between the years 2001 and 2004 were “nonviolent” offenders. But 224 were convicted murderers, not an insignificant number relative to Jamaica’s population. “In such small countries, it does not take a large number of offenders to have a large impact, particularly if they assume a leadership role in criminal gangs on their return or provide perverse role models for youth,” the World Bank report concludes. See World Bank and United Nations, *Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean* (Washington, DC and New York: World Bank and United Nations, 2007), <http://scm.oas.org/pdfs/2008/CP20887E01.pdf>.

¹⁸ For a more complete overview and assessment of the US anti-gang policy in the region, see Florina Cristiana Matei, “The Impact of US Anti-gang Policies in Central America: Quo Vadis?” in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011).



in some cases refused to communicate, the names of suspected gang members to other police agencies. There are many reasons for such breakdowns in communication, including distrust about how the information will be used.¹⁹

These challenges are not limited to Central America. Mexico receives more criminal deportees than all the countries of Central America combined: between 2001 and 2010, the United States returned 779,968 criminal deportees to Mexico.²⁰ Communication between US and Mexican officials is similarly weak. For instance, according to Ciudad Juarez's former mayor, Jose Reyes Ferriz (2007-10), the United States often simply releases criminal deportees at the bridge connecting Juarez and El Paso without warning. The Juarez city government eventually developed a system to bus deportees to other areas of Mexico, but many find their way back to Juarez, where they are lost in the city's complex criminal landscape.²¹

Aside from the rise in gang activity, Central America has also experienced an increase in drug trafficking (see Figure 3). For much of the past decade, the area served as a trampoline for the movement of drugs northward, particularly cocaine and heroin. Data on drug seizures show an admittedly incomplete portrait of the full scale of illicit drug trade; that said, reported cocaine seizures in Central America indicate a notable rise, particularly between 2005 and 2007.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that as much as 300 tons of cocaine move through the region every year. The drugs are transported by water, air, and road. Water routes are covered by speedboats, fishing vessels, or a combination of both. The traffickers use the islands and coasts of Nicaragua and Honduras as drop-off points and storage areas. To move products by air, criminal organizations use the hundreds of private and clandestine airstrips located in Honduras and Guatemala. From there, the drugs move in private vehicles or commercial trucks along land routes.

Aside from the rise in gang activity, Central America has also experienced an increase in drug trafficking.

The importance of the Northern Triangle in this distribution chain goes beyond its stock of ready-made routes, easily corruptible government officials, and willing and well-trained soldiers. As the Mexican government has increased its pressure on criminal groups in Mexico, they have sought refuge in the countries of the Northern Triangle. Large Mexican criminal organizations such as the Sinaloa Cartel and the Zetas have moved important portions of their operations into Guatemala and Honduras. They enter via informal and illegal channels, obtain false local identification from clandestine networks and corrupt local officials, and operate largely incognito. Not surprisingly, the battle among local criminal organizations, the *transportistas*, and foreign organizations has intensified.

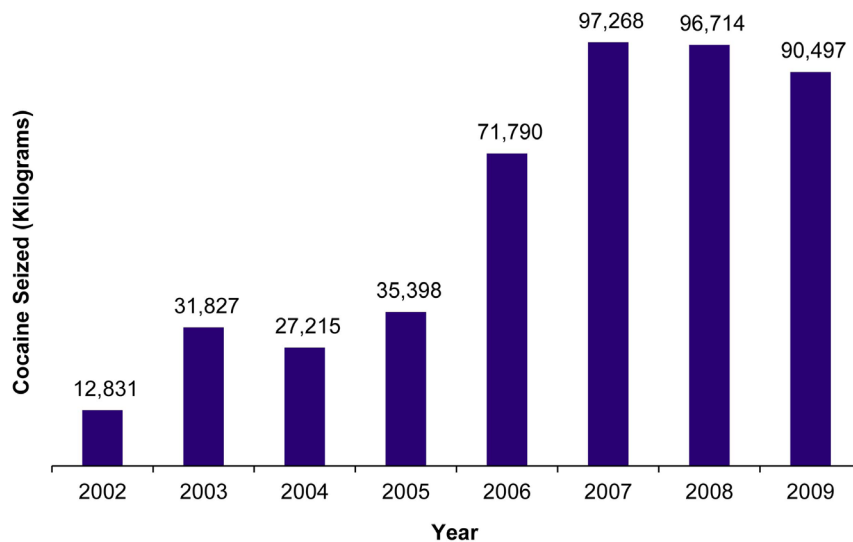
19 Author interviews, San Salvador, El Salvador, May 11-15, 2011.

