

# Dangerous routes: insecurity and human mobility in Mexico\*

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## *Resumen*

Cada año, miles de guatemaltecos, salvadoreños y hondureños migran de manera irregular\*\* por México para llegar a Estados Unidos. A medida que los gobiernos de estos dos países aumentan la vigilancia y multiplican los retenes en el camino, obligan a los migrantes a seguir rutas más largas y más peligrosas para alcanzar su destino. Los migrantes se ven así expuestos a múltiples peligros causados por la falta de seguridad pública, una criminalidad rampante, y la corrupción de las autoridades mexicanas. Este artículo analiza los cambios en las rutas migratorias y en los medios de transporte que usan los migrantes centroamericanos. Asimismo, estudia la evolución del tráfico de personas y los riesgos que confrontan estos migrantes en su tránsito por México.

*Palabras clave:* Movilidad humana, delincuencia organizada, tráfico de personas.

## *Abstract*

*Dangerous routes: insecurity and human mobility in Mexico*

Every year, thousands of Guatemalan, Salvadoran and Honduran unauthorized migrants\*\* travel through Mexico to reach the U.S. As the governments of these two countries intensify surveillance and multiply checkpoints, they force migrants to follow more dangerous routes to reach their destination. Migrants are exposed to multiple hazards caused by the lack of public safety, rising crime rate, and the corruption of Mexican authorities. This article analyzes the migratory routes, the means of transportation, and the evolution of human smuggling from Central America to the U.S. and the social risks confronted by migrants in Mexico.

*Key words:* Human mobility, organized crime, human smuggling

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\*\* In this article the terms “migration or irregular mobility” or “unauthorized” are utilized to refer to the lack of migratory documentation required by Mexican authorities for migrants of these nationalities

## INTRODUCTION

**I**f we consider data provided by Mexican and American migration authorities, detentions of Guatemalan, Honduran and Salvadoran migrants have considerably increased over the last five years. In 2014, most of the migrants arrested by the Border Patrol at the time of attempting to cross the southern American border with no authorization came from these countries, surpassing the flow of Mexicans for the first time (USBP, 2014). Likewise, according to Pew Hispanic Center (2014), between 2000 and 2012, Central American migrants living in the U.S. changed from 6.5 to 7.8 percent of the population born abroad. Most of these migrants had entered with not authorization, travelling over land routes on Mexican territory and crossing clandestinely Mexico's southern and northern borders.

The large population movements from the so called Northern Triangle of South America (NTSA) can be considered forced migrations since they are propitiated by the generalized violence and situations of extreme economic precariousness. Indeed, not only do these countries present very high levels of violence, but stark inequality. Violence exercised by gangs, paramilitary groups and the very state institutions has taken this situation to chaos and homicide rates among the highest in the world. On the other side, economic power is concentrated in a few families and more than a half of the Central American population still lives in poverty.

With an excluding economic system and States incapable of securing minimum levels of personal security, NTCA fundamentally depend on remittances to support their weak economies. At microeconomic level, remittances are the largest part of the income of million of Central American families that without this regular income flow would fall below the poverty line. In 2012, for example, remittances accounted for 16 percent of GDP in Honduras and El Salvador and 9.5 in Guatemala (Cordero, 2013: 23). The economic development model that has generalized in the region as of the 1990's decade is based on labor force exportation and remittance transference (Gammage, 2006).

Most of the migrants from NTCA heads for the United States and uses Mexico as a transit territory. Due to increasingly restrictive and punitive migratory policies, the multiplication of random checkpoints and migratory

controls on Mexican territories and the militarization of southern American border, mobility occurs underground. Many migrants become stranded on the road and live in Mexico for months or years. Others are detected by the authorities and deported to their countries of origin. Ejected from their places of origin, migrants have to travel thousands of kilometers in order to aspire to sell their labor force in the global labor market. However, they emigrate under permanent threat of being ejected (or deported), this time from the destination or transit places.

Migrants' vulnerability comes from both their economic and juridical marginalization and from their delocalization. They are exploited along the way, not only owing to their lack of rights —i.e., their juridical invisibility— but also as prospective laborers in global cities and forced mobility. Searching for a destination ever more elusive, which ideally will secure their survival, migrants and their relatives are willing to fall into debt and risk their lives, traveling routes seized by criminality, paying intermediaries who occasionally turn into aggressors. They resort to smugglers, transporters and small traders who facilitate transit over Mexico and the clandestine crossing of the borders. Paradoxically, the mobility of these poor workers makes room for significant profits for the economy of irregular migration, for traders and entrepreneurs placed along the migratory routes, for large companies of wire transfers and for ample criminal sectors and migratory predators, both inside and outside the state apparatus.

People smuggling enterprises have flourished, have become more complex and frequently more dangerous, precisely because of the reinforcement of border surveillance and security on the territory (Casillas, 2015; París, Ley and Peña, 2016). This is to say, people smuggling, which emerges as a fundamental concern of the governments early in the XXI century, is the counterpart of ever more restrictive migratory policies of the transit or contention countries, such as Mexico, and destination ones, such as the United States. It is linked with high-level corruption of security agencies in Mexico and the control of routes by criminal organizations.

