



# **Unintended Consequences: How US Immigration Policy Foments Organized Crime on the US-Mexico Border**



# **Unintended Consequences: How US Immigration Policy Foments Organized Crime on the US-Mexico Border**

June 2023

## ***Authors:***

Steven Dudley – Project Director

Parker Asmann – Project Manager

Victoria Dittmar – Lead Investigator

## ***Layout and Design:***

Ana Isabel Rico, Juan José Restrepo, and María Isabel Gaviria – Graphic Design

Elisa Roldán – Creative Direction

## ***Editing:***

Chris Dalby – Managing Editor

Diego García, and María Luisa Valencia – Translation

Christopher Newton and Isaac Norris – Fact-checking



## Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	4
<b>2</b>	<b>Major Findings</b> .....	5
<b>3</b>	<b>Background and Context</b> .....	6
<b>4</b>	<b>Impacts</b> .....	10
	1. Smuggling Prices, Profits Explode .....	10
	2. Extortion and Kidnapping .....	13
	3. Official Corruption .....	16
<b>5</b>	<b>Recommendations and Opportunities for Intervention</b> .....	19
	<b>Related Content</b> .....	21

# 1

## Executive Summary

In 2019, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP).<sup>1</sup> What would become known as “remain in Mexico” was the latest in a decades-long effort by successive Republican and Democrat administrations to curb migration by making it increasingly difficult for migrants to enter and stay in the United States.

However, the policies have had numerous unintended consequences, including bolstering criminal organizations along the US-Mexico border. Whereas the smuggling of drugs and weapons used to dominate the cross-border contraband trade, human smuggling has morphed into one of the most lucrative industries for crime groups. It also has made it increasingly dangerous for migrants who face more risks en route and along the US border.

This report aims to highlight the role US policy has played in this transformation, which continues to evolve today. Specifically, it analyzes the ways in which Mexican organized crime groups have become involved in human smuggling as risks rose, prices surged, and migrants began to move through less-traveled corridors. The goal is to inform policymakers who are looking to address irregular migration and combat Mexico’s criminal organizations. We also aim to provide relevant stakeholders with opportunities for positive intervention to mitigate this human suffering by targeting the most violent criminal actors.

The findings are based on two years of desktop and field research across the Mexican states of Baja California, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Sonora, and Tamaulipas, where human smuggling is prominent. It includes dozens of in-person and remote interviews with migrants, asylum seekers, US and Mexican prosecutors, security experts, government officials, religious leaders, and migrant advocates, among others. In addition, we analyzed government data on human smuggling investigations and prosecutions, judicial cases, and previous studies on the topic.

---

<sup>1</sup> US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “Migrant Protection Protocols,” 24 January 2019.

## 2

# Major Findings

1. The prevention through deterrence policies used by the US government have created an increasingly lucrative black market for human smuggling. Transnational criminal networks have assumed greater control over the movement of people and replaced the personalized, community-based nature of human smuggling that once existed.
2. The US government's immigration policies have provided more opportunities for organized criminal groups to victimize migrants. The policies have, most notably, created a bottleneck along the US-Mexico border where northbound migrants are forced to congregate as they determine whether they are eligible to seek asylum and contemplate alternative ways to enter the country. As a result, they have become highly susceptible to extortion and kidnapping. And over time, restrictive immigration policies have expanded the scope of these lucrative, secondary criminal economies.
3. The US government's immigration policies and the externalization of immigration enforcement to countries like Mexico have expanded the breadth of official corruption. As the US government has increased its reliance on third countries for enforcement and pushed migrants to remain in these countries, officials from these nations have expanded their illegal operations. These include extortion, kidnapping, and human smuggling rackets.

