



# The Geography of Human Trafficking on the US-Mexico Border

#BORDERTRAFFICKING



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# **The Geography of Human Trafficking on the US-Mexico Border**

August 2023

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# 1

## Executive Summary

Human trafficking is one of the most complex and misunderstood criminal economies in the world. This is especially true along the US-Mexico border, where a smattering of organized crime groups with varying degrees of power and sophistication operate and engage in a wide variety of criminal activities. Estimates vary, but there are now several hundred crime groups operating across Mexico, many of which are connected to human trafficking.<sup>1</sup>

The question is, what type of connection do they have? Officials often portray human trafficking as being controlled by large, organized crime groups -- frequently referred to as “cartels” -- but the reality on the US-Mexico border illustrates there is a far wider array of groups behind this problem. This report aims to sort through this difficult terrain and analyze the ways in which different types of organized crime groups are involved in human trafficking. The goal is to inform policymakers who are looking to address human trafficking, so they can better focus their limited resources. We also aim to provide relevant stakeholders with opportunities for positive intervention to mitigate this problem.

The findings are based on two years of desktop and field research across the Mexican states of Baja California, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Tamaulipas. It includes dozens of in-person and remote interviews with sex workers, trafficking victims, anti-human trafficking advocates, prosecutors, security experts, government officials, researchers, and academics. The team also visited several cities along the US-Mexico border that are known to be major human trafficking hotspots. In addition, we analyzed government data on human trafficking investigations and prosecutions, judicial cases, and previous studies on the topic.

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1 Lantia Intelligence, “[Mapa criminal: México](#),” 2019-2020.

## 2

# Major Findings

1. There are four major criminal corridors along the US-Mexico border, each of which has a slightly different dynamic of human trafficking. Most of these operations are run by small, clan-based criminal groups who buy off and/or collaborate with corrupt local officials. In each, the extent to which Mexico's major organized crime groups are involved in human trafficking varies significantly. This ranges from supplying victims to human trafficking networks to taxing those networks via extortion but rarely involves total control of these operations.
2. The corridors illustrate that human trafficking depends on the local organized crime landscape, the capacities of law enforcement, and migratory flows through these corridors. Mexican organized crime's closest connection to human trafficking intersects with migrant smuggling. The two crimes are distinct, but vulnerable migrants often find themselves forced into working for organized crime groups or sexually exploited by opportunistic individuals responsible for guiding them through this area.
3. Policymakers seeking to deal with human trafficking would do better to push for further research and increased resources for data collection and analysis. There is a serious dearth of data related to this crime on both sides of the US-Mexico border, which contributes to uncertainty about where to target resources. Without systematic data collection on both victims and victimizers, it is difficult to understand the true nature of human trafficking in this space and thus focus resources towards mitigating its impact.

# 3

## Background and Context

Human trafficking is reportedly among the most lucrative criminal economies in the world. This is, in part, due to the unique nature of the commodity in question: human beings. Put simply, trafficking victims can be exploited repeatedly over long periods of time.<sup>2</sup> The potential profits are significant. According to a regularly cited report from the International Labor Organization, criminals earn as much as \$150 billion per year trafficking people; roughly speaking, two-thirds of these profits come from commercial sexual exploitation, while the other third comes from forced labor exploitation primarily in domestic or agricultural work.<sup>3</sup>

The Americas has a vibrant human trafficking trade. Some \$12 billion in profits are estimated to come from human trafficking in Latin America alone.<sup>4</sup> The US-Mexico border is one of the regions where human trafficking is flourishing. The border area is replete with criminal organizations, many of which appear to be taking advantage of human migration and economic desperation. These organizations vary in size and sophistication, and some of them form part of large criminal enterprises with wide portfolios.

However, determining the profile of the criminal groups involved in human trafficking has proven difficult. Human trafficking is massively underreported. Some Mexican civil society groups believe that just one out of every hundred human trafficking cases is reported to authorities in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> There are similar dynamics in the United States, where few human trafficking crimes are reported and prosecuted. This makes estimating the breadth of the issue on the US-Mexico border difficult, even for authorities who track the crime closely.<sup>6</sup>

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2 InSight Crime interview, law enforcement official and human trafficking expert, San Diego, California, United States, 1 October 2021.

