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# MIGRANT SMUGGLING ALONG MEXICO'S HIGHWAY SYSTEM

STEPHANIE LEUTERT AND CAITLYN YATES



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The Robert Strauss Center's Mexico Security Initiative (MSI) research program at the Strauss Center launched in 2016. MSI is an effort to spur sophisticated inquiry into the causes, dimensions, and consequences of transnational crime and violence as well as the adequacy of past, present, and potential U.S. and Mexican policy responses.

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## INTRODUCTION

On July 23, 2017, Mexican and Central American migrants stumbled out of a trailer left outside a Walmart in San Antonio, looking for water and help after spending hours inside a cargo truck despite southern Texas' intense summer heat. When law enforcement officials arrived on the scene, they found 30 severely dehydrated migrants and another 10 that had died as the temperatures soared and oxygen became scarce.<sup>1</sup> The tragedy focused attention on how smugglers use cargo trucks to move irregular migrants in the United States, but this form of migrant smuggling is neither new nor constrained to South Texas.

In the popular imagination surrounding migration through Mexico, the infamous train network “La Bestia” looms large. The images of hundreds or even thousands of migrants clinging to trains have defined the migration itself and Mexico's migratory policies. Yet, despite being the most visible form of migration through Mexico, only a small percent, estimated between 10 and 20 percent, of transit migrants ride the train on their journey north to the United States.<sup>2</sup> Since Mexico announced Plan Frontera Sur in July 2014—the country's latest border security and immigration strategy—this number has dipped even lower. This paper addresses how smugglers bypass the train network to move migrants north in buses, trailers, and private vehicles along Mexico's highway system. By analyzing cases from both before and after Plan Frontera Sur, this paper documents migrants' increasing reliance on more invisible forms of transportation.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a mixed-methods approach toward analyzing human smuggling. It is based on the results from an innovative secondary source database, which includes 179 entries of human smuggling along the U.S. and Mexican highway systems in the period from 2003 through August 2017. The database collected open-source reports on the vehicle types, smuggled migrants' demographics, location where the migrants were found, and when available, information on the smugglers and their practices. The database's objective was not to be comprehensive, but rather to shine a

systematic light on a form of human smuggling that is often invisible.

This approach has two principal shortcomings. First, the database compiles open-source reports from local and national Mexican and U.S. newspapers and only captures the instances of human smuggling that were deemed sufficiently newsworthy. To mitigate this challenge, the database was compared against data requested and received from Mexico's Attorney General's office (PGR), surveys of deported Central American migrants conducted by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF), and also augmented by interviews and targeted open-source research. The second shortcoming lies in the newspaper articles' heterogeneity. While some news reports described the incidents in great detail, others used only broad language (i.e. listing migrants' specific nationalities versus referring to them as “Central Americans”). A methodology was created to try to combine these varying accounts and is detailed below.

## TRANSIT MIGRATION AND MIGRATORY POLICY IN MEXICO

While Mexico is a sending, transit, and destination country for international migration, this paper will focus exclusively on its role as a transit country for migrants traveling north to reach the United States' southern border. Over the past five decades, the number of migrants in transit through the country has increased, with greater numbers of Central and South American migrants and, more recently, migrants from outside of Latin America.<sup>3</sup> As the migration flows have historically fluctuated, so too has Mexico's policy and legal framework for addressing migration.

For decades, Mexico's laws and policies toward transit migration followed a generally restrictive approach. The 1974 General Population Law (Ley General de Población) criminalized irregular migration, punishing offenders with two years in jail or up to ten years for illegal reentry after deportation.<sup>4</sup> Just under three decades later, in June 2001, Mexico announced Plan Sur, the first major policy initiative to stop Central





Americans from transiting through the country. The program rounded up migrants crossing through Mexico, with 832,000 deportations from July 2001 through December 2005 (93 percent from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras).<sup>5</sup>

Yet in the mid 2000s, as U.S. lawmakers were debating immigration reform, Mexico came under fire for its poor treatment of Central American migrants. The result was a 2008 reform that changed migrants' unauthorized entry and presence in Mexico from a criminal offense to an administrative infraction. In continuation with these changes and spurred on by the gruesome 2010 massacre of 72 migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, Mexico overhauled its migration system in 2011 with the Migratory Law (*Ley de Migración*). The progressive law covered migrants' rights and obligations; the role and guidelines for migratory authorities; the framework for international human movement through Mexico; information on sanctions; and migratory crimes. Importantly, this was the first law in Mexico's history that specifically addressed migration issues, rather than lumping them together with other demographic issues related to the Mexican-born population.

However, despite Mexico's new laws that heralded migrants' rights, the country's immigration enforcement became increasingly strict. In July 2014, amid the spike in the numbers of unaccompanied minors and families leaving Central America and arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border, the Mexican government announced Plan Frontera Sur. This latest initiative was a five-point plan to secure the border and make migration more orderly. It bolstered security throughout southern Mexico, increased the number of checkpoints along Mexico's highway system, and cracked down on transit migration through stepped up enforcement operations. The Mexican government reported that the number of migratory operations involving security forces tripled from approximately 150 a month pre Plan Frontera Sur to 650 a month after the initiative's implementation.<sup>6</sup> Overall apprehensions also increased from 2013 to 2014, rising by 223 percent, 101 percent, and 47 percent in the southern states of Quintana Roo, Tabasco, and Chiapas, respectively.

