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Joined at the Hip: Organized Crime and Illegal Immigration

Key Points

- Criminal organizations are largely responsible for the violence that permeates Mexico and the Northern Triangle and serve as a major motivation for people to leave their homes and migrate north.
- Most organized crime along smuggling routes to the U.S. resembles that of a governing authority: Criminal organizations control swaths of territory, regulate which routes can be used and when, and tax the smugglers and migrants who want to use them.
- Transnational criminal organizations also sometimes use migrant crossings to distract and overwhelm U.S. Border Patrol agents ahead of drug shipments.

Executive Summary

The longstanding debate over illegal immigration in America has focused on Mexico, Central America, and the southern border. While the vast majority of illegal aliens crossing the border are not members of criminal organizations and have no intention of committing crimes in the United States, organized crime in Mexico and Central America nevertheless plays an integral role in the illegal migration of aliens into the United States.

This paper explores the relationship between organized crime and illegal immigration. A common view is that Mexican criminal organizations merely provide the guidance and means of transportation over the last few miles into the United States. This study finds instead that criminal organizations are involved at every stage of the process, from motivating migrant departures for the United States to security along human smuggling routes through Mexico, to the mechanisms for entering the United States undetected.

Organized crime in Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala can be divided into two broad categories: transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and transnational gangs (TGs). The largest TCOs in the region include the Mexico-based Sinaloa Federation and the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generacion (CJNG), as well as remnants of the Los Zetas paramilitary organization (Zetas Vieja Escuela and Cartel del Noreste) and Gulf Cartel. The TGs in the region can be broadly divided into the El Salvador-based MS-13 and 18th Street gangs. TCOs are complex organizations existing primarily for the purpose of perpetrating crimes worldwide for monetary profit, whereas TGs are focused on control of geographic areas of Central America and the United States and the commission of crimes, primarily extortion, kidnaping, and drug trafficking, within those areas.

The brutal violence and unchecked extortion perpetrated by TGs in the Northern Triangle, targeting both civilian populations and rival gang members, motivate decisions to uproot lives and families in the hope of a better, safer life in America. In a 2018 survey, 39% of immigrants from those areas cited threats to themselves or their families as their primary motivation for leaving ([Bermeo, 2018](#)).

TCOs control, regulate, and tax every land port along the southern border. They also control smuggling routes through Mexico and impose a tax, called a *piso*, on the smugglers and migrants who use them. The TCOs control the flow of migrant caravans, strategically diverting Border Patrol resources from sectors of the border that are used to smuggle illegal drugs into the United States.

Organized Crime and Illegal Migration

Violence and a Motivation to Flee

The ubiquitous presence of MS-13 and 18th Street cliques throughout the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala remains a primary motivator for migration from those countries to the United States. A 2017 study conducted on migration from the Northern Triangle countries by Doctors Without Borders found that 57% of Hondurans and 67% of Salvadorans entering Mexico reported not feeling safe at home ([Doctors Without Borders, 2017, p. 10](#)).¹ One third of those migrants had been exposed to violence perpetrated by a non-family member. According to the study, “45.4 percent of Hondurans and 56.2 percent of Salvadorans entering Mexico have lost a family member because of violence in the last two years before they migrated. 31 percent of the Central Americans entering Mexico knew someone who was kidnapped and 17 percent know someone who has disappeared and not been found. The vast majority—72 percent of Hondurans and 70 percent of Salvadorans interviewed—heard regular gunshots in their neighborhoods. Respectively, 75 percent and 79 percent had witnessed a murder or seen a corpse in the previous two years” ([Doctors Without Borders, 2017, p. 10](#)).

As the legitimate job market is unable to support a growing population, the unemployed are forced to decide either to join the local transnational gang or to migrate to the United States.

Violence targeting government actors adds another layer to the security threat posed by TGs in the Northern Triangle. TGs threaten politicians, intimidate police, and bribe public officials. “Deep-rooted violence” is a primary reason for economic instability in the region ([Cheatham, 2019, para. 8](#)). Cheatham reported that the three Northern Triangle countries fall in the lowest quartile for gross domestic product (GDP) per capita among Latin American countries. “Decades of civil war and political instability planted the seeds for the complex criminal ecosystem that plagues the region today, which includes transnational gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Eighteenth Street Gang (M-18)” ([para. 8](#)). The region has been unable to cultivate the necessary infrastructure and political

stability to attract investment and sustain economic development. As the legitimate job market is unable to support a growing population, the unemployed are forced to decide either to join the local TG clique or to migrate to the United States. Violence is thus not just the product of the economic instability. Violence in the region is also a cause of the lack of economic development and opportunity.