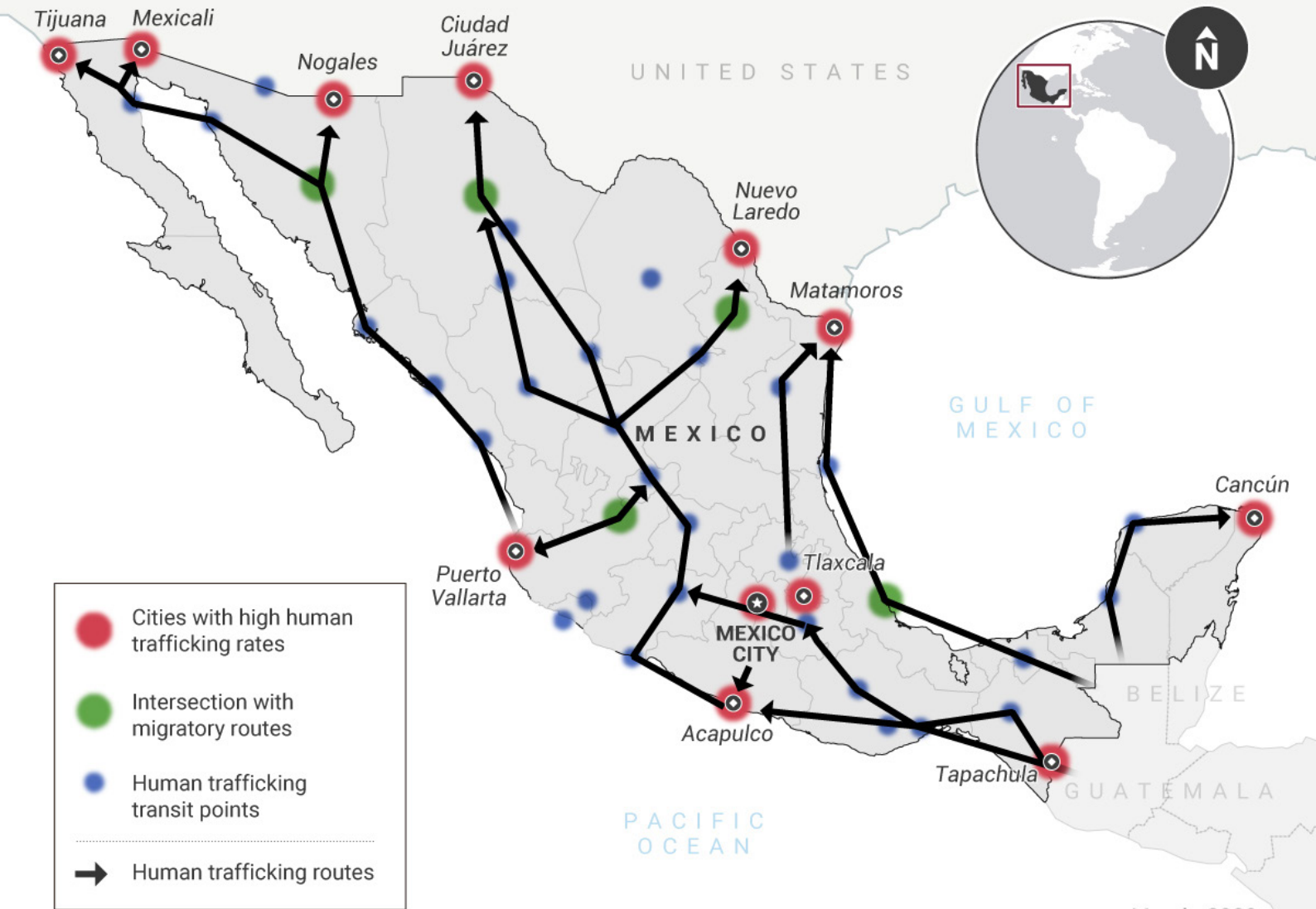
3 International Labor Organization, “Profits and Poverty: The Economics of Forced Labor,” 2014.

4 Ibid.

5 Consejo Ciudadano, “Solamente Uno de Cada 100 Casos de Trata se Conoce a Nivel Nacional,” 1 March 2020.

6 InSight Crime interview, Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), El Paso Division, 22 February 2022.

# Primary Routes and Cities with High Rates of Human Trafficking in Mexico



March 2023

Source: Lantia Intelligence

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Human trafficking is also misreported. Most frequently, it is conflated with human smuggling, even by law enforcement assigned to combat it. The US Justice Department's web page on human trafficking, for example, regularly features cases dealing with human smuggling.<sup>7</sup> Mexican officials in border states like Chihuahua and Coahuila also conflate human trafficking with human smuggling and the movement of migrants.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, the two criminal activities can overlap, but the laws about each differ depending on the country. For InSight Crime, there is also an important difference: Human trafficking is the exploitation of a victim for labor services or commercial sex through force, fraud, or coercion; human smuggling typically involves a willingness on the part of the person seeking those services to be transported to another country. Still, as we mention below, this can be complex, and when there are connections between these networks, this can have important implications.

Given these issues, InSight Crime sought to better understand human trafficking along the US-Mexico border. This is a challenge. As noted, few human trafficking cases are successfully prosecuted, so details about the inner workings of the networks involved in the exploitation are limited. What's more, these groups are dynamic and constantly evolving. Nonetheless, we think it is important for authorities and others working on this issue to understand the different types of groups connected to the trade. By better determining who is involved in human trafficking along the US-Mexico border, authorities will be better positioned to employ their limited resources to confront and prosecute the most egregious human traffickers in these spaces.