Currently, Mexico is in the midst of another wave of transit migration, with today's migrants leaving in search of economic betterment, family reunification, and safety from Central America's gangs and widespread violence against women. Yet, enforcement continues to be Mexico's top immigration priority, and Plan Frontera Sur is just the latest iteration of this policy trend.<sup>7</sup> With stronger enforcement along the railways, migrants have increasingly sought to cross Mexico through less visible routes. As this paper suggests, these invisible means of transportation include a greater reliance on cargo trucks and other vehicles.

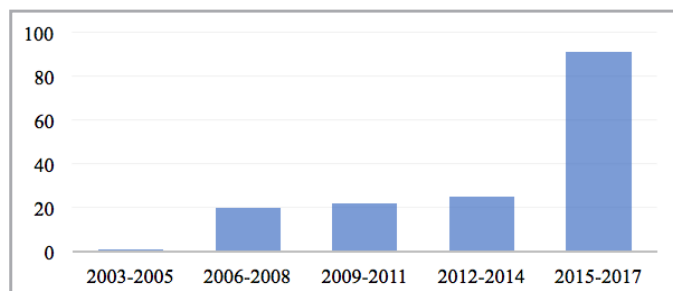
## SHIFTING SMUGGLING ROUTES

As Mexico's immigration officials stepped up their enforcement operations through Plan Frontera Sur, the numbers of migrants relying on Mexico's train network began to decrease. While migrant shelter workers and human rights defenders have anecdotally confirmed this trend, this section supplements these testimonies by measuring Central American migrants' transportation methods through COLEF surveys taken along the Mexico-Guatemala border.<sup>8</sup>

Since Plan Frontera Sur's implementation, migrants have reported a diminished reliance on Mexico's train network, coupled with a simultaneous increase in their use of vehicles. In the two years prior to Plan Frontera Sur, an average of 18 percent of Central Americans reported taking the trains during their last trip through Mexico. Yet in 2014—as the number of immigration enforcement operations increased—the percent of migrants' reporting that they used trains to cross Mexico dropped to 12 percent. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in the number of irregular migrants reporting that they used vehicles at one point in their journey through Mexico. For private vehicles, this percentage rose from 16 percent pre-Plan Frontera Sur to 26 percent in 2016, for buses it jumped from 86 percent to 93 percent, and for cargo trailers it inched up slightly from 9 percent to 10 percent.<sup>9</sup>

The dataset also reflects migrants' greater reliance on vehicles. From May 2003 to June 2014, the dataset records 62 cases of human smuggling in vehicles

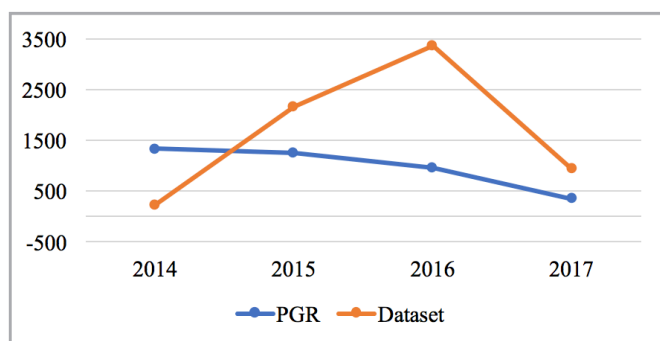
within Mexico, compared to 95 cases from July 2014 through August 2017. This five-fold increase in vehicle smuggling incidences is in part explained by Plan Frontera Sur's higher number of highway checkpoints. However, when combined with survey data, the higher number of cases, compared to previous years, also appears to be at least partly aligned with shifting transportation trends.



Graph 1: Cases of Migrant Smuggling Incidences by Year

## STRUCTURE OF MIGRANT SMUGGLING IN VEHICLES

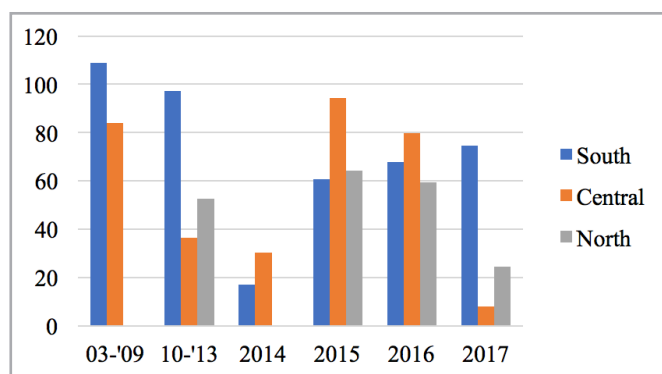
Overall, the dataset includes 11,720 non-Mexican irregular migrants who were apprehended in vehicles while traveling through Mexico. Since 2014, the dataset registered 6,253 migrants (50 percent of the total number). For each year other than 2014, the dataset recorded a higher number of apprehended migrants in vehicles than were registered with Mexico's Attorney General Office (Procuraduría General de la República).



