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River Grande Valley, US-Mexico Border

## Migrant Smuggling and Trafficking at the Rio Grande Valley:

### Ten Observations and Questions\*

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In the scorching heat of a late summer day on the U.S. – Mexico border along the lower Rio Grande Valley (RGV) I had a revelation. Migrant smuggling and trafficking along this difficult part of the border lands is a constantly changing business. Despite involving human lives, smuggling and trafficking are fundamentally a business, albeit a deplorable one, that responds to a complex series of factors – some legitimate, others less so. As a result, the dynamics around these factors are constantly in flux and what we think we know today, maybe different a month, or a year from now.

That's why I was lucky to be traveling with Dr. Guadalupe Correa Cabrera, a recently appointed Wilson Center Fellow and a tenured professor at the University of Texas – Rio Grande Valley. She is one of a handful of academics that has studied the phenomenon of Central American migration from the field. She has conducted hundreds of interviews of migrants, shelter operators, religious workers, experts, and government authorities from the origins of migration in the Northern Triangle Countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, along the difficult trek north through Mexico, and the final perilous push into the United States.

Dr. Correa was the recipient of a State Department grant to study Central American smuggling and trafficking along the Gulf Coast routes of Mexico. For the past 18 months she has tried to piece together the reasons Central American children and families have set out on this risky journey; what routes they have taken, and their experiences along the way. She has wrestled with how the smuggling business works, how and why migrants rely on smugglers, and examined, as much as possible, the extent to which migrants are caught up in forced labor, including forced criminal labor, and sexual exploitation. It's incredibly risky work that requires enormous personal courage, resolve, and confidence; all belied by her diminutive stature, and exceedingly polite, cheery nature.

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\* This is a final draft.

So I did not hesitate when Dr. Correa invited me to accompany her for a last round of interviews along the RGV to confirm impressions and test her hypotheses developed from earlier research. She is an expert on organized crime in Tamaulipas, Mexico, so I figured there could be no better guide to examine this mysterious and little understood world of Central American migration and its connections to organized crime.<sup>1</sup>

The following are my observations based on interviews conducted between September 17 and 22 in twin cities on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border: Brownsville/Matamoros; McAllen/Reynosa, Laredo/Nuevo Laredo. While these are my tentative observations they have been vetted with Dr. Correa. As you will see, I still have more questions than answers. If you wish to share your insights and analysis please send comments to [eric.olson@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:eric.olson@wilsoncenter.org).

1. Central Americans continue to arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border in surprising numbers. While they have not yet surpassed the peak of Fiscal Year (FY) 2014<sup>2</sup>, August 2016 had the highest number of UAC and family unit apprehensions of any August in the past 5 years including 2014. Normally, apprehensions begin to decline in August because of the heat and the reduced demand for seasonal labor in the U.S. – which makes the increased apprehension numbers this August surprising.

Furthermore, FY2016 has already seen the second highest number of apprehensions in the last five years, and will likely come close to or even exceed the number of apprehensions as the crisis year of 2014. Additionally, Central Americans continue to arrive primarily at the RGV – between Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. Our visit beyond Nuevo Laredo to Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña, uncovered much fewer Central American arrivals. This is the historic pattern for Central American migration and hasn't changed much despite stepped-up enforcement in Mexico and the United States.

The obvious question: Given the new U.S.-Central American strategy to address the drivers of migration, promises of significant new economic resources from the United States, and increased border enforcement that makes successful passage harder than ever, why are Central American migrants still attempting the journey, and in even greater numbers than before? Why haven't the new policies been successful? (More on this below).

**“...some may migrate to escape poverty, but the economic hardships in the Northern Triangle cannot be easily separated from the issues of crime, violence, and corruption”**

2. Why are the migrants coming? Our interviews suggested many factors play into a migrant's decision to leave his/her homeland. For Central Americans from the Northern Triangle countries who suffered the direct and indirect effects of armed conflicts in the 1980s and 1990s, there is a history of migration to the United States due to the violence and civil wars. For current generations the tradition of Northward migration and the pull of family reunification are powerful factors. Furthermore, a U.S. law that provides for special protections for children who are potential victims of trafficking has also been a magnet for unaccompanied minors and family units.