We broke down this brief into four major corridors: 1) Tijuana-Mexicali; 2) the Sonoran desert; 3) Ciudad Juárez; 4) the municipalities of Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros. We traveled to each area, where we sought to investigate how human trafficking works, who the major criminal organizations are, and highlight the sticky issues connected to this complex criminal dynamic. Below are our findings from each region.

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7 Justice Department, "Human Smuggler Sentenced Following Migrant Death," 17 November 2022; Justice Department, "Defendants Indicted in Tractor Trailer Smuggling Incident That Resulted in 53 Deaths," 20 July 2022; Justice Department, "Three Individuals Arrested for Conspiracy to Transport and Harbor 86 Illegal Aliens from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras," 6 July 2022.

8 Rubén Villalpando, "Cárteles ganan más con la trata que con drogas en Chihuahua," *La Jornada*, 8 November 2022; Omar Soto, "Por transportación de migrantes, hay en Coahuila hasta 80 carpetas de investigación por trata de personas," *El Heraldo de Saltillo*, 21 November 2022.



# 4

## Corridor 1: Tijuana-Mexicali

The main players in human trafficking in the corridor of Tijuana-Mexicali, in the western state of Baja California, are local pimps and family clans. These clans operate between this part of the border and certain central Mexican states, like Puebla and Tlaxcala. The networks rely on a variety of tactics to capture their victims, including fraudulent job advertisements and false promises of companionship. Some experts estimate there may be hundreds of trafficking cells of between 4 and 20 individuals engaged in sexually exploiting women and girls between the border city of Tijuana and Mexicali.<sup>9</sup> However, it is difficult to determine the true number of networks dedicated to this underground criminal economy.

The red-light district of Tijuana, known as the Zona Norte, is emblematic of how human trafficking works in this corridor. When InSight Crime investigators went to the area, young women and girls stood in the doorways of makeshift motels. Across the street, a municipal police officer sat and watched from his dispatch. Around the corner were a series of bars and brothels, each of which lives in its own gray area of legal and illegal -- selling contraband liquor, housing undocumented migrants, or trafficking children and women. A smattering of missing-persons flyers were plastered on telephone poles, street signs, and the walls of local businesses.

Much of the street-level sex trafficking operations that take place here are “family operations” reportedly run by networks of *padrotes*, the local term used to refer to pimps.<sup>10</sup> They operate out of strip clubs, bars, and informal motels of the type we saw in the Zona Norte. Their victims are often migrant women coming from Central and South America. They also include those that have arrived at the border city from other parts of central and southern Mexico, such as the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Puebla. In this context, victims feel like there are “zero options to denounce the problem in a place that is not your own,” according to one transgender sex worker who migrated to the area from elsewhere in Mexico searching for employment.<sup>11</sup>

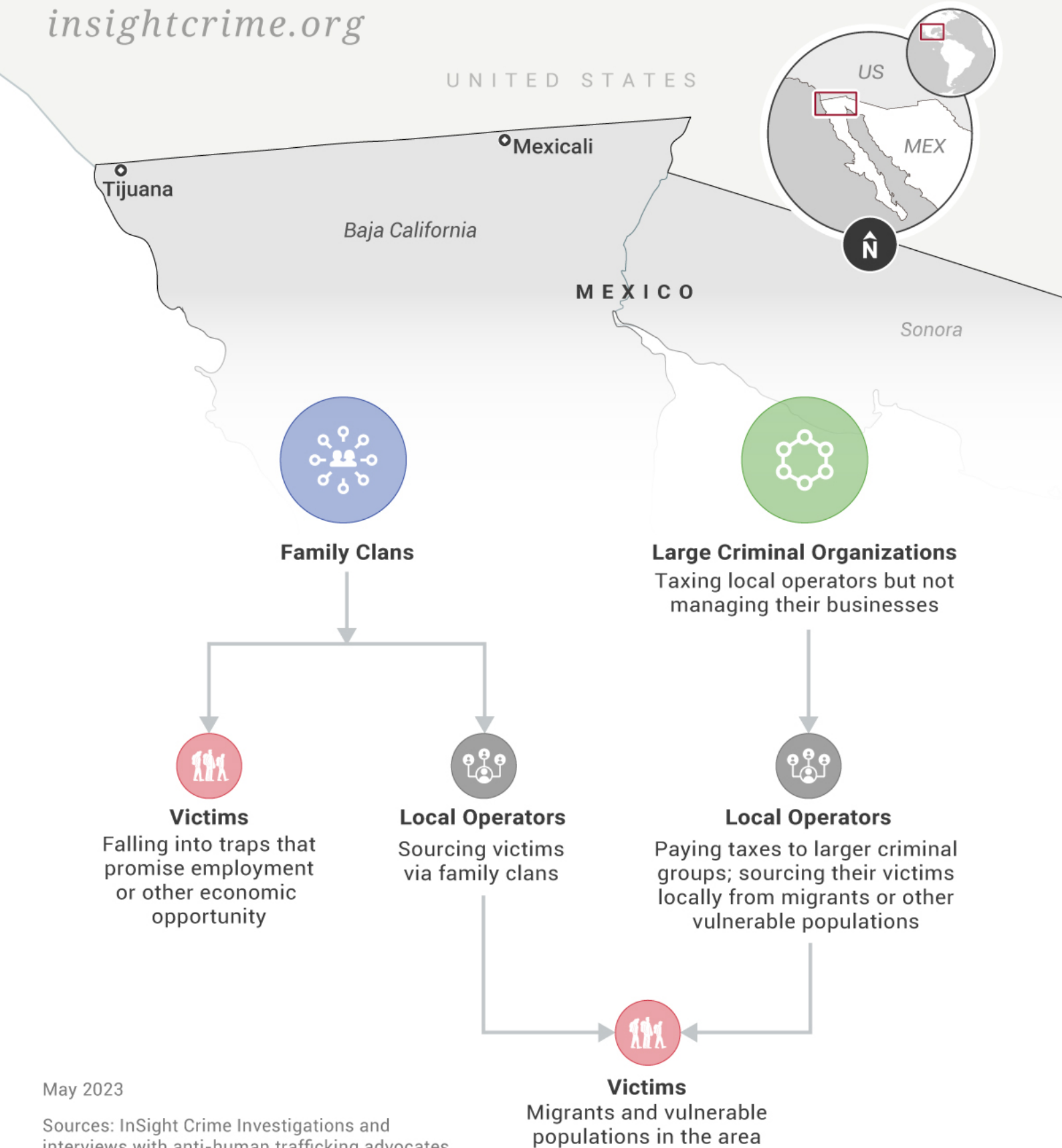
9 InSight Crime interview, Marisa Ugarte, Bilateral Safety Corridor Coalition, Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, 3 and 12 March 2022.