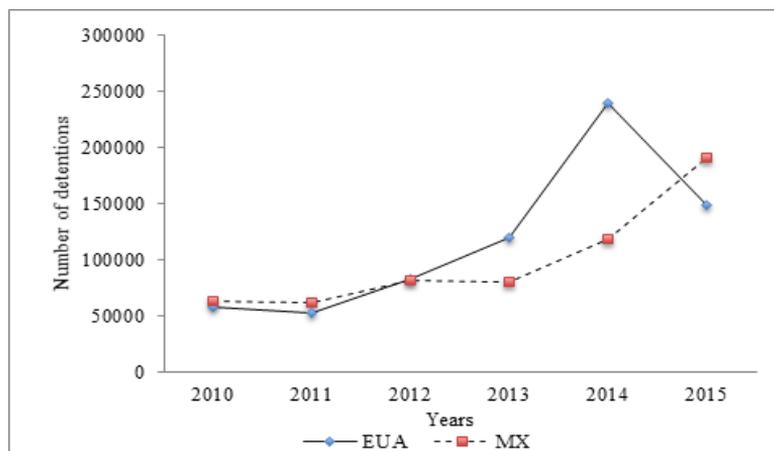
This article describes some of the strategies of mobility of Central American migrants over the Mexican territory: migratory routes, means of transport and the evolution of people smuggling companies from NTCA to the United States. It analyzes the dangers faced by migrants in Mexico, particularly the conditions of violence and the generalized violations of human rights. My goal is to show how these dangers are propitiated at once by migratory policies, widespread corruption and the commoditization of human mobility.

## MIGRATION FROM NTCA TOWARD THE UNITED STATES

In spite of control policies, border surveillance and increasingly restrictive migratory policies in Mexico and the United States, Central American migration has been on the increase as of 2003, with a slight drop in the 2008 recession. This increase is noticed in the growth of population born in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras living in the U.S., remittances sent to these countries and the increase of detentions and deportations of migrants from these regions by both Mexican and American authorities. For instance, according to Pew Hispanic Center, the population born in Guatemala increased in 40 percent between 2003 and 2013 and accounted for 834 thousand people that year (López, 2015a). The population born in El Salvador grew 28.4 percent to reach 1 173 000 migrants in 2013 (López, 2015b). The population born in Honduras increased 40.8 percent and it was 498 thousand people in 2013 (López, 2015c).

In 2014, for the first time in recent history, the number of Central Americans apprehended in the southern American border surpassed the number of Mexicans, accounting for 53 percent of the arrests (graph 1). Another totally novel phenomenon was the significant increase of arrested women and children, who represented that year 29 percent, contrasted with 13 percent in 2013 (Rosenblum, 2014). In 2015, for the first time in ten years, detentions and deportations of Central Americans from Mexico surpassed the detentions made by the American Border Patrol.

Graph 1. Detentions of Central Americans by US Border Patrol and Mexican National Migration Institute, 2010-2014



Source: USBP, 2014; INM, 2010, 2011 and 2012; UPM, 2013, 2014 and 2015.

In the case of Mexico, Salvadorans, Hondurans and Guatemalans represent more than 90 percent of the foreigners detained by the Mexico's National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración, INM) and housed in the so called migratory stations or detentions centers. As it is noticed in graph 1, as of the number of migrants from these three countries detained in Mexico increased in 86.5 percent.

According to the 2013 Survey on Migration at the southern Border (Colef *et al.*, 2013),<sup>1</sup> while also a half of the Guatemalan migrants detained by Mexican migratory authorities had the intention to remain in Mexico, more than 85 percent of the Salvadoran and more than 95 percent of the Hondurans had the United States as a destination. It is important to point out that on its own the increase of detentions and deportation does not necessarily is subject to the migratory control policies and the operations jointly carried out by both governments. For example, in the case of Mexico, detentions considerably increased owing to the so called Integral Plan for the Southern Border (Programa Integral para la Frontera Sur<sup>2</sup>) in the period 2014-2015. This program clearly responded to the pressure from the American government after the arrival of a particularly elevated flow of children and adolescents from the southern Texan border (París *et al.*, 2015).

On the other side, as pointed out by Rodolfo Casillas (2010: 79), the temporary deviation of flows due to natural phenomena or traffickers' strategies can male border control and migratory verification more or less efficacious. A significant example is the increase in the increase of detention of children and adolescents in summer 2014 by the American Border Patrol (USBP); what was called by Barack Obama's administration a "humanitarian crisis". The total of underage detained that year was 67 339, of which 705 (76.7 percent) were Guatemalan, Salvadoran and Honduran and about 72 percent had been detained in the Rio Grande sector. Separately, as massively reported by the media over such period, the underage individuals were virtually delivered to the border patrol while the traffickers

1 The survey on Migration at the Southern Border (EMIF Sur) is carried out continually by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) as of 2004, supported by the Secretariat of Government and the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs. As of 202, it has the support from the National Council of Science and Technology (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, CONACYT) and as of 2014 with the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED).

2 The Integral Program for the Southern Border was set into motion by Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Even if the president spoke of the protection of migrants' human rights, in practice the most visible actions performed after the second half of 2014 have been the number of checkpoints and patrols and a series of measures that make it difficult for the migrants to get on the freight train, which traditionally has been one of the migrants' means of transport.

crossed back to Mexico; this is to say, traffickers mostly used the route of the Gulf of Mexico and their tactic was to deliver the boys and girls to the Border Patrol, under the supposition that they would not be deported to their countries.

EMIF Sur 2013, allows building a demographic profile of the adult Central American migrants returned to their countries by American authorities (table 1).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of Central American migrants deported by migratory American authorities (percentages): 2013

Country of origin	Age		Speak English	Literate	With secondary studies or above
	Women	20 to 29 years			
El Salvador	9.6	46.8	8.5	97.2	36.8
Guatemala	9.3	53.1	12.5	92.9	17
Honduras	11.3	52.5	19.9	97.5	29
Total	10	51.6	14	96.5	24.9

Source: EMIF Sur 2013.