### 3

## Background and Context

In 1994, at the behest of the Bill Clinton administration, the United States Border Patrol, as it was known then, began a strategy it termed “prevention through deterrence.”<sup>2</sup> The idea was simple: If you make it more difficult for people to cross into the United States, then the number who tried would dwindle. In the years after Border Patrol’s announcement, the agency’s budget increased steadily, and the number of agents swelled from around 4,300 in 1994 to nearly 20,000 by 2020.<sup>3</sup> They concentrated their efforts around ports of entry and major cities, which increased the number of apprehensions and deportations but also increased the number of migrants moving through perilous, inhospitable terrain. Migrant deaths and disappearances soared.<sup>4</sup>

The new strategy was the beginning of the increased militarization of the border. It was later followed by the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002, whose budget swelled to more than \$50 billion by 2022.<sup>5</sup> However, the number of migrants being apprehended on the southern border has fluctuated significantly, from around 1.6 million encounters in 2000, to just about a half a million in 2014, and more than 2 million in 2022.<sup>6</sup> This has made it difficult to assess the overall effectiveness of this strategy.

What is clear, however, is the impact this strategy had on the business of irregular migration and the migrants’ safety. First, the nature of the trade changed, and the prices rose significantly for migrants and their families. For years, community-based coyote networks provided a valued service, often across generations of migrants and their families. But as risks rose, so did the need for more specialized networks that operated in less-traveled areas. And as the need for infrastructure rose, so did the need for new partners and the

---

2 US Border Patrol, “[Border Patrol Strategic Plan 1994 and Beyond](#),” July 1994.

3 National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, “[Border Militarization Policy](#),” 2020; American Immigration Council, “[The Cost of Immigration Enforcement and Border Security](#),” 20 January 2021.

4 James Verini, “[How US Policy Turned the Sonoran Desert Into a Graveyard for Migrants](#),” The New York Times, 18 August 2020.

5 DHS, “[Homeland Security Act of 2002](#),” 25 November 2002; DHS, “[FY 2022 Budget in Brief](#),” 2022.

6 Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), “[US-Mexico Border Patrol Migrant Encounters](#),” 1960-2023.

associated fees. This was particularly true at the juncture along the US-Mexico border, the most perilous part of the trip, where separate smuggling networks began charging a premium to cross. Later, larger criminal organizations began to collect fees for passing through their territory. Along the way, ancillary businesses would also emerge around migration, from lodging to transport to camouflage clothing shops.

# Organized Crime Presence and Migration Routes to the US-Mexico Border



Second, migrants became increasingly vulnerable and susceptible to victimization. As the coyotes sought new routes, they had to expand their networks. Their new allies ranged from trusted partners to unknown criminal groups. As the distance between the migrants and those who they hired to move them grew, so did the risks. Available data show that since the 1990s, there has been a significant uptick in migrant disappearances and deaths. That uptick is evident in places like Pima County, Arizona, where hundreds of migrants die each year, although advocates say this is a vast undercount.<sup>7</sup> Many others die or disappear on the Mexican side, where there is even less accounting of these tragedies.

Despite these sobering realities, US policy stiffened in recent years with the implementation of MPP and Title 42. Commonly referred to as “remain in Mexico,” MPP went into effect in early 2019 and required migrants who requested asylum at or between ports of entry to wait for their immigration court hearings in Mexico.<sup>8</sup> Title 42 was a public health measure established in March 2020 amid the global COVID-19 pandemic that effectively suspended asylum and gave US officials the authority to expel those wishing to seek asylum back to Mexico or their home countries.<sup>9</sup> The MPP program ended in June 2021, and Title 42 remained in effect until May 2023.<sup>10</sup>

Following the end of these programs, US officials subjected migrants to new restrictions under Title 8, a convoluted set of immigration laws that some argue make it even harder for them to seek asylum in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Under Title 8, if non-Mexican migrants who enter the country outside a port of entry do not first request asylum in a third country, such as Mexico, they will now be rejected for asylum, deported, and banned from entering the country for five years.<sup>12</sup> Currently, the only clear way to seek asylum is through a US government telephone application known as CBP One. However, rather than a secure and orderly process, the app works more like a lottery as tens of thousands of migrants enter the system simultaneously in an effort to secure

---

7 Colibrí Center for Human Rights, “Fact Sheet on Migrant Deaths,” 17 July 2017.

8 DHS, “Secretary Kirstjen M. Nielsen Announces Historic Action to Confront Illegal Immigration,” 20 December 2018.

9 Federal Register, “Control of Communicable Diseases; Foreign Quarantine: Suspension of Introduction of Persons Into United States From Designated Foreign Countries or Places for Public Health Purposes,” 24 March 2020.