Graph 2: Database and PGR Data (January 2014- August 2017)

**Vehicles Used in Human Smuggling.** Migrants are transported across Mexico in a range of vehicles, from buses to private cars, trucks to trailers. In the open-source dataset put together for this paper, the cargo truck was the most commonly reported vehicle for migrant smuggling, totaling 74 percent of the published reports throughout Mexico's newspapers. Cargo trucks' prominence in the dataset likely stems from the newsworthy nature of their discovery, given the high numbers of migrants hidden inside each cargo truck.

Over the past fifteen years, the average number of migrants in each cargo truck appear to have decreased. In the early 2000s the average cargo truck apprehended in Mexico held over 100 migrants, and prior to Plan Frontera Sur it averaged around 88 migrants per vehicle. However, after July 2014, the number has continued to plummet, with an average of 65 migrants found inside each apprehended cargo truck. (See Graph 2 for a detailed breakdown of the average number of migrants in each trailer by year and geographic region of Mexico).



Graph 3: Average Migrant Count per Vehicle, Year, and Region<sup>3</sup>

Migrants traveling in cargo trucks are hidden in the back compartments of the vehicles, and 11 percent were not just sitting or standing in the back, but concealed through extra efforts, such as being hidden behind bushels of broccoli or laying under double floors. Some of these trucks are equipped with refrigeration systems (for carrying produce) or have fans to keep air circulating. The dataset also documents cases of migrants who were transported in both commercial buses and private vehicles, including an Uber driver

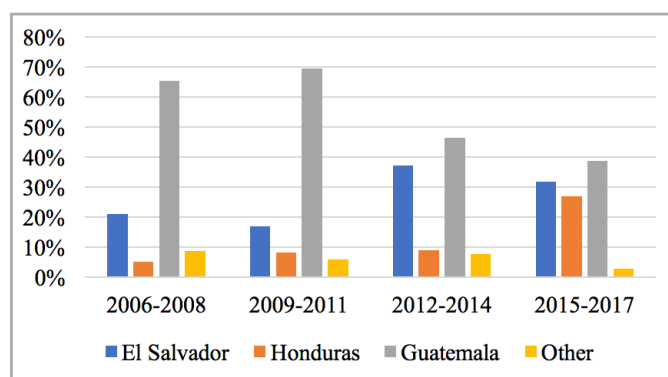


who was paid to drive migrants from the state of Sonora to the state of Chihuahua. In a June 2016 case in Mexico City, which appears to be an outlier, smugglers tied up a bus driver, stuffed him in the bus' onboard bathroom, loaded the bus with migrants, and then attempted to drive north along the Mexico City – Querétaro highway, where authorities ultimately detained the bus.

The newspaper articles do not explain how the migrant smugglers obtained the vehicles that they used to smuggle migrants, but the license plates—when listed in the news articles—are generally registered in the geographic zone where the vehicles were discovered. For example, in Chiapas, the reported license plates were either from Chiapas or the surrounding states, although one license plate was from the more distant state of Jalisco. Migrant smugglers also use different methods to disguise their operations. In Coahuila and Tamaulipas, there were incidents of trucks and vans that used Servicio Público Federal license plates (that are used by federal vehicles that are not registered in any particular state) in order to pass through checkpoints without being inspected. There are also cases of trucks attempting to disguise themselves as humanitarian service providers to avoid revisions. One truck in Oaxaca carrying 83 Central Americans had a fake Red Cross logo plastered on its side and another truck packed with 164 migrants from Honduras and Guatemala was discovered in Chiapas with the words “Para Nuestros Hermanos de Tabasco” painted on its sides to appear as if it was bringing aid to a recently flooded zone in the state of Tabasco.

***Demographics of Apprehended Migrants.*** There is no general profile of a migrant traveling through Mexico via vehicles, with gender, nationality, and age varying throughout the documented cases. However, the most common migrant profile in this database was an adult, Guatemalan male. This demographic did not change following Plan Frontera Sur. However, since July 2014, the dataset reveals an increase in the numbers of Hondurans using trailers to cross through Mexico (74 percent of all the documented Honduran apprehensions occurred after Plan Frontera Sur). COLEF survey data also corroborates this increase, with the percent of Hondurans reporting that they

took trailers during their last trip increasing from 10 percent in 2014 to 24 percent in 2015.<sup>12</sup>