The Guatemalan migrant population is distinguishable by having lower education levels, with more than seven percent of illiteracy. In like manner, a high proportion of Guatemalan migrants (29.5 percent) are speakers of an indigenous language, while this characteristic is under one percent for Salvadoran and 1.5 percent for Hondurans. Guatemalan migrants are also younger (27.2 years of age on average) than Salvadorans (29.5) and than Hondurans (28.8). Most of the migrants from these countries (60.5 percent) worked before emigrating (Colef *et al.*, 2013) and three quarters come from urban zones.

Although many migrants had a job before departing, according to the interviews, their wages were not sufficient for their survival, much less to support a family. On the other side, in the interviews, many migrants point at the generalized violence and racketeering as motivations to migrate.

Most Salvadorans and Hondurans intend to reach the U.S. not to remain in Mexico, where labor and life conditions would be similar to those of their countries. Honduran and Salvadoran migrants interviewed in Saltillo in April 2015 pointed out that they did not have the intention to remain in Mexico because of the constant harassment of police in this country. On the other side, they indicated the difficulty to become employed in Mexico and the wages which are almost as low as in their countries.

This way, Walter, native to El Paraíso, Honduras, was hosted in House of the Migrant in Saltillo (Casa del Migrante de Saltillo) waiting for a relative in Houston sent him the money to pay the coyote (smuggler) and be able to cross the border. Ever since he arrived, a week before the interview, he had looked for a job and only found one the day before, unloading a trailer. He was paid 100 MXN for a day carrying sacks. Before making the journey, he worked in agriculture, construction, warning about 100 Lempiras (HNL), this is to say the equivalent to 70 MXN (interview with Walter, 18-year-old Honduran migrant, Saltillo, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015). Andrés, from Santa Barbara, Honduras, worked in his hometown operating a machine in a meat packing company; he earned 3600 HNL fortnightly (circa 2500 MXN). Due to a problem with the law in his country, he lost his job and was not able to find another similar, so he decided to emigrate to the United States. While crossing Mexico, he stopped for two months in Celaya, as he found a job in a factory, where he was paid three thousand MXN fortnightly. However, after two months he was not hired again as he did not have a visa, this way he resumed his travel to the north (interview with Andrés, Honduran migrant, 24 years of age, Saltillo, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

The interviews with migrants, held with migrants at various transit places over 2015, also show important differences in the motivations to emigrate, according to age group and rural or urban origin: in the case of young or adolescent migrants up to 22 years of age from urban zones, forced recruitment by Maras<sup>3</sup> is one of the main motivations to leave their places of origin; whereas, young migrants from rural areas, the economic motivation is still the main ejecting factor. In spite of the high costs the intermediaries, traders and hoteliers charge in the main migratory routes, it is noticeable to find very poor migrants who set off to the north with no social and economic capital whatsoever. For instance, Jimmy, a Honduran migrant whom I talked to in Veracruz in May 2015, travelled for the first time to the United States, declared he did not know anyone there or in Mexico, he did not have any support from relatives. He left his town with 1500 HNL (about 1000 MXN) and walked for 16 days in row along the rail tracks (interview with Jimmy, 30-year-old Honduran migrant, La Patrona,

3 “Maras” are gangs that appeared in Latino barrios in Los Angeles in the 1980’s, currently they have a strong presence in NTCA and to a lesser extent in Mexico and other Central American countries. The two large Maras that nowadays fight for the Central American streets are “Mara 18” and Mara Salvatrucha (MS13), they have an origin in the United States. The former basically comprised Mexican gangs from East LA; the latter was composed of Salvadoran youths who had grown in the United States. With the intensification of deportations in the nineties, many gangs of NTCA took up the symbology and forms of combat to control the territory and defense of the barrio that originated in the U.S.

Veracruz, May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015). While I explained Jimmy the map of Mexico and the various routes toward north, I noticed he did not know where he was, nor had he decided where he would go. His was an escape rather than a migratory project.<sup>4</sup>

Migrants over 30 years are generally deported after living some years in the United States and they emigrate again because they do not have opportunities for family or labor reinsertion in their place of origin, or else because they have a family in the United States. As they are deported, they normally visit their relatives that remained, however they usually stay only for weeks or months in the ejecting country. Shortly after, they retake the journey to the United States, where they feel at home. This is the case of Jorge, 45, original from Tegucigalpa. Artisan engaged in furniture manufacture and cement sculptures, Jorge emigrated for the first time to Texas in 1999. Soon after, he took their little children there. Now the youths have a permit to study and work in the U.S. owing to DACA (Differed Action for Childhood Arrivals) decreed by President Obama.

Jorge was deported for the first time in 2012, and just reaching Honduras he started the way back to the north. However, he only remained nine months there, after being spotted by migratory authorities he was deported for the second time, with a ban to re-enter the country for 20 years. On this occasion, he tried to set up a workshop in Tegucigalpa and had some assignments for local architects. Albeit, keeping the workshop in Honduras would have implied to pay “the rent” to the Maras, and he was not willing to work on his own to support local gangs. On the other side, he missed being near his children and wanted to support them so that they kept studying in the U.S. This is why, once again, after a year in his hometown, Jorge restarted the way toward the north in 2014. This time he hired a coyote in Honduras who had to take him to Houston, but at entering Mexico they were detained by migration agents and deported after spending a day at the Migratory Station in Tapachula, Chiapas. He immediately started the journey, this time on his own, considering that the coyote, in addition to being expensive, was not a safeguard to reach his destination (interview with Jorge, Honduran migrant, Saltillo, Coahuila, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

The situation is very similar for José, 42-year-old Salvadoran. He emigrated for the first time 19 years ago and ever since lived in Chicago, where he married and had a child. There he learnt to read and write in English and

4 In the House of the Migrant of Saltillo, I also talked to several migrants who had left virtually with no resources or had been mugged in Chiapas and made all the way to the north of Mexico with no money, asking for food in the towns they passed by. However, unlike Jimmy, they were young men with the project to travel.