20 DHS, Office of Immigration Statistics, *2011 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Table 41 (Washington, DC: DHS, 2012), www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2011-3.

21 Author interview with Ciudad Juarez, Mexico Mayor Jose Reyes Ferriz, May 3, 2010. This flow of information to Mexico, however, is reportedly improving. In September 2012, representatives of the Juarez Municipal Police told the author they were receiving notification of gang members' deportations, as well as information on prior criminal activity.



Figure 3. Cocaine Seized in Central America, 2002-09



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *The Globalization of Crime: A Transnational Organized Crime Threat Assessment* (Vienna, Austria: UNODC, 2010), www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/tocta-2010.html.

The shift in criminal operations from Mexico to Central America has resulted in a shift in other parts of the underground economy. Throughout the region, large criminal organizations now often pay their contracted workers in illicit products. These contracted workers, which include street gangs in both Central America and Mexico, then sell the products locally. The Mexican drug economy has become a very lucrative venture with pure cocaine prices in Mexico City reaching \$18,000 per kilogram. As a result, the competition to gain control of the product has shifted from Mexico to the Northern Triangle, where the price per kilo is closer to \$12,000 per kilogram.²²

IV. The Gauntlet

According to the National Commission on Human Rights (Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, CNDH) — the only Mexican government entity that has released data on kidnappings of migrants — 9,758 migrants were kidnapped in 33 different “events” between September 2008 and February 2009.²³ In a 2011 study, CNDH estimated that 11,333 migrants were kidnapped between April and September 2010 in 214 different events.²⁴ Extrapolating the CNDH 2011 findings suggests that around 20,000 migrants are kidnapped per year in Mexico.

The CNDH estimates are based on hundreds of visits to refugee shelters, churches, and other areas where migrants concentrate. Still, government analysts dispute the numbers, saying they are anecdotal and come from unreliable and biased sources. Some observers argue that the methodology used by CNDH can be easily manipulated — for example, if the same migrant told one story to different commission

²² Author interviews, conducted in 2011 in Mexico, Guatemala, and the United States, with intelligence officials of various governments as well as former members of criminal syndicates.

²³ Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), *Special Report of the Human Rights National Commission over Kidnapping Against Migrants* (Mexico City: CNDH, 2011), <http://insightcrime.org/investigations/government-multilaterals/item/606-mexican-national-commission-on-human-rights-special-report-on-immigrant-kidnapping-in-mexico>.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.



investigators, who registered it as a new incident each time. However, the CNDH figure is the only estimate available, and even as they disagree on the exact numbers, all experts and government officials agree that the dangers are increasing for migrants crossing Mexico, especially with regard to kidnapping for ransom.

Yet many migrants continue to undertake the journey. Most of them seek the assistance of traditional intermediaries, popularly known as *polleros* or “coyotes,” and their networks of smuggling operations that operate throughout the region. The coyotes vary in professionalism and price. Some of them cross over into other enterprises, including drug trafficking.

The ability of coyotes to operate has become contingent on their skill in navigating the new criminal landscape. This means dealing with two major actors newly involved in migrant smuggling and a third more traditional actor. The new players are street gangs and large, diversified criminal organizations. As described earlier, these two have different roots and different ends, but both cross over into the human-smuggling business. The more traditional actor is the public sector, notably corrupt government officials and members of security forces.

A. Criminal Organizations

At the top of the new migrant-smuggling hierarchy are organized criminal organizations that collect *piso* from any actors moving merchandise (in this case, human cargo) through their territory. The most famous of these in Mexico is the Zetas group. At its core are former public security officers who defected in the late 1990s to become part of the private security team of the Gulf Cartel. For the first few years, their main job was to protect the cartel boss, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén, and his primary product, cocaine. They proved extremely effective, especially at taking and occupying territory from enemy cartels, and over time they were tasked with expanding the Gulf’s business interests in other parts of Mexico. (The Gulf Cartel is involved in a wide range of businesses beyond drug trafficking and human smuggling, notably insurance fraud.)