Graph 4: Country of Origin by Year<sup>13</sup>

Despite larger numbers of women transiting through Mexico than in the past (as documented in U.S. and Mexican apprehension data), men continue to make up the majority of migrants apprehended in Mexico and the United States.<sup>14</sup> Women consisted of roughly 20 percent of the population in the open-source dataset, a percent that is consistent throughout the database's timeframe. The lowest number of women apprehended in vehicles occurred in 2016, when women accounted for only 12 percent of apprehended migrants.<sup>15</sup> This is roughly equal to COLEF's surveys for 2016, as women constituted only 11.53 percent of Central American migrants that reported traveling exclusively in trailers.<sup>16</sup> These numbers are slightly lower than Mexico's overall migratory apprehension data, where women constituted 25 percent of the country's migrant apprehensions.<sup>17</sup>

Within the discovered vehicles, there were significant numbers of adolescents, children, and even infants. Adults (women and men) and children were frequently found smuggled together in the same vehicle, and sometimes the vehicles carried entire families. Prior to Plan Frontera Sur, minors made up only 3 percent of apprehended migrants, but this number increased to almost 18 percent in the following years. Overall, 50 percent of the vehicles had at least one minor present, but minors accounted for the majority of passengers in only three vehicles. In almost every single case the number of men in the vehicles significantly outnumbered both women and children.



For apprehended migrants, Guatemala was the most common country of origin, constituting 53 percent of all migrant apprehensions in vehicles from 2001 through 2017. Honduras and El Salvador accounted for roughly 16 and 26 percent respectively, with increases in the number of Hondurans since 2014 (as noted

above). Taken together, migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador made up between 83 and 95 percent of all apprehensions during this time period (the percent variation is explained in the endnote).<sup>18</sup> The dataset also includes apprehended migrants from 15 other countries, which are listed in the table below.

Country	Apprehensions Since Plan Frontera Sur	Total Apprehensions (2001-2017) <sup>19</sup>	Percent of Apprehensions Since Plan Frontera Sur	Percent of Total Apprehensions (2001-2017)
Guatemala	882	2,814	38.58%	53.02%
El Salvador	747	1,399	32.68%	26.36%
Honduras	612	827	26.77%	15.58%
China	0	76	0.00%	1.43%
Ecuador	30	67	1.31%	1.26%
Nicaragua	1	32	0.04%	0.60%
Nepal	5	31	0.22%	0.58%
Brazil	1	19	0.04%	0.36%
India	2	16	0.09%	0.30%
Bangladesh	0	9	0.00%	0.17%
Dominican Republic	3	6	0.13%	0.11%
Sri Lanka	0	6	0.00%	0.11%
Peru	0	2	0.00%	0.04%
Albania	2	2	0.09%	0.04%
Cuba	1	1	0.04%	0.02%
Colombia	0	0	0.00%	0.00%
Kosovo	0	0	0.00%	0.00%
Japan	0	0	0.00%	0.00%
Total	2,286	5,307	100.00%	100.00%

Table 1: Apprehensions by Nationality: Overall and Post-Plan Frontera Sur<sup>20</sup>



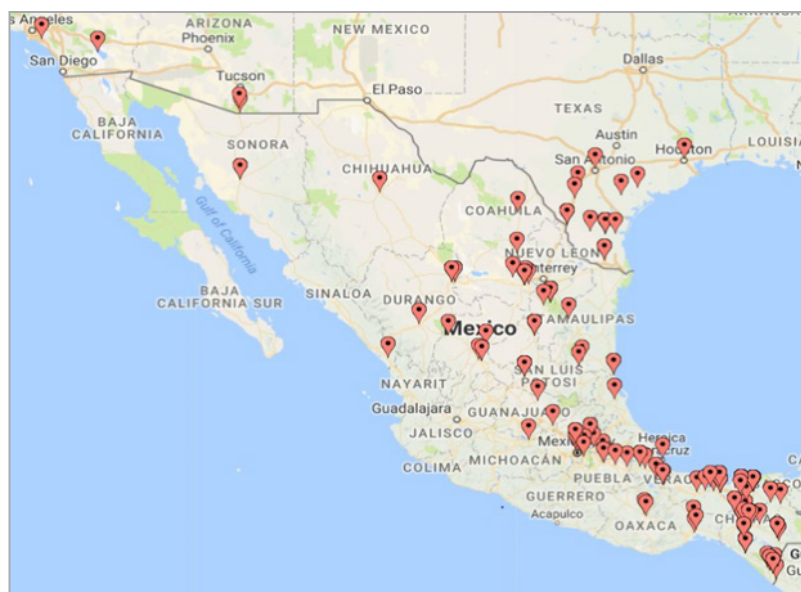
***The Journey.*** Migrants taking vehicles through Mexico often contract smuggling services from within their countries of origin.<sup>21</sup> Once they reach the Mexico-Guatemala border, COLEF data suggests that the most common crossing points for migrants using vehicles are Tecún Uman (near Tapachula, Chiapas) for Salvadoran migrants, La Mesilla in central Chiapas for Guatemalan migrants, and Naranjo, also in central Chiapas, for Honduran migrants.<sup>22</sup> In 2016, these three locations accounted for two thirds of all irregular crossings into Mexico for migrants taking vehicles north to the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>23</sup>

Once migrants enter Mexican territory, those traveling in trailers are loaded into the trucks' cargo portions and begin moving north through main interstates, such as Highway 200 that runs from Tapachula through Arriaga in Chiapas and Highway 145 from Tuxtla Gutierrez in Chiapas through the coastal state of Veracruz. All of these primary routes run from the south of Mexico toward the central region. Human smugglers may at times vary in their routes, but geolocations of the documented incidents reveal that many smugglers choose major Mexican highways and these particular highways have remained constant over time. This preference is likely because these roads tend to be safer, faster, and easier to traverse in large, unwieldy cargo trucks.