But the most common and often-heard reasons for migrating north is the lack of economic opportunity, and the toll of constant violence – threats, extortion, abuse, and murder. There has been no comprehensive survey that would suggest the relative importance of each of these factors, but Dr. Correa

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<sup>2</sup> Since apprehension data is reported by a U.S. government agency – Customs and Border Protection (CBP) – numbers are reported by Fiscal Year, which runs from October 1 through September 30 of the following year.

estimates that roughly 60 percent are leaving to seek a better life and escape from the crushing poverty, and roughly 30 percent are fleeing in response to direct threats or experiences of violence. Remaining causes include motivations such as family reunification, but migrants may have multiple reasons for leaving. These are rough estimates that seem reasonable but the degree of confidence in them may be moderate at best.

One question I have is whether it is possible to neatly divide the motivations for migration into separate categories. For example, some may migrate to escape poverty, but the economic hardships in the Northern Triangle cannot be easily separated from the issues of crime, violence, and corruption. We know that security related issues have a profound impact on economic growth and opportunity, so I am hesitant to make too rigid the distinctions between reasons for migration.

3. In addition to Central American migrants, we encountered and interviewed many recently deported Mexicans, or as they are designated by Mexico: “repatriated” citizens. Many of those we interviewed had two elements in common – they had lived in the U.S. for a number of years (in some cases 10 to 15 years); and they had spent some time in jail before their transfer to immigration detention and eventual deportation. Many talked of a life of work and putting down roots in a community but also making a mistake that led to their deportation. Some of these mistakes were relatively minor – a traffic violation, possession of a small amount of marijuana for which they were given probation; other committed more serious offenses including transporting illegal firearms or assault. All spoke of families they have left in the U.S. and their determination to return to take care of their children and restart their lives.
4. The movement of migrants (whether Central American or Mexican) in the RGV is heavily controlled by smugglers that appear to operate within a very organized criminal market. An unknown but small percentage of migrants make it to the border on their own, but the vast majority seem to arrive with the assistance of an “uncle” or “tío” or “guide” who brings them up through the various and constantly changing routes, and stashing them in “safe houses” along the way. Many migrants did not know where these houses are located, and sometimes are not sure what cities they had traveled through.

Migrants often speak of receiving a “clave” (or code) that they must provide when entering a city such as Matamoros or Reynosa. It essentially marks them as belonging to a particular smuggling ring and, to some extent, provides protection and access to the smuggling network. Migrants traveling on their own or in small groups are quickly approached by lookouts, sometimes called “enganchadores.” Those without a clave are quickly signed up by a smuggling group either through coercion or the migrant’s desire and need to use their services. Deported Mexicans attempting to reenter the United States are also forced to pay for the services of a smuggling group.

The smugglers offer the migrants logistical support and intelligence. Their services include transportation networks, moving from place to place northward to the border based on the smugglers’ sense of the safest route. Depending on the kind of service provided the cost can run between \$6,000 and \$8,000, with some VIP services costing double with a guarantee of several attempts at crossing the border and safe passage to a major city in the U.S. But the majority of migrants seem to pay to be brought to the U.S.-Mexico border, taken to a crossing point, and sometimes helped across the river.

**“Sometimes, the migrants themselves become part of the smuggling network when they cannot pay the smugglers”**

There is rarely just one smuggler involved in the process, but rather a whole network with many minor players contributing to the transportation and housing networks as drivers, lookouts, and housekeepers in the safe houses. Sometimes, the migrants themselves become part of the smuggling network when they cannot pay the smugglers. (More below on forced criminal labor.) Many migrants link up with a smuggler before they leave home, but large numbers also do so at a crossing point at

the Guatemala-Mexico border, since most residents of the Northern Triangle countries can move freely between countries because of a visa waiver program (C-4). There are multiple crossing points at this border but the preferred one at this time appears to be in La Mesilla, Huehuetenango. Less are coming through the Southern route where Guatemalan and Mexican officials have dramatically increased enforcement.