Spanish at evening classes in the public library. In 2013, he was detained by the police in a brawl and spent six months in jail before being deported. When he arrived to San Salvador, he did not have any money and had lost touch with their family. He returned to Sonsonate, where he is from, to learn that one of his sisters had died from a disease, while the other had fled to Honduras with her mother-in-law: the Maras had killed the husband because he did not pay the “tax” for a little bakery they had in Sonsonate. José stayed four months in El Salvador, and that time was enough to realize there was nothing for him there: neither work, family, money, a house nor a plot. That is why he started the journey back to the United States to be close to his son and recover the few properties he had managed to purchase over two decades (interview with José, Salvadoran migrant, Saltillo, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

#### **ROUTES AND MEANS OF TRANSPORT**

In order to reach their destination, migrants and the coyotes they hire are forced to continually innovate routes, means of transport, places to enter and leave Mexico, in function of the new obstacles implied by security forces and the National Migration Institute or criminal organizations (Casillas, 2011).

According to data EMIF Sur 2013, most of the Central Americans who reaches the U.S. entered Mexico at the State of Chiapas (65.8 percent): 34.2 percent crossed from the Department of San Marcos (Guatemala) close to the Pacific Coast near Tapachula, and 31.6 percent from the Department of Huehuetenango (Guatemala) near Comitán. About 20 percent crossed in El Petén to head for Tenosique, Tabasco or Palenque, Chiapas.

The routes to enter Mexico started to diversify after Hurricane Stan, which destroyed part of the rail ways and the roads on the Pacific slope. Being the train station in Tapachula, the migrants who entered at Tecún Umán were forced to walk or search for land transport toward Arriaga, almost 250 km from the border (Casillas, 2008: 165). This way, while in the 2004-2005 period most of the migrants who headed for the U.S. entered Mexico through Tapachula, as of 2006 the entrance points diversified. At the first surveys of EMIG Sur (2004-2005) more than 80 percent of the migrants who had crossed Mexico entered at Tecún Umán or La Mesilla. In 2006, father zones such as El Petén, adjoining the State of Tabasco (París *et al.*, 2016) started to emerge.

Most of those who enter over the Pacific slope usually reach Ixtepec, Oaxaca, and cross Mexico from west to east across Tehuantepec Isthmus. The Valley of Mexico is the node at which the routes divide to the Pacific to reach northern Mexico to enter the United States in the States of California and Arizona and to the Gulf to enter the U.S. in Texas. The most one with the heaviest traffic is the latter. However, there is an important difference according to the migrants' nationality: while more than a quarter of the Guatemalan migrants cross Sonora in northwest Mexico, to enter the United States at Arizona; in the case of Hondurans, nine out of ten migrants travel over the Gulf route and enter in Texas. For Salvadorans, almost 85 percent also enters at that state and a very high proportion crosses at the Mexican city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas (62.3 percent). However, the other 15 percent has more disperse routes and 6.4 percent crosses the northern border at the State of Baja California to enter California (map 1).

Map 1. Central American Migrants' routes over Mexico



Source: María Dolores Paris Pombo and Angélica Zambrano.

As in the case of Mexican migration, the Central American has tended to move to the west of the border to the extent that migratory control and vigilance and the construction of the wall have made it difficult and expensive to cross the border at the northwest. While in the eighties, Salvadoran migration almost only followed the route along the Pacific to California, nowadays most migrants enter through Texas.

The means of transport have also varied in recent years and noticeably differ by country of origin. According to EMIF Sur 2013, the main means of transport used by Central American migrants were buses and trucks (70.1 percent) and one in four migrants pointed out that they have travelled most of the time on foot; in the case of Salvadorans, more than a half (53 percent) stated having travelled mainly on foot. Train is the third means of transport, even though it is rarely the mean transport.

Most of the migrants who resort to train are Hondurans; indeed, adding the percentage of migrants who stated having used the train as first or second means of transport, it only adds 8.9 percent of Guatemalan, 14.6 of Salvadorans, whereas for Hondurans, 42.9 percent of those who reached the U.S. used the freight train (EMIF Sur, 2013) (Table 2).

The interviews with Guatemalan and Salvadoran migrants returned by American authorities, held in San Salvador and Guatemala City in August 2013, indicate that most of them used a number of means of transport to traverse Mexico, including passenger buses, trucks, freight train, long walks, boats, trailers and trucks. Those who managed to enter the U.S. with not further risk generally travelled by first-class buss and stayed in hotels, spending more than eight thousand dollars per travel.

In these cases, traversing Mexico takes under a week. Those with no money to afford sums so high travel by second-class buses or small trucks, which stop at towns and do not take main roads. These usually take three to four weeks to complete the travel.

A Salvadoran interviewed in the airport at Comalapa after being deported from the U.S., in august 2013, told how he crossed Mexico in 2009 in a trailer with 190 people from various countries: Brazilians, Ecuadorians, Colombians, Salvadorans and Hondurans. Back then he paid 7500 USD from San Salvador. In the group there were 40 women and three children. They entered Mexico at Tecún Umán, where they boarded the trailer, it took three days to reach Puebla, where they rested for some days in a hotel, and other three days to Houston. The passed a number of checkpoints, but the coyote had already agreed a payment in each of them so that police and military never opened the container.