10 InSight Crime interview, Victor Clark, human trafficking expert, Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, 11 March 2022.

11 InSight Crime interview, transgender sex worker, Baja California, Mexico, 10 May 2022.

# Sex Trafficking and Family Clans

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May 2023

Sources: InSight Crime Investigations and interviews with anti-human trafficking advocates

The victims lured to the area typically arrive via bus. Sex workers interviewed by InSight Crime used the operations of one family clan to explain how the exploitation often worked.<sup>12</sup> This network was run by a mother and her children, each of whom occupied varying roles within the organization. The clan targeted Mexican migrant women that arrived at the border city looking for economic opportunities to support their families and young children. One son coerced the victims into working for their network, the sex workers said; pimps oversaw the street-level prostitution; another sibling monitored the victims between shifts; and the mother handled the finances.

This type of clan dynamic dominates the cross-border human trafficking trade as well, which extends far beyond this corridor. InSight Crime found at least a dozen US court cases over the last decade targeting family-based trafficking networks that recruited and deceived victims in Mexico before moving them to the United States.<sup>13</sup> One such family clan indicted by prosecutors in the Eastern District of New York operated unobstructed for nearly 20 years.<sup>14</sup> While one brother lured victims into romantic relationships in central Mexico before pressuring them to travel to the United States, his brother and sister used physical, mental, and emotional abuse to force them into prostitution in New York.<sup>15</sup> Other similar family-style operations with links back to Mexico were uncovered in California, Georgia, New Jersey, and Texas, among other states.

Still, in court documents, officials did not establish any links between these independent family networks and transnational organized crime groups. In the Tijuana-Mexicali corridor, these organizations include the Jalisco Cartel New Generation (Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación - CJNG), Sinaloa Cartel, and remnants of the Tijuana Cartel.<sup>16</sup> While these criminal organizations have local cells which monitor all economic activity in their areas of influence and seek to extract a profit where possible through extortion, their priorities appear to lie in other ventures like migrant smuggling, arms trafficking, and drug trafficking, sources told InSight Crime.<sup>17</sup> One source, for example, said padrotes typically “don’t mess with organized crime.”<sup>18</sup> What’s more, taxing these trafficking groups did not appear to be a systematic practice, even if some individual members of criminal organizations purchased sex from the human trafficking groups or sold drugs in the same establishments.<sup>19</sup>

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12 InSight Crime interview, transgender sex worker, Baja California, Mexico, 10 May 2022.

13 US Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of New York, “[Jimenez Rodriguez Sex Trafficking Organization Superseding Indictment](#),” 6 December 2022.

14 Ibid.

15 US Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of New York, “[Government Motion, Document 99](#),” 6 September 2022.

16 For more on each of these groups, see InSight Crime’s criminal profiles of the [CJNG](#), [Tijuana Cartel](#), and [Sinaloa Cartel](#).

17 InSight Crime interview, Jeremy Slack, associate professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, 8 February 2022.

18 InSight Crime interview, Victor Clark, human trafficking expert, Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, 11 March 2022.