10 DHS, “DHS Terminates MPP and Continues to Process Individuals Who Were Enrolled in MPP Into the United States to Complete Their Immigration Proceedings,” 1 June 2021; DHS, “Statement by Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro N. Mayorkas Regarding Immigration Enforcement Efforts,” 11 May 2023.

11 DHS, “U.S. Government Announces Sweeping New Actions to Manage Regional Migration,” 27 April 2023; DHS, “DHS and DOJ Finalize Rule to Incentivize Use of Lawful Immigration Pathways,” 10 May 2023.

12 Ibid.



one of the few appointments made available each day.<sup>13</sup> What's more, the app only functions for those migrants located in central and northern Mexico.<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, migrants effectively remain in Mexico or risk entering illegally and getting returned to their countries of origin where they will have to rustle up the money (and the courage) to attempt the journey again. It is not easy. As migrants told us during our research, throughout the trip, officials and criminals in numerous countries lie in wait for their arrival so they can victimize them in various ways. Indeed, with every MPP, Title 42, Title 8, and the policies likely to follow, criminal networks seem to grow stronger. Below, we illustrate how.

---

<sup>13</sup> Daniela Dib and Ann Louise Deslandes, "Migrants must overcome a new barrier at the border: The U.S. government's terrible app," *Rest of World*, 9 March 2023; US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "CBP Makes Changes to CBP One™ App," 5 May 2023.

<sup>14</sup> CBP, "CBP One™ Mobile Application," 22 May 2023.

# 4

## Impacts

### 1. Smuggling Prices, Profits Explode

US policies have blocked legal migration pathways and pushed migrants into new, riskier corridors controlled by more sophisticated criminal organizations. Higher risks, more infrastructure, and multi-layered networks have meant higher fees for migrants.

Take the case of Ricardo Montes.<sup>15</sup> Many people he knew from his hometown in Guatemala made the journey to the United States numerous times years earlier for about \$5,000. But when he migrated near the end of 2019, smugglers were charging about \$10,000.<sup>16</sup> Still, Montes felt like he had little choice. He was facing harassment and threats from local police in Guatemala City, where he lived.

Montes' experience is indicative of the industrialization of migrant smuggling. Since the 1990s, migrant smuggling has gone from intimate "mom-and-pop" operations to possibly a multibillion-dollar industry controlled in large part by organized crime groups.<sup>17</sup> In recent years, DHS made a conservative estimate that criminal organizations earned \$500 million annually from migrant smuggling.<sup>18</sup> For its part, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has said that globally, smugglers made between about \$5 and \$7 billion.<sup>19</sup> As we shall see from Montes' journey, both may be underestimates.

What was once a manageable journey -- though still fraught with serious abuses and dangers -- has metastasized into a gauntlet controlled by vast networks of smugglers, intermediaries, corrupt government officials, and transnational criminal organizations.<sup>20</sup> With access to ports of entry severely limited for migrants and asylum seekers because of US policy, irregular border crossings are practically the only viable option.

---

<sup>15</sup> The name of this individual has been changed for security reasons.

<sup>16</sup> InSight Crime interview, Guatemalan asylum seeker, 18 April 2023.

<sup>17</sup> InSight Crime interview, US-Mexico border researcher at Human Rights Watch, 12 April 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Then-Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, "[Homeland Security and Immigration Testimony](#)," 15 May 2018.

<sup>19</sup> UNODC, "[Global Study on Smuggling of Migrants](#)," 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Parker Asmann and Steven Dudley, "[Desperation in the Desert: The Industrialization of Migrant Smuggling on the US-Mexico Border](#)," InSight Crime, 5 October 2022.



Smugglers market their services to migrants on social media platforms like TikTok and Telegram  
(Collage: InSight Crime)

“It creates a market for people to be able to find ways to cross our border outside of the ports of entry, and that market is being filled by organized crime,” said one attorney working with asylum seekers.<sup>21</sup>

In Matamoros, for example, factions of the Gulf Cartel extract profits “from all the migrants that are going through their area,” according to one US Homeland Security Investigations special agent.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes these fees are collected directly from the migrants, other times the group targets the organizations that are bringing migrants through their area of control.