Table 2. First and second means of transport used by Central American migrants arrested by migratory American authorities to reach from Mexico's southern to northern borders (percentages)

Means of transport	Salvadorans	Guatemalans	Hondurans
<i>First means</i>			
On foot	52.6	17.6	18.5
Bus or truck	44.8	77.2	72.6
Private car	0.6	1.1	1.9
Trailer or freight truck	0.2	0.5	5.0
Train	0	1.1	1.2
Other	1.0	0.4	0.3
Not know /No answer	0.8	2.1	0.4
<i>Second means</i>			
On foot	0	0	0
Bus or truck	48.3	11.9	13.6
Private car	27.4	6.7	17.5
Trailer or freight truck	6.4	6.1	16.9
Train	14.6	7.8	41.7
Other	0.8	1.1	1.1
Only answered 1 option	1.6	64.4	8.8
Not know /No answer	0.9	2.0	0.4

Source: EMIF Sur 2013.

Those with no money, travel long distances on foot, take various means of transport from the border to the train station. Then, they ride the freight train, generally following the Gulf route that reaches Tamaulipas. If they enter Mexico in El Peten, they travel by car or truck to Tenosique, Tabasco, where one of the train routes sets off. Migrants reach this place by trucks or Kombis bypassing the checkpoints, particularly one important of the National Migration Institute, Federal Police and the Mexican Army, in Huixtla, Chiapas. Some travel on foot along the railroad tracks.

Those who travel on the train wait on the tracks in the vicinity of Arriaga or Tenosique, and aboard it when it starts moving or slows down. In the stations and the crossings of the tracks, they are normally extorted by delinquents to be able to ride the railcars' roofs.

Migrants left the train before reaching the Metropolitan Zone of the Valley of Mexico and take various means of transport (taxis, local buses, among others) to go to Lechería train station, located in the north of the valley, in the municipality of Tultitlán, State of Mexico. This station is a crossroads of tracks running northeast and northwest.

The migrants who lack resources to bribe or extort over the route sometimes walk for more than three weeks, in spans of hundreds of kilometers, in order to avoid checkpoints and gang. At the houses of migrant, found along the transit route, migrants arrive with serious injuries in their feet and with their shoes destroyed.

For instance, José, Salvadoran migrant interviewed in Saltillo (April 2015), explained that he walked almost the entire State of Chiapas and most of Puebla. Crossed into Mexico over El Carmen, in the Department of San Marcos (Guatemala) and took a taxi to Tapachula. From there, he walked for two weeks along the tracks to Arriaga and circumventing the checkpoints using dirt roads. He did not manage to board the train in Arriaga, as there was heavy police presence. This way, he kept walking up to the outskirts of Chahuities, Oaxaca, where he finally was able to board the train. He had to run ways at least three times from raids and on one occasion he had to jump off the train to avoid being mugged by the Maras. For his part, Juan, a Guatemalan migrant interviewed in La Patrona, Veracruz (May 2015), walked from Palenque (Chiapas) to Medias Aguas (Veracruz), this is to say, he covered more than 400 km in 16 days, using the train in very short distances (map 1).

From the end of the 1990's decade to 2005, the freight train was probably the main means of transport for Central American migrants. It had two advantages: it was virtually free and was not overlooked by migratory authorities or police. However, it is very risky due to frequent accidents, particularly when migrants fall sleep or are distracted and slip between the cars or else when they have to board and descend from the moving train to avoid the gangs and random checkpoints<sup>5</sup> of the Federal Police and National Migration Institute. This means turned increasingly risky as did the gangs that took possession of the main stations and started extorting, mugging and raping the migrants and even to throw them from the moving train if they refused to pay.

<sup>5</sup> Volantas, in the original text in Spanish, it is the name for movable random checkpoints.

## PEOPLE SMUGGLING FROM NTCA TO THE UNITED STATES<sup>6</sup>

The increase of border surveillance and migratory control by the U.S. government, as well as the proliferation of random checkpoints in Mexico have both implied a considerable increase in the risks migrant take in order to reach their destiny.

Mainly, extortions, robberies and kidnappings along the way have become common feature (AI, 2010; CNDH, 2009 and 2011; Casillas, 2015; Calva *et al.*, 2015). Even if extortion, robbery and human rights violations of migrants are phenomena associated with migration in Mexico at least as of the 1980's decade (Sánchez, 1993), what emerges as of 2007 is extreme extortive violence by criminal organizations: mass kidnappings (of up to 150 migrants at once), torture and human traffick for sexual exploitation (Casillas, 2015).

In order to avoid the entrance barriers and the multiple checkpoints along the way, Central American migrants are forced, more often than not, to hire smugglers. He old coyotes, who lead the migrants from the places of origin to the Unites States, have disappeared to make room for enterprises o more complex networks in various intermediaries participate, namely transporters, owners of safe houses, guides, police officers, migration agents and other public functionaries, employees of railway companies, etc.

Even if literature on people smuggling in Central American and the United States is scarce, there is wider variety on the so called “coyotes” at Mexico’s northern border. In Tamaulipas border with Texas, some scholars state there are individual and family companies engaged mainly in the crossing of the border mainly for locals and Mexicans from the traditionally ejecting regions, largely in occidental Mexico. However, for the mobility of Central Americans over Mexico, testimonies, academic studies (Casillas, 2011, 2015), and journal reports (Martínez, 2012 and 2014) seem to show that the business has been taken up—at least as of 2005— by complex networks of people smuggling. These usually include recruiters, safe houses, guides, transporters, location systems, etc.

6 Multiple are the terms used in Central America, Mexico and the United States to refer to the unlawful transportation of migrants across the borders of the countries. It is undeniable that the terms convey ethical connotations. As suitably Casillas (2011) points out, the terms “coyote” and “pollero” are commonly used by migrants, journalist and academicians. However, they can be confusing as they are frequently mystified and hide the large number of links and functions that compose the business built upon human mobility. Izcara (2015) uses the term “contraband of migrants”, even if the term “contraband” refers to goods. Here we consider that “people smuggling” is clearer; however, it is much more important to avoid mistaking it for “human trafficking” which designates a much more violent activity, compared with modern slavery.

