



Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Menacing Threat to the U.S. Homeland

Testimony Before the House Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence

By Melissa Ford Maldonado

Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Melissa Ford Maldonado, and I am the policy director for Secure & Sovereign Texas, an initiative of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit and nonpartisan research institution based in Austin, Texas.

Much of my work focuses on the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico, and the center of that relationship, Texas and Mexico. Texas and Mexico not only share a heritage and culture, but also 1,200 miles of common border and a massively important trade alliance. However, this close relationship and proximity has left a door open for illegal activity from Mexico to harm the U.S., especially Texas.

The Secure & Sovereign Texas campaign has done extensive research on Mexican transnational criminal organizations, specifically drug cartels, and why they pose a grave and imminent threat to the safety and well-being of families and communities in Texas and in the United States. I want to share with you what we've seen and learned.

Today, the flow of humans being smuggled, opioids, and poisonous illegal narcotics are driven by Mexican drug cartels. These drug cartels are ruthless, strategic, highly organized money-making entities that continue to evolve in strength and sophistication. They are running a billion-dollar slave trade, and are richer, more armed, and bolder than ever. This is leading to a lot of suffering at the border and beyond the border as well. Texas citizens and communities are being devastated by crime, drugs, a humanitarian crisis, and an unprecedented level of violence.

Smugglers are profiting from pushing people across our border, and it has been heartbreaking to see literally millions of migrants being smuggled—and often abused—across the Texas–Mexico border in the worst conditions possible. Mexican drug cartels have complete control over the southern side of the border. There are [record numbers of migrants dying at the U.S.-Mexico border](#), and a UN report recently labeled it the most dangerous and [deadliest land crossing in the world](#).

Maverick County Sheriff Tom Schmerber, who grew up in the area, [called the border a graveyard](#), saying he's been working on the border for almost four decades but has never seen tragedies of this magnitude. Local officials in Eagle Pass, Texas, are having to keep a refrigerated truck to hold the bodies of migrants who drown in the currents of the Rio Grande while trying to cross the border into the U.S. Across the river, families having picnics or walking along the waterfront promenade of Piedras Negras, Mexico, say they sometimes see bodies floating by or bobbing among the reeds under a bridge. “We had times when we received four or five bodies a week,” said Hugo González, owner of Funerarias González in Piedras Negras. “At one point, there were a lot of corpses and there was nowhere to put them. We just didn't have enough refrigerators at the funeral home.”

In the 2022 fiscal year that ended in September, [the bodies of more than 890 migrants](#), a record number, were recovered by U.S. authorities along the border, a 58% increase over 2021, and far higher than the 247 to 329 deceased found each year

between 2014 and 2020. Unfortunately, [the number of actual deaths is likely higher](#), as other local agencies often recover bodies without involvement from U.S. Customs and Border Patrol.

There are countless heartbreaking stories of cartel-orchestrated human smuggling in Texas. Less than a year ago, [a trailer with more than 60 migrants](#) locked inside was abandoned by a smuggler near San Antonio. Fifty-three of them died after being left in the heat. This is terribly sad. The men, women, and children who died in that hot trailer were just looking for a better life, but cartels saw them as disposable commodities to be exploited and discarded. That's why we must work hard to target those that are using them and profiting from their illegal crossings the most.

Regrettably, it is a grim reality that cartels exploit the most vulnerable, specifically targeting women and young girls. Rape, assault, and sexual slavery are everyday life for the women and children who attempt to cross. In our investigations, we have conducted interviews with Border Patrol agents and engaged with individuals involved in supporting and safeguarding female migrants. They estimate that an overwhelming majority of female migrants face some form of sexual assault during their journey toward the U.S. Furthermore, they have alerted us to a concerning surge in instances of child sex trafficking.

The impact on the Texas side of the border is equally disheartening. Exploiting the porosity of our border, cartel operatives have expanded their operations into the United States, inflicting turmoil upon our border communities. Texan ranchers and homeowners often find themselves confronted with armed smugglers trespassing on their land, engaging in theft, destruction, arson, and property invasion.