Not every trip is the same. Smugglers provide migrants with a menu of options at different price points that depend on the services provided, ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars just for permission to cross the US-

21 InSight Crime interview, Rebekah Wolf, Policy Counsel with the Immigration Justice Campaign at the American Immigration Council, 6 April 2023.

22 InSight Crime interview, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), San Antonio Field Office, Assistant Special Agent in Charge Mark Lipa, 8 May 2023.

Mexico border, to more than \$10,000 for a guided journey to a particular US city.<sup>23</sup> Montes, for example, was on the higher end of that scale and was forced to pay for the trip in three tranches.

First, Montes drove his car from Guatemala's capital city to Gracias a Dios, a small, isolated village in the department of Huehuetenango on the border with the Mexican state of Chiapas. There, he gave his car to the coyote. That would pay for the first leg of the journey to the US-Mexico border. This is common, experts told InSight Crime -- migrants often use their homes, land deeds, and other assets as collateral or to pay smuggling networks.

Montes waited in Gracias a Dios for six days before his handlers picked him up and helped him cross into Mexico. Officials stood by as he crossed, he said. From there, he was moved through a patchwork of safe houses run by individuals that his smuggling network contracted to facilitate his journey through Chiapas to the capital city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez. From there, he boarded a series of vans, cars, and trucks alongside dozens of other migrants. They were stopped several times by Mexican authorities, who collected their own small and large payments for permission to keep moving north. In all, Montes said he would pay about \$1,000 in bribes, either directly or through the drivers that often handled paying the officials.

Seventeen days later -- after going through Puebla, Mexico City, and Monterrey -- he arrived in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, at the US-Mexico border. At this point, he had to pay the second tranche of \$3,000 to his coyote network, but he was a little worried. Montes knew nothing about his smuggler or the broader network.

---

*“[The coyote] was just the one I found on Facebook when I started looking for travel options.”*

---

“It’s completely different from how it once was,” he explained. “[The coyote] was just the one I found on Facebook when I started looking for travel options.”<sup>24</sup> In total, Montes said he interacted with seven different guides along the way who worked for the same network he originally paid in Guatemala.

This is typical of the journey these days and can cause problems. Prices, for instance, can change on a whim. At one point, one of the guides told Montes that the money he paid his smugglers had not arrived. The guide demanded an extra 1,000 pesos from Montes and 24 other migrants they were transporting, or about \$1,500 total. As is evident in the next section, danger lurks, especially for those who do not have the extra money. These charges may also include

---

23 InSight Crime interview, US-Mexico border researcher at Human Rights Watch, 12 April 2023.

24 InSight Crime interview, Guatemalan asylum seeker, 18 April 2023.

extra fees for lodging, food, clothes, or a guide.<sup>25</sup> In some instances, other criminal organizations usurp control over entire groups, then force them to pay significantly more for transport to the United States.<sup>26</sup>

Prices can also vary for the crossing itself. Across Mexican border states like Baja California, Sonora, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas, migrants told us they were charged between \$10,000 and \$13,000, to be smuggled over the border and transported to certain US cities.<sup>27</sup> Simple permission to cross the border without a guide could incur a significant fee that ranged from \$500 to \$2,000, or higher depending on the criminal group in charge, on top of whatever the migrant had paid to get to the border. For his part, Montes was lucky, avoiding any extra fees before he crossed. There, in the United States, Montes paid the final tranche of \$3,000.

Montes' journey can give us a sense of the market's value. In fiscal year 2022, US authorities encountered just under 2.4 million migrants at the southwest border, a new record.<sup>28</sup> Many of these migrants were encountered more than once, but if we assume that half of them, or 1.2 million, paid \$10,000 in smuggling fees and bribes, the market would be worth close to \$12 billion.

## **2. Extortion and Kidnapping**

US policies like MPP and Title 42 increased the number of migrants residing in dangerous border cities for long periods of time, exposing them to greater risks of extortion and kidnapping.