In a study on the activity of coyotes in Tamaulipas, Izcara Palacios (2014: 4) proposes a classification according to the complexity of the networks. Simple coyote networks are led by one single coyote and can be seasonal or operate year-round. They are mainly supported on the migrants' trust, frequently based on kinship, comradeship or friendship. Conversely, complex networks comprise more extended hierarchical structures, and involve various enterprises and individuals engaged in connecting migrants, transport, lodging communication and information. This author points out that owing to the substantial increase in the control of migratory routes and the crossing of the borders by organized crime, and mainly owing to the increase of the "fees" criminals charge coyotes, many of the small networks—particularly seasonal ones—have tended to disappear, while more complex networks have strengthened. Likewise, the author also points out that some polleros might have been recruited by criminal organizations (Izcara Palacios, 2014).

For Central American migration, this increasingly complexity of people smuggling has to do with the increase of surveillance in the country since the end of XX century, or what some authors call the edification of the "vertical border" (Anguiano and Trejo, 2007: 51). In like manner, hiring guides or smugglers—particularly by migrant women and children—is promoted by the high hazard of crossing this country. This is to say, the coyote that leads the Central American migrants over Mexican territory not only has the function of a guide, but also of an intermediary in the bribe negotiation of the "fees" asked by police and migratory authorities and criminal organizations.

The same sort of corruption along the migratory routes—mainly in the Gulf of Mexico—has radically changed as criminal organizations such as Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel dominate the territory, control the flows and obtain a revenue not only from extortion to migrants and coyotes, but also from systematic kidnapping and human trafficking. The extortion of migrants was widespread, at least since the flows of Central Americans in transit over Mexico started to increase by the end of the 1980's. However, the ones who exercised extortion were public functionaries, mainly migratory agents and law enforcers, including the police and the military (Sánchez, 1993; Menjívar, 2000; Spener, 2009). As of 2005, much more frequent denounces were heard about migratory agents colluded with criminal organizations in crimes of enormous violence, such as mass kidnappings.

Journalistic reports started to denounce kidnappings of migrants in 2006 (López, 2007), but the violence and consistency they nowadays occur seems to date back to 2008. Father Baggio, director the House of Migrant of Nuevo Laredo, considers that as of 2009 “at the border everything is monopolized by drug dealing and there are no ‘independent’ coyotes”. He points out that drug lords control the border line on the Tamaulipas’ side and charge a fee per each migrant that intends to cross. The coyotes that skip these fees can be brutally beaten or even murdered (Baggio, 2011).

In this respect, Gilma Pérez, from the Human Rights Center of the Central American University (UCA) in San Salvador also states that as of 2009 the sort of testimonies they received at the center changed. The first migrant that reported torture and kidnapping by a criminal organization narrated actions so sadistic that they were difficult to believe. However, this year the Salvadoran digital newspaper *El Faro*<sup>7</sup> started to disseminate similar testimonies and the very center received other migrants who had lived the same hellish experience. They noticed then that more than an isolated event, violence and extreme cruelty had become an exploitation against migrants (interview with Gilma Pérez, San Salvador, 2013).

Other interviews with defenders (Xicoténcatl, 2015; Pantoja, 2015; Manzo, 2015) verify that between 2005 and 2010 a fundamental transition occurred in the smuggling of Central Americans in northeast Mexico, when the migratory route was taken over by criminal organizations: particularly the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas. Those who benefit from territorial control not any longer are only state agents, but also complex criminal organizations. Up to that moment, news on organized crime in Mexico were almost only related to the production and traffic of illegal drugs.

Some studies in recent years (Bailey, 2014; Osorno, 2012, among others) have pointed out fundamental changes that led to a restructuring of criminal organizations as of the XXI century: mainly the control of territory, diversification of illicit activities and the transformation of the links between the State and organized crime. The criminal organizations that appeared after 2000 based their revenues not only on drug dealing control, but fundamentally on territorial expansion and control. This control takes place through extortion, this is to say charging “fees” to all illicit and most of licit activities in their territories. To make sure none “dodges the fee”, they exercise physical violence in a spectacular and continuous manner; by means of threats or bribery (called “law of the bullet or the silver”) take

7 Martínez, 2012 and 2014.

control of law enforcement authorities. Likewise, they gather small armies to fight other criminal organizations or security agencies.

As of the early XXI century, the Mexican territory was divided between a number of criminal organizations, many of them tended to fragmentation when some of their cells were stroke by the violent deaths or the apprehension of their leaders. This caused the proliferation of drug routes and that the main migration routes overlapped. The main migratory route for Central Americans, which crosses the states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas, overlaps the territorial control of Los Zetas and the Gulf Cartel. Also, the Pacific route, which goes from Guadalajara to Sonora, mainly used by Guatemalans, follows one of the main drug routes in Mexico too, the territory controlled by the Sinaloa Cartel up to the state of Arizona. Los Zetas control railways from Arriaga (Chiapas) or Tenosique (Tabasco), passing through the states of Veracruz, Puebla, (state of) Mexico and San Luis Potosí, to reach Nuevo Laredo or Reynosa. According to Diego Enrique Osorno:

Los Zetas especially sought the control of the coasts of the Gulf of Mexico (...) owing to the evident strategic issue of consolidating the routes to ship illegal goods to the United States, be it Cubans who want to be in Miami or tons of Colombian cocaine for New York (Osorno, 2012).

This way, the notion of the migrant —as with drugs— is reduced to common (Central Americans) or luxurious (Cubans or Asians) merchandise.