As protection forces grew, the Zetas took advantage of new business opportunities and began collecting *piso* from those who sold drugs and contraband on the local market, or operated illegal bars or brothels. They used the money from this tax to contract and train more soldiers. Soon, the Zetas were large enough to challenge the Gulf Cartel itself. The first signs of a break came after Cárdenas was arrested in 2003. By the time Cárdenas was extradited to the United States in 2007, the Zetas had formed their own, independent organization. Although technically they still answered to the Gulf leadership, the Zetas were now an open threat. The Zetas split definitively from the Gulf Cartel in early 2010, after the cartel murdered a Zeta commander and refused to hand over the assassins.

Throughout, the Zetas have remained true to their core mission: taking and controlling territory where they collect *piso* from other criminal organizations and, increasingly, legitimate businesses. In most instances the Zetas do not set up infrastructure to operate these illicit businesses, though they do provide “security” services. Their singular focus on the military side of the equation is both a strength and a limitation. Their income stream is diverse and their ledger complicated, which is perhaps why they are known to have a strict accounting system that works completely separate from the military arm of the organization.

The Zetas have adopted the Gulf Cartel’s strategy of granting autonomy to contract workers — the lieutenants, the assassins, and the hawks. Some of these contract workers are part of gangs, which occasionally results in messy and complicated situations on the ground. Most are part-time (locals in Monterrey call them *zetillas*), but they use their connections to the Zetas to commit other crimes such as car theft and armed robbery. Delineating Zeta crime from locally motivated crime is difficult, if not impossible.



It is not clear exactly when the Zetas began collecting money from the coyotes, but by 2008, the group was entrenched in areas along the border with Guatemala (particularly in Chiapas, Tabasco, Campeche, and Quintana Roo), from which they could launch surprise assaults on migrants. Their areas of operations have since spread to places such as Veracruz, San Luis Potosí, and, most notably, Tamaulipas. Tamaulipas has become a particularly difficult part of the journey for migrants as the fight between the Zetas and the Gulf Cartel has intensified. In August 2010 suspected Zetas killed at least 193 migrants in an abandoned farmhouse for reasons that are still not clear.²⁵ By early 2011 the war had engulfed hundreds more, who were pulled from public buses and forcibly enlisted as “soldiers,” or killed as suspected collaborators with the Gulf Cartel and then buried in mass graves.

The Zetas are not the only large criminal organization victimizing migrants. Factions of many engage in similar activities, either directly or indirectly. The Gulf Cartel appears to be the most active, and works with both the Mexican police and Mexican migration officials in order to capture its victims. Factions of the Juarez and Tijuana cartels also collect *piso* from local smugglers and may, in the case of Juarez, be directly involved in trafficking. Portions of the old Familia Michoacana, now called the Caballeros Templarios, and the Sinaloa Cartel have also reportedly displaced coyotes operating in their territories and have attempted to take over this business.

*The Zetas are not the only large criminal organization
victimizing migrants.*

There are also large independent and semi-independent groups operating throughout the US-Mexico border region. The author was given access to a file documenting a case in which a Baja California kidnapping ring tricked Mexican migrants passing through the neighboring state of Sonora into believing they would be taken across the border near Tijuana. Instead, the group kidnapped the migrants and had their relatives deposit money into accounts controlled by the ring. They also physically abused the victims, raping the women and severely beating the men.

B. Street Gangs

Street gangs' participation in the human-smuggling business is not uniform, across the region but seems to be divided into two broad categories: predators and informants. There are numerous reports of gang members harassing, robbing, and raping migrants moving north. Gang members who travel or lodge alongside migrants, sometimes in refuge houses established by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) along known routes, gather information on potential victims. These informants then pass the information on to larger criminal organizations or corrupt security forces, who corral the migrants en masse to systematically rob or extort money from them or their families. In general, the gangs appear to be contract workers in such schemes.

Different gangs appear to control different lengths of a route. However, despite the massive presence of street gangs in the Northern Triangle, there is no evidence that they play any role until migrants cross into Mexico. Their presence in Mexico is especially strong along the railroads frequently used by migrants. Their targets, like the larger criminal groups, are most often Central American migrants attempting the journey without the services of a coyote.

²⁵ Initially, only 72 cadavers were discovered, but upon further investigation the total body count was found to be 193.



