Cracking Down on the Illegal Human Smuggling of Migrants Into the United States

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Key Points

- More than 2 million people were smuggled around the world in 2016.

- Smuggling has become a multi-billion-dollar business for criminal organizations, including cartels.

- As illegal crossings at the U.S.–Mexico border continue to increase, so do the risks for migrants of being victims of smuggling.

- Laws against smuggling should be strictly enforced to deter people from engaging in human smuggling within our borders.

Due to the inability of numerous countries worldwide to effectively tackle prevalent issues such as violence, corruption, political oppression, food shortages, and security within their own borders, a significant number of their citizens are motivated to flee their home countries and come to the United States using smuggling networks. Smuggling involves two or more parties initially collaborating voluntarily to come together for transportation across international borders in exchange for financial or material compensation. Unfortunately, many migrants on this arduous journey become victims of trafficking or human rights violations. Rather than fulfilling its crucial role as the primary defender of our communities against such exploitations, the federal government has neglected its responsibility to secure the border. It is therefore time for Texas to step up.

Human smuggling is "the facilitation, transportation, attempted transportation, or illegal entry of a person or persons across an international border, in violation of one or more countries' laws, either clandestinely or through deception, whether with the use of fraudulent documents or through the evasion of legitimate border control" (White House, 2011, p. 6).

Smuggling is an especially pervasive tool for individuals seeking to come to the United States, and a highly profitable enterprise for those who smuggle migrants to the United States.

- According to the U.N., in 2016, there was a minimum of 2.5 million migrants who were smuggled worldwide (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018, pp. 22–23).

- According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), in recent years, 80% to 95% of those apprehended at the U.S. border attempting illegal entry used a smuggler (DHS, 2019, p. 62).

- DHS estimates Mexican and Central American migrants may pay smugglers as much as $1,200 as an initial payment and up to $8,000 after reaching their final destination in the United States (DHS, 2019, p. 62).

- Other sources estimate that fees can be much higher. The U.N., for example, indicates that a smuggling operation from Central America across

Mexico to Texas can cost as much as $15,000 (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018, p. 47).

- The U.N estimated that in 2016, smuggling generated between $5.5 billion and $7 billion worldwide (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018, pp. 22–23).

- The RAND Corporation estimates that smuggling networks that smuggled migrants from the Northern Triangle countries to the United States alone made between $200 million and $2.3 billion in 2017 (Greenfield et al., 2019, p. 35). These organizations are now likely making even more money, as the number of people seeking to cross the southern border to come to the U.S. has skyrocketed (Gramlich, 2023).

- There is evidence that there are alternatives to monetary payment for smuggling fees, including smuggling illicit drugs or other items across the border, or working off debts upon arrival (DHS, 2019, p. 62).

Smugglers offer an array of services, including transportation, guiding, and escorting to facilitate illegal border crossing. They offer accommodations along the route, provide counterfeit travel documents, engage in corrupt payments, and possess extensive expertise in navigating routes. They also appear to be very familiar with American immigration laws and assessing the capabilities of border security.

Central America and Mexico are both the primary origin and transit areas for smuggled migrants traveling to the United States—primarily due to geographical proximity and family and cultural ties (U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018, p. 94). Most foreign nationals who attempt illegal entry into the United States and are apprehended at the southern border are from Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala; however, migrants from all over the world also use their services.

The Mexican drug cartels are running a billion-dollar slave trade, ravaging our state with human smuggling, drug trafficking, and escalating violence. Combating these cartels and putting an end to the illegal smuggling of migrants into the United States is an immensely challenging task. Mexican drug cartels exercise complete control over the border, recently labeled the deadliest in the world. Their actions are wreaking havoc on our communities as they exploit and mistreat migrants when they take their perilous journey across the Texas–Mexico border (Jordan, 2022). There is also another concerning trend emerging: an escalating competition among criminal organizations seeking to assert their dominance over regional drug markets and the smuggling routes leading into the United States.

Unfortunately, we can't count on the Mexican government to be our ally on this because there is abundant evidence that the Mexican state is intertwined with organized crime, which in turn has led to elements of that state—for example, police and military—victimizing and oppressing the very citizens they are meant to protect (Treviño, 2022). It is undeniable that there has been a massive loss and/or handover of Mexican sovereignty over its territory in past years, with estimates suggesting that up to 35%–40% of Mexico is under direct cartel rule (Davidson, 2021).

The collusion between the Mexican state and drug cartels has resulted in a deadly trade involving the trafficking of fentanyl, widespread corruption, and the enslavement of millions of individuals, not only in Mexico but also in the United States. This collusion makes it highly unlikely for Texas or the U.S. to establish a reliable partnership for border security with Mexico. Texas has the right to defend itself against the crimes committed by Mexican drug cartels within its borders, including human smuggling. Within constitutional bounds, Texas has the option to take actions that hold these cartels accountable and directly contribute to the safety and security of its communities.

The time has come to assertively uphold our laws and take decisive action against criminal organizations. Given the lack of trust in the federal government's ability to do it, Texas must step up, with its full constitutional powers brought to bear. It is necessary to help create safer communities and send a strong message to criminal organizations and their members that their illegal activities will not be tolerated in Texas, and that they will face severe consequences if they are caught. ★

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Ford Maldonado is the policy director for the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Secure and Sovereign Texas campaign, which strives to keep our nation safe and free. Melissa's work and expertise is focused on policies that secure the border and restore the rule of law as we fix and improve legal immigration to the United States. Melissa writes about foreign policy, public safety, drug cartels, and organized crime.

Melissa was born and raised in Cochabamba, Bolivia, but now calls Texas home. She moved to Tyler, Texas for college, and after completing a semester as a Bill Archer fellow in Washington D.C., she graduated from the University of Texas at Tyler in 2018 with bachelor's degrees in Economics and Political Science.

Prior to joining the Foundation, Melissa served at the White House under President Donald Trump, first in the Office of American Innovation and later in the Domestic Policy Council. After the President left office, Melissa worked for the Center for Advancing Opportunity, a research and education initiative in Washington D.C.

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