As the routes of people smuggling and those of drug trafficking match, the very drug-dealing organizations are in charge of “regulating” the transit of Central American migrants. They force coyotes to pay them heavy sums of money, impose both frequency, route and number of migrants that can travel in a group. When coyotes miss a payment or fail to fulfill one of the rules, or worse if they abandon the migrants to their fate, these can be kidnapped and be trafficked or else be massacred (Martínez, 2012 and 2014). Revenues from migration through violence are not only based on fees for transit, but along the entire exploitation chain that comprises robbery and mugging, kidnapping, retention in safe houses and human trafficking. This means the transition toward an utterly different stage in human smuggling: the very migrant is turned into merchandise; migrants’ bodies, organs, pain, sexuality are also commoditized. Father Pedro Pantoja, of the House of the Migrant of Saltillo, expresses as follows: “organized crime not only squeezes them, but has an imagination to use the migrant person, as in

butcher's in which everything from the victim is used up". Elías Canetti says that the pursuer measures the flesh, all the victim's body, and as a pursuer plans what can be exploited (interview with Pedro Pantoja, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015).

Enterprises of people smuggling have gradually adapted to these new circumstances and nowadays work as complex entrepreneurial networks, pay "fees" to criminal organizations and follow the routes and number of migrants agreed with them. A number of Central American migrants state that they were "sold" by the coyote they hired; this is to say, the people smuggling network that operates between Central America and the United States increasingly tends not only to the depersonalization of the coyote — who becomes a simple link in a chain of people smuggling— but also the commodification of migrants.

Gustavo, migrant interviewed in Guatemala City in August 2013, narrates his travel as follows:

The coyote took us from here (Guatemala) to El Petén by car with paid expenses. We were a day on the field before getting to El Petén, paid one night, he wasn't bad connected. When we got there, he sold us a goods. He told he had an emergency and end of the story, he sold us there and left us with that person. He closed the deal and then they took us to Veracruz, there they dropped us in a little house with some flat beds. We were there for a day. They gave us some food, soda and things. The next day a man picked us up and then set off in a van, they were about ten.

Gustavo's story not only shows the awareness of commodification, but the objectification of the migrants in terms of the travel. However, unlike most of the migrant with fewer resources, in this case the enterprise "fulfilled" the terms of the contract, as in two weeks they reached the U.S.: in 2009 Gustavo paid six thousand USD in advance and other two thousand upon arrival.

Some migrants interviewed in Guatemala and El Salvador (August 2013, July 2015) used transnational people smuggling companies with powerful infrastructure and say they had contact with various intermediaries such as transporters, guides and even federal police officers that moved them in official vehicles. They used to cross the territory in under a week and paid sums that reached up to ten thousand USD; however, most of the interviewees had hired coyote recommended by relatives who had paid sums from six to eight thousand USD.

Those with fewer resources make the entire trip on their own paying the "fees" directly to police, migration agents and criminals who control

the routes. Upon reaching the northern border, most of the migrants — particularly almost everyone who had tried once on their own and were arrested at the border— are forced to hire a coyote in order to increase their chances to cross without being detained. Migrants interviewed in Saltillo (April 2015) declared having paid between 2800 and four thousand USD to cross the U.S. border. The one who charged less are usually —in terms by David Spener (2009: 123), those who help the migrants “just to jump”, this is to say, once in American territory they are on their own to reach their destinations.

Ebert, native to Santa Bárbara (Honduras), did the travel for the first time in 2013 with a small group of adolescents from the same city. On this occasion they took the Pacific route up to Nogales, Sonora; there, they were recruited by drug dealers to cross the Sonoran Desert carrying a backpack with drug that weighed more than 15 kilos. Moreover, they carried some food and a gallon of water. According to Ebert, the journey lasted six days; they guide took them to water reservoirs where they were able to rehydrate. When they reached Tucson, the traffickers paid them 500 USD each and offered them to return to Mexico and do the trip, now for a thousand USD (interview with Ebert, Honduran migrant, 19 years of age, Saltillo, April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015).<sup>8</sup>

Owing to the numerous obstacles posed by Mexican authorities and criminal organizations, traversing Mexico lasts more than three weeks for about 70 percent of the irregular migrants and more than five for about 30 percent (EMIF Sur, 2013). All the transit routes over Mexico have to become longer due to the need of circumventing obstacles, walking long distances and the waiting times in the node-cities and at the border.

According to EMIF Sur 2013, about a half of the Central American migrants (50.7 percent) hired an intermediary (in terms of the survey: guide, coyote or pollero) to reach from Mexico’s southern border to the northern: 64.6 percent of the Guatemalan; 29.8 percent of Hondurans; and, 49.1 percent of Guatemalan. The use intermediaries is more frequent among women both to travel through Mexico and to cross the American border. The cost is also significantly higher for women. In table 3 the percentage of use of intermediaries by nationality and sex of the migrants returned by U.S. migratory authorities is displayed.

<sup>8</sup> In an interview on repatriation processes I carried out in 2010, I had the chance to interview three Mexican adolescents who were engaged in crossing into the U.S. with backpacks full of drugs. Both journalistic articles and the interviews with functionaries and people in charge of the Houses and shelters seem to agree on that it is generally Mexican adolescents who live in border cities.

Table 3. Use of guide, coyote or pollero and average cost un USD

	Guatemalans		Hondurans		Salvadorans	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Hired a coyote to cross Mexico	63%	77.9%	28.0%	44.0%	47.4%	65.5%
Average cost	3 476	3 334	3 077	3 620	3 033	3 180
Hired a coyote to enter into the US	77.3%	87.8%	55.4%	68.8%	62.8%	78.6%
Average cost	2 970	3 019	2 283	2 970	2 703	3 050

Source: EMIF Sur 2013.