Individuals residing in border towns have shared with us their profound sense of insecurity within their own homes. Many now find themselves unable to roam their properties unarmed, and their children are no longer allowed to play outside. One of these women is Dolores Chacon, whom we met about three weeks ago in El Paso. She lives in a small home on the El Paso–Mexico border. In 2008, a fence was erected right behind her home, which she now calls her freedom wall. Before that, she says her property was constantly getting broken into and vandalized, which left her constantly terrified in her own home. Many of her neighbors moved away because of this.

Many Texas communities are also seeing an increasing number of high-speed car chases in usually quiet little towns, placing residents at risk. In March, [a human smuggler in Ozona, Texas](#), killed Emilia, a 7-year-old girl, and her 71-year-old grandmother while trying to escape police. The smuggler also killed two of the 11 illegal immigrants he was transporting.

Another disturbing trend we are witnessing involves [the recruitment of American teenagers by cartels](#) through popular social media platforms such as Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others. These platforms serve as avenues for enticing young individuals with the promise of quick cash in exchange for transporting migrants into the United States.

In February, [a 15-year-old led police on a high-speed chase](#) in Mission, Texas, that ended with seven migrants bailing out of the vehicle on a dirt road. That same month, [a 12-year-old and 15-year-old transporting illegal immigrants](#) near San Antonio, Texas, crashed their vehicle while trying to outrun cops in a high-speed chase. [Last August](#), a 15-year-old girl transporting migrants in El Paso led police on a high-speed chase which ended in a multi-vehicle wreck.

The smuggling of migrants is often used as a diversion to overwhelm Border Patrol agents, who are [increasingly assaulted](#) doing their job. Since October of last year, [248 Border Patrol agents have been assaulted](#) at the southern border.

All these occurrences have a huge impact on the local economy and quality of life of communities in Texas, but it is not just a local issue anymore—this is affecting the entire country.

Mexican drug cartels are responsible for the smuggling not only of humans but of record amounts of illegal drugs into the United States, the former being used to help facilitate the latter.

Whether transported by the criminals themselves or smuggled by the migrants on the orders of their coyotes, drugs are coming across the border in record amounts, and people are dying in record numbers in what has become the deadliest drug crisis in history.

Texas law enforcement has [seized 418 million lethal doses of fentanyl](#) since the beginning of Operation Lone Star in 2021. That is enough to kill every man, woman, and child in America.

[Over 107,000 Americans died from drug overdoses](#) in the 12-month period ending in January 2022, and we've had more than [1,000,000 American drug overdose deaths since 1999](#).

Fentanyl is involved in [more deaths of Americans under 50 than any cause of death](#), including heart disease, cancer, homicide, suicide, and accidents.

More Americans are dying each year from drugs than were killed in the entire Vietnam War—and the death toll is rising every day.

One of the most disturbing parts of this is that Mexican drug cartels often [process deadly amounts of fentanyl into pills](#) made to look like any other prescription medicine. One mother, Rebecca Kiessling, [shared her story](#) when she testified before the Homeland Security Subcommittee on Border Security earlier this year, after both her sons, Caleb, 20, and Kylan, 18, were killed by prescription pain pills that ended up being laced with fentanyl.

Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and Members of the Subcommittee, I believe that Mexican criminal organizations are the largest criminal threat to the U.S. right now. Texas is working hard to fight them with every means possible, but we need help, and it is past time to take decisive action to protect American communities.

I'd like to conclude by making two points:

The federal government has failed to fulfill its duty to secure the border and protect the people of Texas and the U.S.

The Mexican state is no longer a partner to the United States. There is irrefutable evidence of [extensive collusion between the Mexican state and criminal cartels](#) at all levels of government. [Cartels effectively control 30% to 40% of Mexico's territory](#) and together, they are conducting a deadly export trade, trafficking in fentanyl, corruption, and worst of all, literally millions of fellow human beings. This collusion makes it impossible for the U.S. and Mexico to have a reliable border security partnership.

It is crucial that we approach the border situation with a realistic perspective and respond accordingly. The border is already militarized from the southern side, and the cooperation with the Mexican state ceased a long time ago because the Mexican government would much rather cooperate with cartels than with us. In light of these circumstances, we must implement robust measures and utilize the full strength and capabilities of the United States to effectively address the border crisis.

Thank you for your time. I am grateful for your leadership, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

About Texas Public Policy Foundation

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