In Mexico's southern states, the majority of vehicles were discovered at inspection points along major highways. This is not particularly surprising given that Mexico has concentrated checkpoints along these highways that aim to compensate for the porous nature of the border itself and stop both irregular migrants and illicit goods from transiting through the country. After Plan Frontera Sur, the percent of vehicles discovered at checkpoints in southern Mexico rose by 10 percent, compared to other means of discovery (car accidents, anonymous tip off, etc.).

To bypass checkpoints, migrant smugglers appear to use various strategies. Some testimonies point toward established business arrangements, where smugglers communicate ahead of time with officials at checkpoints and pay a 'tax' per migrant.<sup>24</sup> Yet other smugglers appear to try to avoid revisions and payments by taking back roads, or, as mentioned above, disguising their vehicles in efforts to avoid revisions.

In Mexico's central states, Highway 150D—which takes migrants from the southern coastal state of Veracruz to the central state of Puebla and later Mexico City—is the primary highway for smugglers. Authorities apprehended most of the vehicles in this sector following traffic violations as opposed to highway checkpoints. However, in 2016, one bus carrying 102



Map 1: Vehicles Being Used For Human Smuggling: Location of Discovery



irregular migrants was discovered in the central state of Zacatecas after authorities became suspicious of its non-traditional route.

In Mexico's northern states, there has been a sharp increase in the number of apprehended vehicles since Plan Frontera Sur. From July 2014 onwards, Mexican officials apprehended 32 vehicles in this region, compared to only 2 incidents in the previous decade. These apprehensions were spread among various highways, including less prominent roads. Similar to Mexico's central region, authorities apprehended most vehicles during inspection or following a traffic violation. Yet, two trucks carrying migrants were also discovered after they crashed, and in a more dramatic case, an Uber driver carrying migrants was discovered after criminal groups shot at his car.

During the journey, migrants in cargo trucks are at times provided with limited food and water, sometimes with just a few gallons for a large number of people. Migrants are forced to stay in the trailers throughout the duration of that day's trip. For trips across Mexico, migrants are often taken to safe houses or hotels in different areas of the country, where individuals or employees are paid to watch them before they are transported in vehicles to their next destination. Sometimes these migrants are locked in the houses and other times they are allowed to leave while they await the next part of the trip.<sup>25</sup> Much like a migrant's demographic profile, his or her smuggling experience also varies.

**Human Smuggler Profiles.** Within the dataset's 179 cases, 30 incidents (17 percent) included demographic information about the smugglers who were apprehended while driving vehicles with irregular migrants or assisting in the smuggling activities. These smugglers were overwhelmingly male (there was only one case of female smuggler and she was accompanying her partner), of Mexican origin, and between the ages of 20 and 40. Of those drivers whose ages were listed, only one smuggler was under the age of 18 and none were over the age of 45. Almost all were Mexican natives and had drivers licenses from an area near where they were apprehended.

There were also four cases of human smugglers who were from Central America. In two of these cases, the newspaper articles mention that the drivers had the appropriate immigration documentation for travelling through Mexico. There was only one case that involved a direct relationship between an organized criminal group and a smuggler, with a Honduran national who was a known member of the 18th Street (Barrio 18) gang.

Roughly 70 percent of the dataset's articles include the mention of a smuggler, and in some cases, there were two or more individuals involved in this part of the smuggling process. Of these articles, half of the smugglers were traveling alone and the rest were with at least one additional person (another driver, a spotter who drove ahead, or guides who assisted the driver and the migrants as a sort of intermediary). In one 2015 case in Salto de Agua, Chiapas, there were six guides working together to move 183 Honduran, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan migrants north to Mexico City, which was the largest group of smugglers listed in the dataset. There were also thirteen drivers who reportedly escaped either before or while their vehicle was being discovered, most commonly following some type of vehicle crash.

The profit margins involved in human smuggling are a powerful incentive for attracting smugglers. While human smuggling is an illicit activity, it's possible to make some rough back-of-the-envelope estimates as to their business ledgers. Since Plan Frontera Sur, there were 65 migrants on average within each trailer in Mexico, and Central American migrants are estimated to pay between \$7,000 and \$10,000 for door-to-door smuggling services.<sup>26</sup> Taking the conservative end of that spectrum, each trailer represents total revenues of \$455,000. Even when factoring in expenses such as obtaining the vehicles, purchasing gasoline, providing migrants with food and shelter during the journey, bribing officials along the way, paying organized criminal groups at the U.S.-Mexico border, and compensating the various guides and organizers at each stage, smugglers can make an attractive profit.