This was clear to us in the border city of Nuevo Laredo, where kidnappers stalk strategic parts of the city. Outside the airport and at the bus terminals, for instance, paid lookouts target migrants arriving from Monterrey and elsewhere. And near the international bridges, taxi drivers linger to offer rides that lead migrants straight into the hands of kidnappers working with the Northeast Cartel, the dominant group in the region.

In cities like Nuevo Laredo, there is no safe haven. At migrant shelters, for example, kidnappers do informal surveys of the migrants. There, the migrants must have what is known as the *clave*, or key that confirms they have paid for permission to be in the city and cross the border. Those without this key are kidnapped. Ransoms can climb as high as \$10,000, according to one local attorney who has knowledge of cases in the area.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> InSight Crime interview, local religious leader, Altar, Sonora, Mexico, 12 September 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> InSight Crime interviews, Mexican migrants, Altar and Nogales, Sonora, 12 and 14 September 2022.

<sup>28</sup> CBP, "[Southwest Border Sectors Total Encounters by Fiscal Year](#)," 1960-2020; CBP, "[Southwest Land Border Encounters](#)," 2020-2023.

<sup>29</sup> InSight Crime interview, independent immigration attorney, 28 February 2023.

To be sure, migrants have long been extorted and kidnapped en route to and at the border. But US policies greatly expanded the pool of potential victims. Both MPP and Title 42 sent many migrants back to Mexican cities where they have no social or communal ties and organized criminal groups like the Northeast Cartel are dominant. As one immigration attorney put it, the US government is “essentially handing [organized crime groups] victims.”<sup>30</sup>



*Graffiti referencing the Northeast Cartel on the streets of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas (Photo: InSight Crime)*

Still, it’s difficult to gauge the true scale of the problem. Kidnapping and extortion are two of the most underreported crimes in Mexico.<sup>31</sup> In 2021 and 2022, for example, Mexican officials recorded just 55 cases of migrant kidnappings nationwide, although they reportedly “rescued” more than 2,000 migrants from human smugglers in 2022.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, during that same two-year period, Human Rights First, a non-governmental human rights organization, documented thousands of kidnappings or attempted kidnappings of migrants

30 InSight Crime interview, Rebekah Wolf, Policy Counsel with the Immigration Justice Campaign at the American Immigration Council, 6 April 2023.

31 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), “Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE),” 2022.

32 Gobierno de México, “Delitos Perpetrados en contra de personas migrantes irregulares en México, serie histórica 2016-2022,” 2016-2022; INM, “Rescatan INM e Interpol a 4 mil 549 víctimas de tráfico, trata y delitos conexos,” 5 May 2023.

who had been expelled to or stranded in Mexico due to Title 42.<sup>33</sup> In both cases, the numbers -- experts and lawyers told InSight Crime -- were probably far higher.

Nuevo Laredo has arguably the most sophisticated and well-organized migrant kidnapping dynamic of all the US-Mexico border cities, according to migrants, attorneys, and other border researchers interviewed for this investigation.<sup>34</sup> In one case chronicled by Human Rights First, US officials expelled a Guatemalan asylum seeker and her five-year-old son to Nuevo Laredo. A taxi driver picked them up immediately and handed them over to members of the Northeast Cartel. Although the criminal group had kidnapped them once before, its members demanded another \$9,000 ransom payment before releasing them.<sup>35</sup>

Another feature of recent US immigration policy that has put migrants at increased risk are so-called “lateral expulsions.” In most cases, migrants expelled under Title 42 or Title 8 are brought to the nearest port of entry and forced back into Mexico, which poses its own risks. But in some cases under Title 42, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) drove or flew migrants to a different part of the border from where they originally crossed and required them to cross back into Mexico.<sup>36</sup> These lateral expulsions put migrants at extreme risk, according to experts, lawyers, and migrants interviewed by InSight Crime. While migrants may have paid one criminal network for permission to cross the border in a certain area, when they are returned to Mexico by CBP at a different point of the border, they no longer have permission to cross.<sup>37</sup> In another case chronicled by Human Rights First, armed men kidnapped one Honduran asylum seeker and her seven-year-old daughter “just blocks from the port of entry” after being expelled to Ciudad Juárez via a lateral expulsion flight.<sup>38</sup>