While not as prominent as migrants forming the Northern Triangle caravans, Mexican citizens also are sometimes driven by organized crime to migrate to the United States. The predominance of TCO-related violence in Mexico is well documented. “In a classified study produced in 2018 but not previously reported, CIA analysts concluded that drug-trafficking groups had gained effective control over about 20 percent of Mexico, according to several current and former U.S. officials” ([Sheridan, 2020, para. 7](#)). The State Department recently issued a travel advisory against visiting 16 different Mexican states due to COVID-19 and the prevalence of “crime and kidnapping,” ([Department of State, 2020](#)). According to a *Washington Post* article ([Sheridan, 2020](#)), “the Mexican government denies it has lost control of any part of the country. But in a little-noticed passage in its security plan last year, it likened crime groups to insurgents, with ‘a level of organization, firepower and territorial control comparable to what armed political groups have had in other places’” ([para. 8](#)).

The security challenges in Mexico are as diverse as the country’s geography and are intertwined with the corruption endemic to the Mexican government. In the western state of Sinaloa and surrounding areas, the Sinaloa Federation has geographic and, at times, political control. When a son of Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman was arrested in October 2019, the Federation besieged the city of Culiacan and coerced the Mexican government into releasing him ([Sheridan, 2020](#)). The country’s seaports from Veracruz in the east to Manzanillo in the west are controlled by CJNG, which is also in bloody conflicts with the Sinaloa Federation to control land ports near Tijuana and Juarez. In other land ports along the Texas border, the Cartel del Noreste, Zetas Vieja Escuela and Gulf Cartel remnants fight for control using military-grade artillery.

The Last Few Miles: Coyotes, Smugglers, and Traffickers

For those who choose to leave the Northern Triangle for a better life in America, the escape from TG-controlled territory leads them into TCO-controlled territory. The Cato Institute, the Center for Immigration Studies, and the Heritage Foundation all acknowledge that TCOs exert some level of influence over illegal border crossings. At

¹ The sample size of the Doctors Without Borders study was somewhat small (under 500 people surveyed) and may not have been representative of the migrant population leaving the Northern Triangle.

times, such influence involves direct control over human smuggling operations in their territories. More often, TCOs tax and regulate illegal border crossings. The Cato Institute describes the journey to and through the border: “Immigrants pay thousands of dollars to smugglers to get here. Then, most wait in lines at the fence to turn themselves in to Border Patrol agents and request asylum. ... After 180 days, they can apply for a work permit, and when most are denied asylum, they still stay illegally” ([Bier, 2019, para. 8](#)). The Heritage Foundation echoes the same sentiment and describes the TCOs as “the most serious criminal threat to both Mexico and the United States” due to their involvement in the trafficking of illicit goods and their “spread [of] human misery” ([Quintana, 2019, para. 2](#)).

Smugglers have clients while traffickers have captives.

The Migrant Policy Institute describes the plight of the migrant through Mexico. Gilardi ([2020](#)) starts by distinguishing between smugglers and traffickers: “Smugglers have clients while traffickers have captives” ([para. 3](#)). Gilardi also observes that these categories overlap and can even shift from smuggler to trafficker as the journey proceeds. The relationship between smuggler and client is described as “complex, multifaceted” and “the closer migrants perceive smugglers to be engaged with criminal enterprises (such as drug trafficking), the less likely they are trust to [*sic*] them” ([paras. 1, 6](#)). Gilardi finds that smugglers hold massive influence over the lives and journeys of migrants seeking to enter the U.S. through the southern border. While smugglers not directly affiliated with TCOs try to operate as independently as possible from TCOs, their lack of connection to the local TCO is only a matter of degree and never complete.