5. The smuggling market may be organized but it is also very dangerous. Stories of extortion, traffic accidents, poor conditions in safe houses, and sexual abuse are common. Many migrants talked of being threatened by the smugglers, and extortion seems especially common once the migrant reaches a border city like Reynosa. Many migrants told us that the smugglers demanded several thousands more to cross into the United States once they reached the Mexican border cities. One migrant said she was told she needed to provide another \$2500 immediately, and \$1500 when she had crossed into the United States. Those that cannot pay can be forced to give up the phone number of a family member in the U.S. to be extorted, or they can be abandoned by the smuggler in one of the border cities, which are among the country's most violent cities.
6. One particularly insightful social worker at a shelter told us that most migrants don't fully understand that the hardest part of the journey was entering the United States and making it to a U.S. city away from the border. According to her many migrants do not understand that they cannot simply swim or wade across the river at night and fade into the woodwork. The existence of considerable physical barriers including walls and fences, electronic and human surveillance, and other modern detection techniques make it nearly impossible for an individual or group of migrants with no knowledge of the terrain to cross the border successfully.

As the U.S. has significantly reinforced the border, especially since 9/11, individual migrants have increasingly relied on the expertise of criminal groups – smugglers and local criminal networks – to successfully make the crossing. Only criminal networks have the logistical capacity and informal intelligence networks capable of finding the weak links and getting people in place to cross. Migrants report being driven to different sometimes-remote locations on the border to cross. Even with the support of these networks, crossings are not necessarily safe. We spoke to several Central Americans who were seriously injured when their smuggler's bus flipped over on its way to a crossing point outside of Reynosa. Five people, mostly children, had reportedly died and nearly 30 others were injured, some severely. Those I interviewed were unsure where they were headed but they said the driver was speeding and tipped the bus over on a sharp curve. They reported that many Mexicans stopped to help, pulling some out of the bus and calling ambulances. One woman with whom I spoke had surgery to stop internal bleeding and her 4-year-old daughter was in a leg cast.

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7. Despite the perils of the final push into the U.S. and the high probability that they will be caught, the migrants keep coming. This suggests that there is some unknown percentage that is successful. If 100 percent of those attempting the journey were being captured and returned, the smugglers and migrants would know and seek alternative routes. Migrants have their own information networks and social connections which they use to learn from the experience of other migrants.
8. One aspect of Dr. Correa's research has to do with trafficking in persons. We asked everyone with whom we came in contact during our trip about reports of human trafficking, and Dr. Correa has spent a great deal of time running down stories, trying to verify episodes and reports, and trying to speak with victims. What we learned from this trip, and what her research to date has confirmed, is that trafficking in persons exists, though it is much less prevalent than is often assumed. We learned about forced criminal labor as well as sexual exploitation cases. Human trafficking is generally under-

stood to be forced, fraudulent, or coercive. Commercial sexual exploitation of minors is by its very nature trafficking, because a minor is not in a position to make up her/his own mind. However, prostitution in and of itself is not understood to be trafficking because some

women accept it as an economic option. There are many reports of Central American women engaging in prostitution or sexual labor as a way to pay for their migration north, feed themselves and their children, or ensure they receive protection.

**“It’s possible Salvadorans have become immune to stories of deportation and they are no longer dissuaded by them given the extreme violence they endure at home.”**

Cases of sex trafficking among minors are the most common and verifiable. Many such cases tend to occur along the Guatemala-Mexico border in cities such as Tapachula, Mexico or Tecún Umán, Guatemala. Cases of labor trafficking using deceptive promises of lucrative employment are also reported frequently, but these are usually in small numbers. Forced criminal labor occurs when migrants either cannot pay the smuggler, or when the smuggler is moving illegal narcotics as well as human beings. Stories of smugglers requiring migrants to carry backpacks, presumably laden with illegal drugs are commonplace. But sometimes women are also forced to work for the criminal networks in cooking, cleaning, or sexual services when they cannot pay their passage.

We have verified that the practice of human trafficking exists, but just how widespread is it? According to most people we interviewed, and especially the priests and volunteers that work in the shelters, these cases are infrequent. They often use the phrase “de vez en cuando” (once in a while) to describe how often they hear about these incidents. Sometimes, they are recalling a second- or third-hand account and cannot elaborate on details. This does not mean trafficking does not occur but it suggests the frequency and volume is less than smuggling. This finding is largely consistent with what Dr. Correa has been able to determine throughout her research. Her best estimate is that trafficking cases represent no more than 5 percent of the total. Smuggling using criminal networks is much more prevalent, according to Correa, representing upwards of 90 percent of all migration cases.