19 Ibid.

# 5

## Corridor 2: The Sonoran Desert

In this inhospitable western desert, the lines between human smuggling and human trafficking are blurred. And those who might be considered victims of human trafficking in the eyes of the law often do not see themselves as victims at all. Consider the case of Enrique Pérez.<sup>20</sup> Pérez -- who InSight Crime encountered in the dusty village of Altar, Sonora, about 100 kilometers south of the US border, shortly after he was deported from the United States -- is from Central Mexico.

Pérez had an agreement with his coyote, or human smuggler. Half of the \$13,000 he owed was to be paid up front; the other half would be delivered after he was guided across the border, transported from Arizona to Texas, and earned enough from working the job he had arranged in Texas. It was a typical deal. In fact, dozens of migrants we spoke with at different points along the border were happy with these arrangements and simply saw this as the nature of the business, not as a form of human trafficking.

However, human trafficking experts and law enforcement in the United States said the practice qualifies as human trafficking.<sup>21</sup> In fact, this appears to be one of the common reasons that human smuggling is often conflated with human trafficking. “There are a lot of connections between these two crimes, and the smuggling of a person across the border may be a means to a different end as well,” according to one high-ranking official working with Interpol’s Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Unit.<sup>22</sup>

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20 The name of this individual has been changed for security reasons.

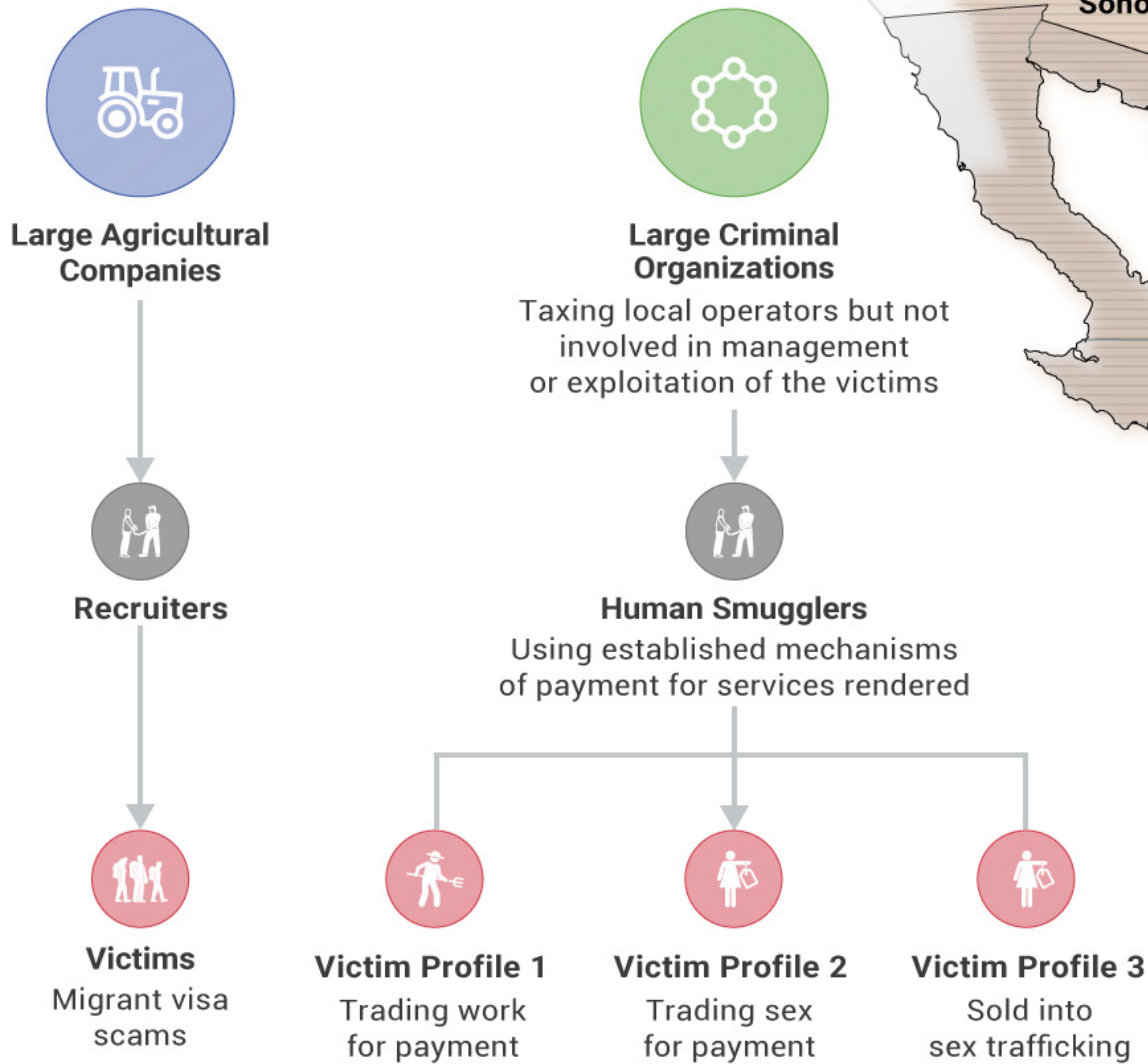
21 InSight Crime interview, Interpol’s Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Unit, 1 February 2022.