To the extent that criminal organizations have grasped the control of migratory routes, extorting, kidnapping, robbing and mugging the migrants and coyotes, has noticeably modified the image of the coyote in the ejecting communities. Gilma Pérez, coordinator of the Program for Migrants of the Human Rights Center (Central American University) in San Salvador, states:

The figure of coyote, historically and culturally, is one undergoing continuous transformation in the Salvadoran world-view. For us, a coyote was a positive concept (...) in 2005 we started to receive news of missing, accidental and disappeared migrants. We started to learn about requests for the repatriation of migrants' bodies. Then, all this produces a demand of coordination and information services which we cannot provide (interview with Gilma Pérez, San Salvador, August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013).

At present, according to Gilma Pérez, testimonies about coyotes that abandoned their migrants on the road and that did not meet their part of the deal or that charged higher fees on the road are increasingly frequent. A number of the travel experiences told by the migrants interviewed in Central America give an account of the frequency with which coyotes break the deals. For instance, Luz hired a woman (a coyote) that took her from Tapachula to Mexico City. There she left her stuck in the bus station with no money and she spent four days begging to survive before being able to communicate with her husband who sent some acquaintances to pick her up (interview with Luz, 50-year-old Guatemalan migrant deported, Guatemala, August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013).

Migrants' advocates and journalists point out that increasingly the most senior coyotes are co-opted by large people smuggling companies or the very criminal organizations. This way, in an excellent book on the transit of Central American migrants over Mexico, Óscar Martínez states:

For ten years now the figure of the friend-coyote started has been declining. That neighbor of the town that for a reasonable amount took his compadre to the United States is now a dour man, covered in scars and dangerous even for his own clients. On occasion, an ally to Los Zetas, someone to trust in as there is no choice. Sometimes a kidnapper. A swindler most of the times. They are the inhabitants of the road... (Martínez, 2012: 145).

Martínez gathers testimonies from a number of coyotes who regularly made the route toward north with Central Americans and had to quit their business when they were forced to work for companies in the coyote industry. Particular is the testimony of “el Chilango”<sup>9</sup>, who used to work on his own: “we the coyotes that go with the people can’t work in peace no more. We’re employees of the drug barons that live at the northern border. They deal with Los Zetas and they take the bread” (Martínez, 2012: 145).<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Migrants who start the way from Central America toward the United States generally are aware of the dangers they have to face. Particularly, via the migratory networks and the media, they know about the presence of criminal organizations such as Los Zetas. Migrants’ advocates state that—in the case of Central American women—many of them take or are shot contraceptives before traveling in order so as not to become pregnant in case of being raped. The persistence and even increment of Central American migration on Mexican territory indicate the desperation of many people from NTCA to run from their places of origin. For many, traveling north is unavoidable, it represents the only possibility to survive and the promise of sending remittances and support the family at once. When they reach the U.S., most of the migrants effectively manages to find a job, may it be in the informal market. The interviewed migrants who had been deported from the U.S., all had jobs they deemed decorous and well-paid before being detained and sent back to NTCA. However, extremely

9 T.N. Slang; someone native to Mexico City.

10 In an article published in the digital newspaper *El Faro*, in April 2014, Óscar Martínez points out that some time after meeting *el Chilango*, he received a phone call from him asking for help, cut most likely by *Chilango*’s kidnappers. He had been sequestered and punished for three Hondurans on his own without paying the corresponding fees to his boss. The journalist tried to phone back, but *Chilango* never picked up the phone. For more than a year, Martínez asked for him on the road, but no one saw him ever again.

severe and punitive migratory policies have criminalized these migrants, not only in the destination country, but in all the region. Sent back to their places of origin, migrants are frequently forced to start an utterly dangerous route to the north afresh and if they manage to reach their destination, they will be persecuted and should live in hiding.

The multiple risks faced by migrants along the route and the crossing of the borders, are the result of excluding economic policies and punitive migratory laws. Since the creation of the National Migration Institute in 1993, the Mexican government has fostered a migratory policy based to a large extent on the systematic detention and deportation of Central Americans who irregularly travel over the country. For more than two decades, in addition to building dozens of detention centers for migrants, they have multiplied random checkpoints on secondary and main roads and have set control programs on freight trains. Owing to the frequent corruption of security agencies (including migratory agents), many of the migrants reach Mexico's northern border bribing at the checkpoints. However, corruption and collusion of functionaries with the organized crime produce harassment against migrants and a condition of great insecurity for human mobility. Besides robberies, muggings and extortions, nowadays migrants frequently suffer crimes and grave violations to their human rights, such as extortive kidnapping and human trafficking.

To the extent extortive violence against migrants has increased, the people smuggling networks from NTCA have changed. Nowadays, the enterprises that offer irregular migrants to take them up to the Mexican northern border are usually complex, composed of multiple links engaged in "moving the migrant" over certain distances. Due to the strict territorial control some criminal organizations keep—particularly the route of the Gulf of Mexico—it is unlikely that traffickers are able to dodge the payment of fees to use such routes. This does not necessarily mean they have been absorbed by the criminal organizations. However, it does imply a heavy presence of organized crime along the routes. At present few are Central American migrants who after traveling over states such as Veracruz, Tamaulipas and the State of Mexico had not come across criminals self-called "zetas" or "maras".

Dangers faced by human mobility are related at the same time with the process of commoditization of migrants and the policies of migratory and border control. As pointed out by Wendy Vogd (2013: 770): "the migrants' vulnerability is produced by the crossing of policies that regulate citizenship and the forces of capitalism".

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