Trafficking in Persons in Central America and Along Mexico's Eastern Migration Routes:
The Role of Transnational Criminal Organizations

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To explain the role of transnational criminal organizations (TCOs, including so-called “drug cartels”) in human trafficking in the countries of the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador) and along Mexico’s eastern migration routes (2 goals, 6 objectives).

Special emphasis was made on the subject of "forced labor for criminal activities" (activities related to drug cartels and transnational gangs or pandillas) in Central America and along Mexico's northeastern border.
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Hypothesis

Massive forced displacements of Central American people escaping from violence and extreme poverty

Cases of sex trafficking and labor trafficking along the migration routes—that allegedly involve Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs) and are intimately linked to migrant smuggling

Limitations of justice systems in the continent, and the need to further investigate these phenomena
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 with labor and sex trafficking rings.

Objective 4. To better understand the phenomenon of “opportunistic trafficking,” (participation of migrants in TCOs’ activities, such as the 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.

**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) along Mexico’s eastern migration routes from Central America to Mexico’s northeastern border in sex trafficking, opportunistic trafficking, and other types 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.
Method: Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations in the researched trafficking areas;

Project duration: 18-months;

Field sites: Mexico City, key trafficking areas along Mexico’s eastern migration routes, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala;

Interview average duration: approx. 1h 30m [Note: the duration of interviews with migrants varies substantially; sometimes migrants were interviewed in groups];
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- # of shelters/migrant facilities: 25

  [Note: Includes visits to airports in San Salvador, Guatemala City and Honduras; INSAMI (Instituto Salvadoreño del Migrante); and ARG (Asociación de Retornados Guatemaltecos)]

- # of migrants interviewed (in transit and repatriated): 140

- # of law enforcement agents, experts/academics, shelter workers, human rights NGOs/practitioners, and others: 255

- # of prisoners interviewed: 11

406 interviews
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Shelters and other 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 (Iztepec, Oaxaca)
Shelters and other migrant facilities

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)


20. *Instituto Salvadoreño del Migrante* (INSAMI)

21. *Asociación de Retornados Guatemaltecos* (ARG)


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)
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Maps and routes

“La Bestia” (The Beast)
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Mexico Eastern Migration Routes
- Red: San Salvador -> Medias Aguas
- Blue: San Pedro Sula -> Medias Aguas
- Black: Medias Aguas -> Saltillo -> Piedras Negras / Nuevo Laredo / Reynosa
- Orange: Coatzacoalcos -> Reynosa / Matamoros
- Purple: Tenosique -> Cancun
- Green: Belize -> Cancun

Guatemala / Mexico Border Blind Spots
Deportations from US

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Sex Trafficking
- Domestic (current)
- Domestic (past)
- International (current)
- International (past)

Sources: Fieldwork (2015 / 2016); Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera and Maria Fernanda Machuca. Topography: ESRI, INEGI; Elaboration: Dawid Wladyka (UTRGV)
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Forced Labor for Criminal Activities

- Domestic (current)
- Domestic (past)
- International (current)
- International (past)

Sources: Fieldwork (2015 / 2016); Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera and Maria Fernanda Machuca. Topography: ESRI, INEGI; Elaboration: Dawid Wlodyka (UTRGV)
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.