22 Ibid.



# A Blurry Line Between Human Smuggling and Human Trafficking

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May 2023

Sources: InSight Crime Investigations and interviews with migrants and activists

Human smuggling and human trafficking intersect in other ways as well, most notably through the sexual exploitation of female migrants.<sup>23</sup> There are numerous well-documented cases of women and girls being raped as a form of payment for smuggling. Anecdotally, this is a huge problem, but it is difficult to determine the scale. There are rumors, for instance, of “rape trees” -- known

<sup>23</sup> US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), “San Diego-based human trafficking investigation leads to criminal charges for foreign national,” 11 April 2023.

places where sexual assault occurs -- but little evidence or testimonies to substantiate these claims.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, multiple sources said sexual exploitation is more of a crime of opportunity rather than a systematic part of smuggling operations, which distinguishes it from the type of human trafficking we saw in the Tijuana-Mexicali corridor.<sup>25</sup>

That is not to say this type of human trafficking does not exist. Further east, in the border city of Nogales, there is sex trafficking within the so-called *zona de tolerancia*, the red-light district where victims are exploited at bars, brothels, and motels. Similar to what we heard in the Tijuana-Mexicali corridor, sources in Nogales told us the Sinaloa Cartel has networks that may collect a tax from these human trafficking operations but do not manage them.<sup>26</sup> The sources added that some coyotes may also sell migrants to human traffickers. Prices vary. According to one local source, Colombian and Venezuelan women, who are especially vulnerable and may not have the resources to pay for expensive smuggling fees, are sold for more than those coming from Central America or Mexico.<sup>27</sup>

The price differences illustrate an important pattern in the relationship between human trafficking and human smuggling along the border: The possibility of being trafficked seems to increase as the distance between the migrants and their handlers grows. For a long time, coyote networks were well-established family clans or individuals who worked in specific areas and with the same families and communities for years.<sup>28</sup> But the market is increasingly stratified, and the groups managing them are atomized. Thus, the likelihood of having a single, trustworthy network of smugglers move migrants the entire journey is far less than it once was. The result -- especially for those who are coming from greater distances through corridors that are not typical for them -- is that they are more likely to be exploited.

And while the danger to women and girls arriving from South America was highlighted most often by our sources, labor trafficking is also common for migrants like Pérez, both in Mexico and the United States. Many migrants looking for work in the United States are targeted by deceptive recruiters advertising legitimate jobs under the H-2A or H-2B temporary work visa program.<sup>29</sup> The former allows US employers to petition to recruit migrants for

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24 Michelle Téllez, William Paul Simmons & Mariana del Hierro, “[Border crossings and sexual conquest in the age of neoliberalism in the Sonoran Desert](#),” *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16 October 2018; Lauren Fox, “[The Watch](#),” *US News*, 5 July 2013; Brandon Darby and Bob Price, “[Rape Trees, Dead Migrants and the Consequences of an Insecure Border](#),” *Breitbart News*, 25 April 2016.

25 InSight Crime interview, David Hathaway, Santa Cruz County Sheriff, 16 November 2021.

26 InSight Crime interview, Óscar Andrade, Pastor and member of Desert Chaplains, 20 January 2023.

27 Ibid.

28 Gabriella Sanchez, “[Border Crossings: Human Smuggling Operations in the Southwest](#),” Arizona State University, May 2011.

29 Polaris Project, “[Labor Trafficking on Specific Temporary Work Visas](#),” July 2022.

seasonal agricultural jobs, while the latter allows recruitment for other low-wage work in non-agricultural industries like construction, meatpacking, and landscaping. In one emblematic case, a criminal network allegedly earned more than \$200 million in illicit profits by exploiting thousands of Central American and Mexican laborers over the span of six years.<sup>30</sup> Recruiters targeted the victims with job offers to work on agricultural farms in Georgia, Florida, and Texas under the H-2A visa program, but they were paid pennies while living in crowded and unsanitary living conditions.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Georgia, "[Blooming Onion' Indictment](#)," November 2021

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

## 6

# Corridor 3: Ciudad Juárez

The Ciudad Juárez corridor in the state of Chihuahua is characterized by complex, multilayered, and dynamic interactions between criminal organizations, making it extremely difficult to determine the overarching pattern of human trafficking. What is clear, however, is that human trafficking is both prevalent and pervasive, and that it relies on either direct state participation, malpractice, or indifference. As it is in the other corridors, there are few reliable data points and even fewer cases made, making the study of this trade even more challenging.