In sum, advocates say the number of potential extortion and kidnapping victims “increased tremendously” as a result of MPP and Title 42.<sup>39</sup> In fact, some of the criminal proceeds increased in direct proportion with the time migrants spent in these border cities. In Nuevo Laredo, for instance, criminal

---

33 Human Rights First, “[Human Rights First Tracker of Reported Attacks Against Asylum Seekers and Migrants Who Are Stranded in and/or Expelled to Mexico Due to Title 42 Since January 2021](#),” 2021-2022.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 American Immigration Council, “[A Guide to Title 42 Expulsions at the Border](#),” May 2022.

37 InSight Crime interview, independent immigration attorney, 28 February 2023.

38 Human Rights First, “[Human Rights First Tracker of Reported Attacks Against Asylum Seekers and Migrants Who Are Stranded in and/or Expelled to Mexico Due to Title 42 Since January 2021](#),” 2021-2022.

39 InSight Crime interview, migrant shelter directors, Reynosa, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 9 May 2023.

actors charged extortion based on how long migrants were in the city. They demanded to review court documents to see when their next hearing was and based the extortion payment accordingly.<sup>40</sup>

### **3. Official Corruption**

US immigration policy has for years driven migrants and asylum seekers into increasingly isolated and dangerous migratory paths between ports of entry in which they are afraid of contact not just with organized crime groups, but also authorities.



*A migration checkpoint between Monterrey, Nuevo León, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas (Photo: InSight Crime)*

Consider the final hour of the 400-kilometer bus trip from Monterrey to Piedras Negras, along the US border. There are at least three government checkpoints on this isolated two-lane highway alone. One is controlled by the Mexican Army, another by a specialized unit of the Coahuila state police, and another by Mexican immigration officials. The checkpoints are notorious. Contact with them brings the threat of detention or deportation. And when

InSight Crime passed them, we did not see any security cameras.

This fear and power imbalance creates an “obvious opportunity” for government officials to extort vulnerable migrants in exchange for not being detained, one researcher told us.<sup>41</sup> The many migrants InSight Crime spoke to as part of this investigation said this is exactly what happens. They explained that extortion is present at nearly every step of their journey to the US-Mexico border. This includes paying off local and state police, migration officials, and members of the National Guard. One migrant told InSight Crime that

<sup>40</sup> InSight Crime interview, former Human Rights First researcher on US-Mexico border, 7 March 2023.

<sup>41</sup> InSight Crime interview, Stephanie Brewer, WOLA’s Mexico Director, 13 April 2023.



officials board the bus with a simple message: “C’mon folks, you know the drill.”<sup>42</sup> Refusal can lead to the destruction of their transit documents, arrest, or deportation.<sup>43</sup>



*The National Migration Institute’s (INM) repatriation building for deported migrants in Matamoros, Tamaulipas (Photo: InSight Crime)*

US policies have made this situation worse. In recent years, the US has enrolled an increasing number of Mexican agencies into their prevention through deterrence efforts, thus multiplying the officials’ interactions with vulnerable migrants.<sup>44</sup> Human rights defenders accused local officials of extorting migrants at bus stations and highway checkpoints. In some instances, migrants told InSight Crime, the bus drivers appeared to be part of the schemes. As one expert told us, what this means in practice is that “migrant bodies have targets on them, and it’s not even just that they’re deportable, but they’re also *extortable*.”<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> InSight Crime interview, Venezuelan asylum seeker, Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 12 May 2023.

<sup>43</sup> InSight Crime interviews, Venezuelan, Guatemalan, and Honduran asylum seekers, Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 9-12 May 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Stephanie Leutert et al., “[La Implementación y el Legado del Programa Frontera Sur de México](#),” Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas at Austin, June 2019.

<sup>45</sup> InSight Crime interview, Levi Vonk, author and expert on migration, borders, and violence, 14 April 2023.