**Smuggling on the U.S. Side of the Border.** When migrants reach the U.S.-Mexico border, they cross into U.S. territory with guides.<sup>27</sup> These migrants may





spend several days in stash houses before being loaded into new vehicles and heading north along major highways, where they hit the second layer of U.S. border enforcement that takes place through Customs and Border Protection (CBP) checkpoints set up along the first 100 miles of highway moving north. Some trailers move through these checkpoints.<sup>28</sup> While other drivers seek to avoid these checkpoints through back roads or by paying ranchers and/or their employees to pass through their private property. Often the vehicles used along these back roads are flatbed pickup trucks that hold up to 14 people instead of cargo trucks, as it can be difficult logistically, and more conspicuous, for large trucks to make it down these rougher roads.

Smugglers also have migrants circumvent checkpoints by hiking through the arid Texas ranchland to a point that is further along the road. It is during these hikes that migrants can succumb to the extreme Texas temperatures, making the counties with highway checkpoints some of the deadliest points for migrants throughout their journeys. In FY2017, CBP reported over 1,100 rescues of individuals and over 70 deaths in the Laredo, Texas area.<sup>29</sup> In Brooks County, the county directly north of Laredo, over 500 migrants’ remains have been found since 2009.<sup>30</sup> Law enforcement officials estimate that this number likely accounts for only 20 percent of the actual migrant deaths in Brooks County over the past eight years.<sup>31</sup> This pattern plays out across the U.S.-Mexico border, although the Laredo, Texas region is considered to be the most dangerous area for migrants in the United States.<sup>32</sup>

Compared to Mexico, the United States’ irregular migrant population also includes the addition of Mexican migrants. These migrants contract smuggling services once they reach the U.S.-Mexico border, and frequently travel with the same guides and along the same routes as Central American migrants. Within the United States, 16 of the 22 apprehended vehicles were transporting Mexican migrants, but only one trailer—apprehended in 2015 in Falfurrias, Texas—transported exclusively Mexican citizens.

Within the dataset, there are four cases of U.S. vehicle apprehensions that list information about the human


smugglers. In three of these cases, the smugglers were U.S. citizens, and in the fourth case, the Mexican citizen smuggler was detained alongside the migrants and deported back to Mexico. Interviews with immigration officials and previous smuggling research emphasize that human smugglers in the United States are both male and female and come from all backgrounds, races, and ages (including minors).<sup>33</sup>

***Smuggling Gone Wrong.*** Within the dataset, there were seven incidences of migrant deaths or injuries in Mexico and the United States. While this equals around 4 percent of all cases, there are other more widespread risks that come with being smuggled in a vehicle, and particularly in a cargo truck. The most common risks to being hidden in the compartment of a truck or private vehicle are side effects from the potentially extreme temperatures—from below freezing in refrigerated trucks to up to 140 degrees Fahrenheit (60 degrees Celsius) in trucks without air conditioning in the summer heat—along with asphyxiation, dehydration, and starvation.

The risks that migrants face while riding in trailers are different from those that they confront while taking the trains. Surveys conducted in 2016 reveal that those individuals traveling in trailers were almost three times more likely to experience extreme cold throughout the journey and almost twice as likely to suffer from a lack of food or drink. However, migrants traveling by trailer are more protected from other types of risks. For example, Central Americans were three times more likely to get assaulted if they were traveling by train and are exposed to the unique danger of falling off the top of the train.

	Trailer	Train
Extreme Cold	31%	13%
Lack of Food / Drink	29%	17%
Assault	13%	38%
Get Lost	6%	6%
Fell Off the Train	0%	9%

Table 2: Risks for Migrants in Trailers and Trains <sup>34</sup>



The most recent, high-profile trailer tragedy was the July 2017 case in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>35</sup> The combination of a lack of ventilation and the extreme Texas heat is estimated to have pushed the temperatures inside the truck to 140 degrees Fahrenheit (60 degrees Celsius), killing 10 migrants in a combination of dehydration and heat stroke, and leaving another 20 migrants with possible irreversible injuries. The vehicle's driver was apprehended on the scene and later pled guilty to "conspiracy to transport aliens resulting in death and transporting aliens resulting in death." He now faces a potential maximum sentence of life in prison.<sup>36</sup>

This, however, wasn't the first deadly incident. In 2016, a cargo truck carrying 60 migrants was abandoned in the state of Veracruz. By the time Mexican migration officials found the migrants, at least four had died of dehydration and asphyxiation inside the truck. Thirteen years prior, in 2003, another trailer was abandoned at a truck stop in Victoria, Texas—approximately 100 miles southeast from San Antonio—when the outside temperature was 95 degrees Fahrenheit (35 degrees Celsius). More than 90 migrants were discovered packed in the truck after other drivers at the truck stop heard the migrants' screams. Seventeen migrants were pronounced dead on the scene and another dozen were hospitalized for severe dehydration and heat stroke.