Gangs continue to harass migrants in the United States, where they appear to have more autonomy than in Mexico and often replicate the activities of groups like the Zetas. This is because the Zetas do not control the territory in which the gangs operate in the United States. In one recent case in Houston, gangs demanded *piso* from a smuggler and held his human cargo until he met their demands.²⁶ US authorities call this a “coyote rip:” a gang commandeers a group of immigrants and then holds them for ransom or payment. According to US law enforcement, numerous kidnapping cases in Phoenix are connected to similar “rips” or to smugglers demanding more money from their clients. There were close to 300 reported kidnappings per year in Phoenix between 2006 and 2009, according to the US Department of Justice (DOJ).²⁷

*Corrupt state officials and public security forces
seem ready to take advantage of migrants
who have succeeded in eluding criminal organizations.*

Throughout this chain, corrupt state officials and public security forces seem ready to take advantage of migrants who have succeeded in eluding criminal organizations. This includes portions of the National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM), who last year reportedly handed over at least 120 migrants to members of the Gulf Cartel to be held for ransom. Six INM officials were eventually arrested for the crime.²⁸ Some local and national police have reportedly set up dragnets for migrants as well. In some cases, the police appear to be working with the criminals. In Reynosa four police officers were arrested after 68 migrants were rescued from suspected members of the Gulf Cartel.²⁹ Army checkpoints are also notoriously tricky passage points for coyotes and migrants, and army personnel have been connected to extortion and mass kidnappings.³⁰

Successfully navigating this gauntlet requires some combination of money, experience, and luck. Migrants tend to be categorized into three groups:

- those who can afford to arrange for travel by air, using either a coyote or some other specialized service;
- those who have to travel by some combination of air, water, and land, using a coyote;
- and those who travel by land and cannot afford a coyote.

C. Coyotes

Drawing upon anecdotal evidence only, those who pay a specialized service or coyote to arrange the journey and those who do not are both at risk, although the perception is that contracting a coyote greatly lowers the chances of being victimized. (This report does not examine the first category of migrants listed above, focusing instead on the second two categories, since air travelers do not face the same risks as land travelers.)

26 Steven Dudley, “Coyote Rips’ in Houston Give Migrants Another Headache,” InSight Crime, May 2011, www.insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/885-ms-13-coyote-rips-in-houston-give-migrants-another-headache.

27 US Department of Justice (DOJ), National Drug Intelligence Unit (NDIC), *US Southwest Border Smuggling and Violence* (Washington, DC: DOJ, 2010), www.justice.gov/ndic/pubs38/38661/swb.htm.

28 Geoffrey Ramsey, “Migrants Accuse Mexico Immigration Officials in Kidnap Case,” InSight Crime, May 12, 2011, <http://insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/910-migrants-accuse-mexico-immigration-officials-in-kidnap-case>.

29 Dudley, “Coyote Rips’ in Houston Give Migrants Another Headache.”

30 Amnesty International, *Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico* (London: Amnesty International, 2010), www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/AMR41/014/2010/en/8459f0ac-03ce-4302-8bd2-3305bdac9cde/amr410142010eng.pdf.



For those who travel alone, without coyotes, the dangers begin almost the minute they start. Their enemies are often their fellow passengers. Both gang members and other migrants working as informants obtain information about their compatriots as they travel and then pass this on to corrupt officials, gangs, or criminal organizations. Criminal groups stop independent travelers and take them captive en masse by arresting or kidnapping them. They then use the information obtained from informants to obtain a ransom or an extortion payment.

These “detentions” can last for hours, days, or even weeks. The most sophisticated criminal groups have developed an extensive infrastructure to accommodate numerous victims. There are anecdotes of dozens of kidnapped victims being held in large warehouses or apartments until they can arrange for a payment to their captors.³¹ The payments are made to US or Mexican bank accounts, or are wired directly through money transfer services.³² The amounts vary but can run into the thousands of dollars.

Even those who have the money to use coyotes are not guaranteed a safe and incident-free journey. Who they contract and how much they pay in order to navigate the criminal landscape can be the difference between life and death. The process usually begins in the migrants’ home country; a coyote collects money at the start of the journey, and sends a representative to accompany the migrants. The fee generally ranges from \$2,000 to \$10,000 and can include transportation and lodging for small and large groups. In the best of circumstances, this fee also includes bribes to private company personnel (bus drivers, hotel managers, and others) and security forces (police, army, customs), and a commission for gangs and criminal organizations en route.

Even those who have the money to use coyotes are not guaranteed a safe and incident-free journey.