It gets worse. In border cities, migrants have reported being kidnapped by Mexican immigration officials or detained until ransoms are paid.<sup>46</sup> In other cases, immigration officials turned a blind eye as migrants were kidnapped in front of or even from within government facilities.<sup>47</sup> In extreme cases, migrant advocates told InSight Crime that immigration officials and local police transported migrants in government vehicles and handed them to organized crime groups who then held them for ransom.<sup>48</sup>

Along the US-Mexico border, migrants, lawyers, and other advocates cited the state of Coahuila as being one of the most dangerous for migrants with regard to official corruption. “The state is the most organized criminal actor,” said one attorney working with families and victims of forced disappearances perpetrated by officials.<sup>49</sup>

---

46 Luis Chaparro, “Migrants Died In Detention Fire Because They Couldn’t Pay \$200 Bribe to Be Released,” Vice News, 6 April 2023.

47 Human Rights Watch, “DHS OIG Formal Complaint Regarding ‘Remain in Mexico,’” 2 June 2020.

48 InSight Crime interview, migrant shelter director, Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 21 February 2023.

49 InSight Crime interview, attorney working with families and victims of forced disappearances, Piedras Negras, Coahuila, Mexico, 23 February 2023.

# 5

## Recommendations and Opportunities for Intervention

### 1. **Allocate more resources to expand the CBP One application.**

The CBP One app currently offers just 1,250 appointments per day to apply for, yet there are tens of thousands of migrants waiting in Mexico. As a result, many resort to irregular border crossings increasingly controlled by organized crime groups, which they view as their best chance at entering the country. By expanding CBP One beyond Mexico and dedicating more resources to fixing glitches and improving its functionality, more migrants may be able to access asylum resources, thus reducing their need to remain in Mexico for long periods of time.

### 2. **Condition a percentage of US security assistance to Mexico on the government ensuring the safety of migrants waiting in that country to seek asylum in the United States.**

Migrants waiting in Mexico are currently under threat not just from organized crime groups but also local police and migration officials. Despite that, very little is being done to safeguard them. Conditioning a percentage of US security aid to Mexico on the government ensuring their protection and safety may push them to do more to root out corruption and combat collusion between officials and crime groups. This would help undermine a key part of how organized crime groups exploit migrants.

### 3. **Improve available infrastructure and resources at ports of entry and within the United States to process asylum seekers.**

Under international law, the United States is obligated to allow those already in the United States or who arrive at ports of entry to apply for asylum. However, current US policy greatly restricts that access and forces

people to wait in Mexico and contemplate crossing between ports of entry where there are increased dangers for migrants. Improved infrastructure and resources at ports of entry and within the United States would reduce the risks of extortion and kidnapping that migrants waiting in limbo in Mexico face on a daily basis.

---

# Related Content

Learn more about InSight Crime's in-depth coverage of migration and organized crime. In recent years, we have documented how organized crime groups in Mexico have assumed a greater role in migrant smuggling operations and taken advantage of irregular migration, including through targeted kidnappings.



## Desperation in the Desert: The Industrialization of Migrant Smuggling on the US- Mexico Border

US-MEXICO BORDER / 5 OCT 2022

Along the US-Mexico border, the business of smuggling migrants has evolved from a close...

[READ HERE >](#)



## Human Smugglers Outsourcing Drivers, Wreaking Havoc on US- Mexico Border

US-MEXICO BORDER / 20 SEP 2022

Federal and local authorities in Arizona are sounding the alarm about a rise in the use...

[READ HERE >](#)



## With US Policy, Mexico Crime Groups See Double the Opportunity in Northbound Migrants

HUMAN RIGHTS / 17 JAN 2022

Reported kidnappings have decreased significantly in Mexico, but in recent years, at least one out...

[READ HERE >](#)



InSight Crime is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the study of the principal threat to national and citizen security in Latin America and the Caribbean: organized crime. For more than a decade, InSight Crime has crossed borders and institutions - as an amalgam of journalism outlet, think tank and academic resource - to deepen the debate and inform on organized crime in the Americas. On-the-ground reporting, careful research and impactful investigations are hallmarks of the organization from the very beginning.

*For more information, visit [insightcrime.org](https://insightcrime.org)*