It is not only extreme temperatures that can prove fatal to migrants traveling in vehicles. In 2007, 6 migrants were killed and 11 more injured in a trailer accident in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. The trailer was carrying approximately 200 migrants and divided horizontally by boards, in an effort to double the truck's carrying capacity. Some 100 women and children travelled on the truck's top section and almost 100 men travelled on the lower level. While in route, the boards collapsed, causing injuries and death from head trauma and asphyxiation.

Traffic accidents can also endanger migrants who are traveling in vehicles. In the database, there is only one recorded crash that resulted in the injury or death of migrants. This took place in 2004 in Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, right along the Mexico-Guatemala border, when a truck carrying 80 migrants crashed, killing 2 migrants and sending another 30 to the hospital.

Within the dataset, there were nine additional vehicle crashes that led to the migrants' discovery. Yet despite the low number of reported deaths and injuries from traffic accidents, migrants traveling through Mexico in vehicles face greater risks than regular passengers, given that they are often standing in the back, sitting on the floor, or squished into a compartment.

A final risk for migrants comes not from their means of transportation but rather from the organized criminal groups that control the smuggling routes. Along the U.S.-Mexico border, migrants are required to pay unofficial taxes known as "derecho de piso" to criminal groups—which are generally included in their initial smuggling fee—in exchange for safe passage through the territory. These taxes are often reported to amount to somewhere between US\$300 or \$400 per migrant, and in exchange migrants are given "claves" or keywords and/or bracelets that allow them to be identified as migrants who have already paid the tax.<sup>37</sup> If migrants or their smugglers do not pay the "derecho de piso" for the right to pass through the territory, their lives could be at risk. However, even with the "claves" and bracelets, migrants are not always ensured safe passage.<sup>38</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY CONSEQUENCES

Since Mexico's announcement and implementation of Plan Frontera Sur, transit routes for a subset of migrants appear to be shifting. For those migrants who previously relied on the country's train network to head north, the stepped-up operations and apprehensions along the trains have led smugglers to look for alternative routes, including an increased reliance on vehicles. The migrants now traveling in cargo trucks face a different set of risks and challenges, but may also be spared some of the dangers that were unique to the country's trains.

For policymakers, these new routes lead to new enforcement dilemmas. To detect and apprehend migrants traveling within vehicles, officials are largely focusing on the use of highway checkpoints. However, as officials increase the number of checkpoints, boost



technological capacity, and complete more secondary inspections, there are at least three immediate consequences. The first is increased corruption at highway checkpoints, as smugglers bribe migration and security officials to ensure their smooth passage. The second is smugglers' increasing reliance on less-traveled roads, which tend to be smaller and more dangerous for cargo trucks. While the third effect is a higher number of deaths, as migrants attempt to circumvent checkpoints on foot through rugged terrain.

As Mexico's Plan Frontera Sur incentivized smugglers to move away from the country's train network, attempts to crack down on cargo trucks will likely push smugglers and migrants into an ever more diverse array of smuggling practices. Given its geographic position—caught between Central America's weak economies and high rates of violence, and the United States' family ties and demand for cheap labor—Mexico's government has few policy levers to significantly change the numbers of Central Americans transiting through its territory. The country has several policy options at its disposal and could step up enforcement or attempt to regularize this illicit smuggling market. However, without coordination with the United States and Central America, Mexico's migration enforcement will continue to be a cat and mouse game, creating an ever-shifting landscape for migrants but with varied and constant risks.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Ryan Devereaux, “Camion de la muerte: They helped prosecutors after Escaping Death in a Smuggler’s Truck. Now they are being Deported,” *The Intercept*, October 2017, <https://theintercept.com/2017/10/01/immigrants-helped-prosecutors-after-escaping-death-in-a-smugglers-truck-now-theyre-being-deported/>.

<sup>2</sup> Colegio de la Frontera Norte, “Encuestas sobre Migración en la Fronteras Norte y Sur de México,” COLEF, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Secretaría de Gobernación, “Boletines Estadísticos,” SEGOB, 2017, [http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es\\_mx/SEGOB/Boletines\\_Estadisticos](http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Boletines_Estadisticos).

<sup>4</sup> “Ley General de Población,” 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Secretaría de Gobernación.

<sup>6</sup> José Knippen, Clay Boggs y Maureen Meyer, “Un Camino Incierto,” Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), November 2015, 14.

<sup>7</sup> INM manages a US\$217 million budget and 4,500 employees, compared to the Refugee Commission’s (COMAR) US\$1.5 million budget and staff of 30. See: Knippen, José, et. al. “Un camino incierto: justiciar para delitos y violaciones a los derechos humanos contra personas migrantes y refugiados en México”; WOLA.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Isacson, Maureen Meyer, and Hannah Smith, “Increased Enforcement at Mexico’s Southern Border,” Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), November 2015; Hermanos en el Camino Albergue, accessed on October 25, 2016, <http://www.hermanosenelcamino.org/>; “En los límites de la frontera, quebrando los límites: Informe 2016,” *La 72*, April 2017, <http://www.la72.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Informe-DDHH-2016-LA-72.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> These percentages are the averages of the years 2012 and 2013 (pre-Plan Frontera Sur) and 2015 and 2016 (post-Plan Frontera Sur). COLEF.