Exactly how the coyote guarantees a safe journey is particularly complex. According to one source familiar with the arrangement, the coyotes pay \$30,000 a week to the Zetas, who ensure safe passage for a specific number of migrants crossing their territory during that week.³³ Another coyote told an investigator that he paid \$500 per head once he had arrived at a designated area (in this case, the city of Monterrey, Nuevo León) where he knew large criminal groups held control.³⁴ Which group he paid depended on what was happening in the area. Responsible coyotes, therefore, may carry extra cash on hand for any unforeseeable circumstances. No matter the system, confusion about who has paid whom and when remains a strong possibility. Moreover, in a shifting landscape, it is difficult for coyotes and their representatives to properly identify a given criminal group’s role and informants.

V. Criminal Crossover

There is evidence that numerous criminal organizations in Mexico profit from human movement, but most appear more interested in collecting *piiso* than in smuggling people across borders. However, in

31 Óscar Martínez, “Somos de los Zetas,” *El Faro*, November 23, 2009, www.elfaro.net/es/200911/migracion/386.

32 In 2010, Western Union agreed to pay \$94 million to help settle a ten-year Arizona investigation into its practices. Part of the money went to anti-money-laundering initiatives in Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and California. See Jonathan Stempel, “Western Union to Pay \$94 million in Laundering Probe,” Reuters, February 11, 2010, www.reuters.com/article/2010/02/11/westernunion-moneylaundering-idUSN1119905220100211.

33 Author interview with former Salvadoran consulate officials, May 2011.

34 Southern Pulse, “Inside Illegal Re-Entry — From San Salvador to Houston,” InSight Crime, March 21, 2011, <http://insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/698-inside-illegal-re-entry-from-san-salvador-to-houston>.



Central America, some criminal organizations appear to have broadened their activities to include human smuggling.

The clearest example of this is Jose Natividad Luna Pereira, also known as “Chepe” Luna, a Salvadoran national who operates in the Northern Triangle. Luna began his career moving dairy products from Honduras to El Salvador during the 1980s. These exploits earned Luna and his collaborators the nickname Cartel de los Quesos (the “Cheese Cartel”). Luna then branched into human smuggling before finally moving into drug trafficking.

Luna remains one of the region’s foremost traffickers of both legal and illegal goods, specifically pirated goods, stolen cars, and cocaine. Like his counterparts, he moves his products via a series of transport companies that operate throughout the isthmus. His legal infrastructure has allowed him to take advantage of numerous business ventures, using them to co-opt portions of the police, judicial, and immigration systems. The result is a vast, multinational, and multidimensional criminal network that includes human smuggling.

Other organizations fill smaller roles in the human-smuggling chain. As described, former military personnel in Guatemala use their contacts or control over certain governmental offices to supply legitimate documentation for migrants, mostly high-end travelers that use the country as a landing pad. These individuals can obtain documentation from corrupt officials before starting their journey north.

There do not appear to be many Central American–based street gangs involved in human smuggling, but some are reportedly connected to human trafficking, specifically forced prostitution. The Zetas have also been connected to human-trafficking activity in the Northern Triangle countries and in Mexico. According to the Honduran consul in Chiapas, the Zetas have forced numerous Honduran women into prostitution in southern Mexico.³⁵

There are some reports that migrants are being used to traffic small quantities of drugs. The Justice Department, in its assessment of the southeastern Texas–Mexico border, said that smugglers used “shark boats” to move drugs and migrants, although it is not clear if migrants and drugs are transported on the same journey.³⁶ Other DOJ security assessments also note this crossover.³⁷

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials would not provide the author with specific data on this matter, and most intelligence reports from DOJ do not mention or go into any great detail about the connection between human and drug smuggling. There may also be some confusion since drug-trafficking groups hire migrants to take backpacks full of drugs across the border, particularly in deserted areas such as the Arizona border.³⁸ This, however, appears to be another kind of operation. In other words, smuggling large numbers of humans, some of whom may be carrying small amounts of drugs, and using an individual to smuggle a backpack full of drugs are different.

Reports from Mexico also appear to substantiate the theory that migrants are used to smuggle narcotics, although, again, it is difficult to assess how prevalent the practice is. One theory regarding the August 2010 massacre in San Fernando, for instance, was that the migrants had refused to carry drugs into the United States. While there is little evidence in this case, Mexican intelligence officials told the author that drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs) use migrants to move small quantities of drugs. Mexican intelligence officials also noted that migrants are recruited into Mexican criminal gangs in high numbers. Some of these go willingly, they said; others are forcibly recruited. Those who refuse face execution.