It is telling, for instance, that nearly all of the experts and law enforcement consulted in this area pointed to a decade-old legal case as their starting point. In mid-2013, police in Juárez arrested six alleged members of the Aztecas, a local gang with deep historical roots in the city that once operated as the armed wing of the Juárez Cartel. Authorities said they also formed part of a human trafficking network. Allegedly protected by municipal and state police, the network posed as the owners of modeling agencies and other businesses to recruit young women and girls into a sex and drug trafficking ring, which operated out of a major hotel in the center of the city and other business fronts. Once ensnared, victims and their loved ones faced death threats. The bodies of dozens of victims were found in an area known as the Arroyo el Navajo, in the Valle de Juárez.<sup>32</sup> A court eventually convicted five men for killing 11 young women between 2009 and 2010.<sup>33</sup>

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32 Red Mesa de Mujeres Ciudad Juárez, “Estudio de Caso: El Case de Arroyo el Navajo de Ciudad Juárez,” 2022.

33 Ibid.



# State Complicity and Impunity



**Large Criminal Organizations**  
Range of involvement from taxing to direct participation in trafficking



### Local Gangs

Sourcing victims locally, then selling them to local operators who they sometimes oversee and sometimes do not



### Local Authorities

Direct involvement or permissive malfeasance



### Local Operators

Working with local gangs to source and control victims



### Victims

Migrants and vulnerable locals



May 2023

Sources: InSight Crime Investigations and interviews with anti-human trafficking advocates

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El Diario de Juárez, a local newspaper, frequently called it the “*juicio histórico*,” the historic trial.<sup>34</sup> Others called it the “*juicio del siglo*,” or trial of the century,<sup>35</sup> but it did little to change the dynamic, even if the faces and alliances between the gangs and larger criminal syndicates shifted.<sup>36</sup> Today, similar networks of front companies and owners of clubs, brothels, and hotels operate unimpeded despite the heavy militarization of the city, local experts and groups that assist victims told InSight Crime.<sup>37</sup> Some of these operations may be independent or work with family clans of the type we found in the Tijuana-Mexicali corridor.

But some of these local sex businesses may also respond to or work with the more than a dozen local gangs that operate in the city.<sup>38</sup> This includes the Aztecas, who operate from prisons on both sides of the border and whose tentacles extend into the city and beyond. Many of these gangs may also work with parts of the Sinaloa Cartel or the New Juárez Cartel, which emerged from the remnants of the Juárez Cartel after a bloody battle with the Sinaloa Cartel left it reeling.<sup>39</sup> As such, activists and experts said these larger criminal organizations may also play a part in the human trafficking networks that sexually exploit women and girls in the area.

That said, the ties between organized crime groups and human trafficking networks in Juárez remain murky. InSight Crime spoke to a human smuggler known as “Perro,” a member of La Línea, another New Juárez Cartel affiliate. He said that in his 10 years with the criminal group, he has seen some members of La Línea accept sex as a form of payment for smuggling services. However, he insisted that human trafficking connected to the local sex trade is not part of the group’s portfolio.<sup>40</sup>

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34 Blanca Carmona and Araly Castañón, “Arroyo El Navajo: Omisiones y deficiencias, marca del ‘juicio histórico,’” *Diario de Juárez*, 7 December 2019.

35 Red Mesa de Mujeres Ciudad Juárez, “Estudio de Caso: El Case de Arroyo el Navajo de Ciudad Juárez,” 2022.

36 InSight Crime interview, Ivonne Mendoza, Director of the Centro para el Desarrollo Integral de la Mujer (Cedi-mac), Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, April 2022.

37 InSight Crime interview, Mónica Salazar, Director of Dignificando el Trabajo A.C., Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, April 2022.

38 Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso, “Feminicidio sexual sistémico: impunidad histórica constante en Ciudad Juárez, víctimas y perpetradores,” 15 January 2019.

39 Rubén Mosso, “En Chihuahua, quince grupos delictivos operan para los cárteles de Juárez y Sinaloa,” *Milenio*, 11 January 2023.

40 InSight Crime interview, “Perro” of La Línea, 10 and 28 February 2022.

# 7

## Corridor 4: Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros

Along this corridor, which lies in the far eastern state of Tamaulipas, large criminal organizations appear to exert far more control over human trafficking than in the other corridors we studied. While there were some slight differences between them, criminal organizations in the three main cities in the region -- Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros -- are much more hands-on, relative to their western counterparts.

In Nuevo Laredo, for instance, the Northeast Cartel dominates. Its presence is seemingly everywhere, including outside one of the city's migrant shelters, where three men riding in a white pickup truck circled the facility during our visit. With their windows rolled down, they passed slowly by the side gate where vans loaded with migrants entered. It was an ominous illustration of power and presence. The head of this shelter told InSight Crime that the many migrants moving through this city of almost half a million people are the "*pan de cada día*," the daily bread for the criminal group.<sup>41</sup>

The Northeast Cartel emerged from the remnants of the once-feared Zetas. Most of its leaders are relatives of the founding members of that organization.<sup>42</sup> Several experts and sources consulted for this investigation in Nuevo Laredo said that the Northeast Cartel is the arbiter in this border city, handling everything from settling neighborhood disputes to controlling the flow of drugs, people, and other contraband across this part of the US-Mexico border -- the busiest land crossing on the entire border.<sup>43</sup>

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

42 Mexican Defense Ministry (SEDENA), "Ejto. Mexicano, FGR, CNI y G.N. detienen a J. Gerardo "N" (a) "El Huevo" presunto líder de la delincuencia organizada en el estado de Tamps," 14 March 2022.