<sup>10</sup> The regions were classified by: the northern region included all U.S.-Mexico border states and Durango; the southern region included Mexico-Guatemala border states and Campeche, Quintana Roo, and Oaxaca; all other states were classified as the central region.

<sup>11</sup> The fake Red Cross truck was discovered in July 2011 in San Pablo Etla, Oaxaca and the fake humanitarian aid truck was found in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas in November 2007.

<sup>12</sup> COLEF.

<sup>13</sup> The database does not have any information on the country of origin for migrants apprehended between 2003 and 2005.

<sup>14</sup> “USBP Southwest Border Apprehensions by Citizenship, Gender, and FY1995-2017TD through July,” U.S. Customs and Border Patrol, Released via FOIA, accessed on October 25, 2017; Secretaría de Gobernación.

<sup>15</sup> From 2001 and 2017, 20 percent of apprehended migrants were women. Between 2014 and 2017, 24 percent of apprehended migrants were women.

<sup>16</sup> COLEF.

<sup>17</sup> Secretaría de Gobernación.

<sup>18</sup> The number of migrants by nationality were not mentioned in every news report. To measure these nationalities, the paper first counted all the migrants who were listed by number and nationality. Then, it also counted as “1” all those instances where the country was mentioned but not the number of migrants from that country. Using both measures, Guatemalan, Honduran, and then Salvadoran nationals were the most frequently apprehended nationalities.



- <sup>19</sup> It was only possible to count 5,307 of the over 12,000 migrants listed in the database, as many articles did not mention nationality.
- <sup>20</sup> Migrants from Colombia, Kosovo, and Japan were also mentioned in the news articles, but the number of migrants from each country was not specified.
- <sup>21</sup> Óscar Martínez, “Los coyotes del norte están aumentando las cuotas por Trump,” *El Faro*, September 2017, [https://elfaro.net/es/201702/el\\_salvador/19951/Los-coyotes-del-norte-est%EF%BF%BDn-aumentando-las-cuotas-por-Trump.htm](https://elfaro.net/es/201702/el_salvador/19951/Los-coyotes-del-norte-est%EF%BF%BDn-aumentando-las-cuotas-por-Trump.htm).
- <sup>22</sup> COLEF.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Author Interview: Salvadoran Migrant, October 12, 2017; Author Interview: Guatemalan Migrant, August 24, 2017.
- <sup>25</sup> Alejandra Gudiño, “Rescatan a 21 centroamericanos en Nezahualcóyotl; iban a los EU,” *Milenio*, December 27, 2016.
- <sup>26</sup> COLEF data differed by nationality. In 2016, the 25th to 75th percentiles for each country were as follows: US\$4,000-\$7,000 in Guatemala; US\$5,000 to \$7,000 in Honduras; and \$3,000 to \$4,000 in El Salvador; COLEF; Author Interview: CBP Officer, Laredo Sector, October 2017.
- <sup>27</sup> Of the 179 cases in the database, 22 were in U.S. territory. Nineteen were in Texas, 2 in Arizona, and 1 in California.
- <sup>28</sup> Ryan Devereaux.
- <sup>29</sup> Author Interview: CBP Officer, Laredo Sector.
- <sup>30</sup> Manny Fernandez, “A Path to America, Marked by More and More Bodies,” *New York Times*, May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/05/04/us/texas-border-migrants-dead-bodies.html>.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> International Organization for Migration, “Migrant Smuggling Data and Research: A Global Review of the Emerging Evidence Base,” International Organization for Migration, 2016, 278, [https://publications.iom.int/system/files/smuggling\\_report.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/smuggling_report.pdf); Author Interview: CBP Officer, Laredo Sector.
- <sup>34</sup> COLEF, 2016.
- <sup>35</sup> Ryan Devereaux.
- <sup>36</sup> Mary Hui and J Freedom du Lac, “American truck driver pleads guilty in ‘horrific’ immigrant smuggling case that left 10 dead,” *The Washington Post*, October 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/10/16/truck-driver-pleads-guilty-in-smuggling-case-that-killed-10-immigrants-he-could-face-life-in-prison/?utm\\_term=.1c3894bb9f9e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/10/16/truck-driver-pleads-guilty-in-smuggling-case-that-killed-10-immigrants-he-could-face-life-in-prison/?utm_term=.1c3894bb9f9e).
- <sup>37</sup> “Una pulsera y una clave para llegar vivo hasta el Río Bravo,” *La Prensa*, June 2017, [http://www.laprensa.hn/virales/1080649-410/pulsera-clave-coyotes-migrantes-estados\\_unidos](http://www.laprensa.hn/virales/1080649-410/pulsera-clave-coyotes-migrantes-estados_unidos).
- <sup>38</sup> Eric Olson, “Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking at the Rio Grande Valley: Ten Observations and Questions,” Woodrow Wilson Center, September 2016, 4, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/olson\\_border\\_2016final\\_0.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/olson_border_2016final_0.pdf).



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