35 Geoffrey Ramsey, “Trafficking, Forced Prostitution Denounced in Chiapas,” InSight Crime, April 21, 2011, www.insightcrime.org/insight-latest-news/item/804-with-human-trafficking-up-in-s.

36 DOJ, National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC), *Houston High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area Drug Market Analysis* (Washington, DC: DOJ, 2009), www.hsdl.org/?view&did=35901.

37 DOJ, NDIC, *Arizona High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area: Drug Market Analysis* (Washington, DC: DOJ, 2007), <http://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/cdm/compoundobject/collection/feddocs/id/1323/rec/18>.

38 Ibid.



Migrants also appear to be connected to bulk arms purchases and the movement of weapons across the US-Mexico border. Networks of arms traffickers often have families on both sides of the border, many of whom have dual citizenship and connections to criminal operations in Mexico. The traffickers use “straw buyers” (usually individuals with no criminal records) to buy multiple weapons, which are then trafficked across the border in bulk to Mexico and sold to large or small criminal organizations. Migrants can be used as buyers, although they do not actually move any bulk product in either direction. However, the necessity of finding “clean” buyers and movers for weapons makes the use of illegal immigrants less likely.

VI. Conclusion

Migrants’ journey north from Central America through Mexico to the United States, always perilous and unpredictable, has gotten several new obstacles in recent years. These are the result of a transformation in the region’s criminal organizations. In Mexico what were small, family-run DTOs have morphed into large, criminal operations with military prowess and a large portfolio of criminal activities, including that of kidnapping migrants for ransom. At the same time, street gangs have proliferated in the region, providing “eyes and ears” for these larger criminal organizations to seize large numbers of migrants en route.

These criminal actors, often working in tandem with security forces and government officials, are preying on migrants by the thousands. The estimates of how many are victimized are unreliable, but all those consulted by the author over a two-year period agree that the risk of being kidnapped for ransom has increased exponentially. Many of those who could not or would not pay this ransom have been killed. Again, there are no reliable statistics, but there are mass graves, specifically in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas where the Mexican Zetas operate.

For their part, the Zetas provide the clearest example of a Mexican criminal organization that has diversified its portfolio. The group, once an armed wing of the Gulf Cartel, has become a multifaceted criminal operation that is focused on controlling territory and wields superior training and tactics. Other criminal organizations operating in Zeta territory must pay a hefty toll. Zeta territory encompasses the routes most frequented by migrants moving north and crossing into the United States.

Migrants’ journey north from Central America through Mexico to the United States, always perilous and unpredictable, has gotten several new obstacles in recent years.

Groups like the Zetas have changed the game. Coyotes moving migrants must arrange payment to the Zetas (or the other controlling criminal groups) or risk losing their cargo. Migrants without coyotes run the highest risk of being victimized, though paying a coyote does not ensure safe passage. The semi-autonomous and amorphous nature of today’s criminal groups makes the migrant’s journey more unpredictable than ever. Meanwhile, ransom money keeps the stakes high and, in some cases, the profiteering is stretched into the United States. For example, US street gangs victimize migrants after arrival.

The human-smuggling business crosses over into other criminal activities as well. Some smugglers also traffic humans, many of whom are forced into prostitution; other smugglers have branched into trafficking drugs. Migrants themselves are forcibly recruited by criminal gangs, especially in Mexico. Some of these migrants have become “soldiers” for large criminal operations, while others are forced to move small quantities of drugs by land.



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About the Author



Steven Dudley is Co-Director of InSight Crime, a project based in Medellin, Colombia, that is supported by American University in Washington, DC, and that aims to monitor, analyze, and investigate organized crime in the Americas. Dudley, who has an office at American University, works with a team of five investigators and various contributors throughout the region to give the public a more complete view of how organized crime works in the Americas, as well as its impact on public policy and on communities from the Rio Grande to Patagonia.

As a longtime reporter, investigator, and consultant, he specializes in breaking down security issues on the ground in conflict situations; studying trends and tendencies of organized crime; analyzing political crises; reporting on corporate social responsibility, environmental subjects, and human-rights issues; and investigating international and local justice systems.

Mr. Dudley is an expert on Latin America, where he lived for over 15 years, and is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese. He is the author of *Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia* (Psychology Press, 2003), which documents Colombia's civil war.

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