Human smugglers range from independent operators and loose networks to subsidiaries of the TCOs themselves ([Greenfield et al., 2019](#)). TCOs maintain control of smuggling routes and impose a tax, a *piso*, on the migrants and smugglers who operate in their territory. The RAND Corporation’s estimate of total *pisos* paid to TCOs by migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador “ranged from about \$30 million to \$180 million in 2017” ([Greenfield et al., 2019, p. xvi](#)).

The amount charged by the TCO varies based on how many migrants are to cross and when they cross. TCOs will time migrant crossings to distract and overwhelm U.S. Border Patrol agents, enabling the crossing of more profitable drug shipments at other locations ([Gilardi, 2020](#)). TCOs thus

take advantage of the agents’ preoccupation with migrant groups as cover to move their drug shipments across the border unmolested ([Gilardi, 2020](#)), allowing for TCOs to profit from both a completed drug shipment and the *piso* collected from migrants using their territory.

In early 2020 the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) focused on illegal crossings between Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. The Mexican side is controlled by the Cartel del Noreste, and Laredo is the second busiest port in the United States ([Arthur, 2020](#)). According to CIS, no unauthorized migrants can move into the United States through the area without the permission of the TCO. The behavior of migrants in this sector is also substantially different from the behavior of migrants elsewhere along the border ([Arthur, 2020](#)). Specifically, they are substantially more averse to capture once they have crossed the border, at times resorting to violence when approached by Border Patrol officers. In other sectors, illegal aliens more often rush to turn themselves in. Additionally, whereas 65% of migrants apprehended near other ports along the southern border in FY2019 were family units or unaccompanied children, around Laredo nearly 90% of apprehensions were single adults ([Arthur, 2020](#)).

TCOs also sometimes use migrants as drug mules. The TCOs will coerce migrants traveling through their territory into carrying large bags, or *mochilas*, filled with illegal drugs ([Burnett, 2011](#)). “‘They hit us, threw us on the ground, searched us and took our money,’ one immigrant said, ‘then they told us if we didn’t smuggle drugs for them, they would kill us. They didn’t give us any other option’” ([para. 4](#)). Not only does this perpetuate the stream of illicit drugs into the U.S., it also victimizes migrants, making them desperate to unlawfully enter and remain in the U.S.—even if imprisoned on drug charges—for fear of being killed by a TCO if they are sent home ([Burnett, 2011](#)).

Thus, while Mexican TCOs occasionally engage directly in human smuggling and use migrants as a medium for trafficking drugs, most of their involvement in illegal immigration resembles that of a governing authority. They control the territory, regulate which routes are used and when, and tax the smugglers and migrants who use them.

Conclusion

International criminal organizations, whether TGs or TCOs, are involved at every step of the journey from Central America to the United States. The violence they perpetrate against other criminal organizations, government actors, and civilians drives unlawful migration to the United States. Where a criminal justice system is unable to protect citizens and businesses, unemployment flourishes, economic opportunity dwindles, and the incentive to leave

for a better life in the United States becomes the driving force of migration.

Mexican TCOs control smuggling routes and regulate travel across land ports. Smugglers and migrants are forced to pay a tax to the TCO in order to use the route or port controlled by the TCO. The TCOs also profit from migratory caravans by regulating and timing border crossings in order to distract Border Patrol agents and enable smuggling of illegal drugs into the United States. TCOs also sometimes use illegal aliens as drug mules, forcing them to carry illegal drugs across the border.

This bleak picture of the relationship between organized crime and illegal migration poses difficult questions for policymakers. How does the U.S. respond to such threats originating in other countries? Past cooperation between

U.S. and Mexican governments has yielded, at best, a mixed bag of results. As a prior TPPF study found, these cooperative efforts are only effective when Mexico is fully engaged and not operating at the behest of a TCO ([Davidson, 2020](#)).

The United States's best course of action is to continue bolstering border security and reform existing immigration law in order to de-incentivize illegal crossings. Specifically, larger numbers of Border Patrol officers would prevent TCOs from successfully moving illegal drugs across with the distraction of human smuggling groups. Better technology would enable agents to locate tunnels used to cross illegal aliens and illegal drugs. Finally, a concerted effort to improve the criminal justice systems and build the economies in the Northern Triangle countries would likewise provide a disincentive to illegal migration into the U.S. ★

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