9. Remaining questions: This work is difficult because there are no randomized samples. The Colegio de la Frontera Norte produces an annual “Survey of Border Migration” (EMIF in Spanish) funded by the Mexican government. This is an interesting instrument that sheds light on migration within Mexico, but the survey does not include information on Central Americans. Most of what we know about Central American migration and trafficking is from interviews and focus groups<sup>3</sup>. This work is insightful, but it leaves significant gaps in our knowledge. Of particular interest to me is the nature of the relationship between migration and criminal networks. We were not able to determine the relationship between smuggling networks and local criminal organizations that controlled the territory at the U.S.-Mexico border. Is there more than one smuggling network competing for migrants who paid off the local criminal bosses in Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo; or are they all part of the same criminal enterprise? There is a general assumption that the Zetas and Gulf Cartel have lost much of their power and control of the border and gulf routes. Have they been replaced by another group? Or are they just much reduced in size and influence operating essentially only in the border cities? Separately, there are many more women migrants in southern Mexico than in the north. What happens to them? Do more turn back, or become trapped in forced labor along the way? Do they choose to settle in Mexico when they find work rather than proceeding north and facing further risks? Or are they finding alternative routes we do not know about yet?
10. Policy issues: Since the 2014 migration crisis, the United States, Mexico, and Central America have joined together in a policy to discourage further Central American migration. One element of that

<sup>3</sup> I also recommend the work of Ernesto Rodriguez, a Mexican researcher at the ITAM – Instituto Tecnológica Autonomo de México. See: “Central American Transit Migration through Mexico to the United States: Diagnosis and Recommendations. Towards a Comprehensive Regional Vision and Shared Responsibility” [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272353063\\_Central\\_American\\_Transit\\_Migration\\_through\\_Mexico\\_to\\_the\\_United\\_States\\_Diagnosis\\_and\\_Recommendations\\_Towards\\_a\\_Comprehensive\\_Regional\\_Vision\\_and\\_Shared\\_Responsibility](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272353063_Central_American_Transit_Migration_through_Mexico_to_the_United_States_Diagnosis_and_Recommendations_Towards_a_Comprehensive_Regional_Vision_and_Shared_Responsibility)



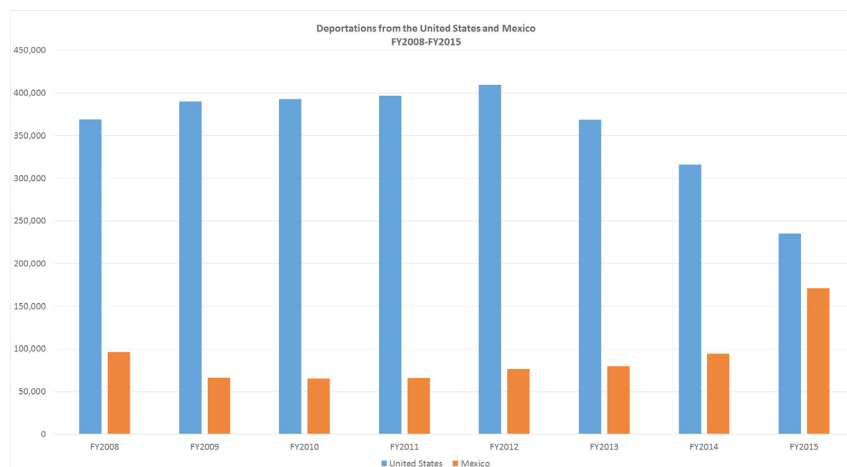
Migrant attempting to cross into the United States

policy emphasizes greater enforcement of immigration laws and increased efforts to dissuade irregular migration. This includes expedited processing and removals including deportations, or “repatriation.” Enhanced border enforcement is another significant component focused on the U.S. –Mexico border as well as the Mexico-Guatemala border and borders within Central America.

Additionally, the U.S. government, in particular, but Mexico and the Northern Triangle countries as well, have undertaken public education campaigns to dissuade would be migrants by publicizing the dangers and likely failures of such a trek. The U.S. Congress went a step further by requiring the State Department to provide evidence that the Northern Triangle countries are making progress in several areas, including efforts to dissuade further migration, before those countries can be eligible to receive a portion of the U.S. assistance package.

These policy prescriptions are based on the assumption that aggressive enforcement in country, in Mexico, and at the U.S. border, along with evidence of peril along the way and the futility of the journey, will persuade Central Americans to stay home. One U.S. official told me that “Central Americans will stop coming (to the U.S.) as soon as they see the plane loads of their compatriots returning without reaching their goal.”

But this assumption has not been confirmed by recent numbers. The U.S. and Mexico deport thousands each of Central Americans year, with Mexico’s deportation numbers having greatly increased in this past year, but the migrants keep coming (see graph below).



Source: US information: <https://www.ice.gov/removal-statistics>

Mexico information: [http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es\\_mx/SEGOB/Sintesis\\_Grafica?Sintesis=2016](http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es_mx/SEGOB/Sintesis_Grafica?Sintesis=2016)

Graph includes all deportations from both countries - nevertheless, the majority of people deported were Central American migrants

It is entirely possible that Central American migrants have a different perspective. The horrible stories of abuse and extortion, and the futility of crossing into the U.S. may be offset by their own horrific experiences at home. Furthermore, they are in touch with friends, neighbors, and family members who have successfully made the journey, encourage them to migrate, and sometimes finance their journey. It is possible they do not entirely believe the bad publicity and are willing to take the risk because they know of people who have been successful, or because the push to flee violence and poverty in their home country is too great. U.S. deportations to Central America, especially to El Salvador, have been occurring at accelerated rates since the mid to late 1990s. It's possible Salvadorans have become immune to stories of deportation and they are no longer dissuaded by them given the extreme violence they endure at home. Several immigrants I interviewed during our trip suggested as much.

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A second important element of the policy is designed to address the drivers of migration in the Northern Triangle countries. Broadly speaking, both U.S. and Northern Triangle policies identify three priorities for addressing the causes of migration: increase economic opportunity, especially among vulnerable groups; increase public security; and strengthen governmental capacity to fight crime and corruption. You can find the U.S. strategy [here](#), and the Northern Triangle countries' Alliance for Prosperity [here](#).

While I have specific questions and concerns with these broad policy objectives, they correctly identify the major issues afflicting the Northern Triangle countries and driving migration. Extreme poverty and lack of economic opportunity, violence and insecurity, and ineffective governments are the root causes of the Central American crisis and contribute significantly to the desperation people feel.

The problem is less in the diagnosis and much more in the challenges of implementation and sustainability. Addressing economic, security, and governance problems require a long-term strategy that is only now being implemented and is not likely to produce the kinds of impacts on migration that governments hope for. These long-term strategies are the best approach, and the U.S. Congress has approved a generous package of assistance to address them. But building the rule of law in countries with very high levels of corruption, and with organized crime groups essentially running parts of government will not be an easy or short-term task. Likewise, the long-term impact of structural inequality in Central America, the challenges of improving opportunities for youths between the ages of 10 to 25, especially when quality education and healthcare are not accessible to most, suggest there will be no quick fixes.



If enforcement and dissuasion have not slowed the flow, and planned investments to address root causes will take time to work, what then? One important element is to expand the possibility of in-country processing for potential migrants with a legitimate claim to protection under international norms. Rather than fleeing to Mexico or the United States because of violence, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans should have greater access to international protection within their countries, and, when deserving, be resettled to a second country. The U.S. began a pilot project in 2015 that allows for in-country processing, and more recently has brokered a deal between the United Nations and the Government of Costa Rica to receive a limited number of individuals from the Northern Triangle on a temporary basis while their petitions for asylum or refugee status are being processed. These programs offer important alternatives for people fleeing the region's violence, but they are often clouded by public misperceptions, fears that by applying for protection within their country they will be further exposed to threats and violence, and unrealistic requirements by authorities. As an interim solution to the immediate problems of extreme violence, the United States, Mexico, and the Northern Triangle countries should work together to significantly expand these programs and improve their public image.