43 InSight Crime interview, government official working with at-risk youth, Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 24 February 2023; Laredo Economic Development Corporation, "No. 1 Inland Port Along US-Mexico Border," 2022.

# Criminal Oversight of Local Exploitation



## Large Criminal Organizations

Extract profits through taxing local operators



## Local Operators

Pimps sourcing victims using their own local networks



## Victims

Migrants and vulnerable locals

*insightcrime.org*

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Sources: InSight Crime investigations and interviews with anti-trafficking advocates and religious leaders

The group's most direct involvement in human trafficking overlaps with migrant smuggling. Those that arrive in the city without the proper "clave," the code that confirms they've paid for permission to cross, are often kidnapped and at times forced to work for the Northeast Cartel.<sup>44</sup> This can include mandatory work at safe houses or crossing the border with drugs.<sup>45</sup> That said, it's not clear to what extent this occurs. With the rise in the trafficking of synthetic drugs like methamphetamine and fentanyl, many drug shipments

<sup>44</sup> InSight Crime interview, pastor and migrant advocate, Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 22 February 2023.

<sup>45</sup> InSight Crime interview, immigration attorney previously based in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 28 February 2023.



pass through ports of entry in passenger vehicles or tractor-trailers.<sup>46</sup> And criminal groups like the Northeast Cartel do not risk trusting migrants -- who are often apprehended -- with trafficking such drugs through remote stretches of the border.<sup>47</sup>

In Nuevo Laredo's red-light district, a walled-off area located in the center of the city where sex workers have operated for more than 40 years, the Northeast Cartel's ties to human trafficking are more indirect, local sources said.<sup>48</sup> Some women enter sex work without criminal coercion, experts said, but others have been deceived by the lure of other types of employment, only to find themselves trapped.<sup>49</sup> The Northeast Cartel monitors this sector, and some members may pay for sex, but the group has limited purview over its trafficking enterprises, the sources said.

In Reynosa, on the other hand, the criminal landscape is much more fragmented, which makes it increasingly difficult to determine the nature of human trafficking but also makes it more likely these groups will be directly involved in the trade. Local lawyers and migrant advocates told InSight Crime about criminal groups entering shelters, extracting migrants, and disappearing with them. However, these accounts are nearly impossible to verify since there are no subsequent judicial, media, or NGO investigations into the trade.

What's more, many migrant advocates and migrant shelter directors close their eyes and ears to these crimes as a means of survival. As one local pastor who has supported migrants in both Reynosa and Matamoros put it, "It's really kept hush-hush. ... You hear about it, but you don't hear about it."<sup>50</sup>

Another local lawyer representing families in cases of forced disappearances agreed. He blamed Mexico's high impunity rate. "People don't want to talk about it because they know that there is no punishment," the lawyer said. "There is no investigation, so people keep quiet so they don't get in trouble."<sup>51</sup>

Given the constant victimization of migrants, the large flows of people through this region -- migrant encounters by US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) are among the highest along this part of the Texas border -- and the fragmented nature of organized crime groups that control all illicit activity here, this appears to be one of the most prominent spaces on the US-Mexico border for

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46 Philip Bump, "[Most fentanyl is seized at border crossings — often from U.S. citizens](#)," Washington Post, 4 October 2022.

47 Parker Asmann, "[Record Fentanyl Seizures and Migrant Encounters on US-Mexico Border Are Unrelated](#)," InSight Crime, 26 September 2022.

48 Cynthia Rodríguez Leija, "Galáctica: Los testimonios del barrio rojo," 2021.

49 InSight Crime interview, government official working with at-risk youth, Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 24 February 2023.

50 Ibid.

51 InSight Crime interview, lawyer representing victims of forced disappearances in Reynosa, 17 May 2023.

human trafficking.<sup>52</sup> To be sure, smaller groups, many of whom do not have a major role in the drug trade, seek revenue from criminal activities with lower barriers of entry. Human trafficking is one of those trades, especially given the high volume of vulnerable populations moving through this territory.

Further east in the border city of Matamoros, factions of the Gulf Cartel, specifically the Cyclones-Scorpions, maintain similar oversight of local prostitution and sex work. However, sources told us these groups are not directly involved in this exploitation. They have a supposed code requiring members not to harm women and children, although some individual members routinely break those internal rules.<sup>53</sup>

Still, as with any illegal activity that occurs in this space, the Gulf Cartel is ever-present. The group owns some bars, motels, and small homes where sexual exploitation takes place and collects taxes from the human traffickers, but their members are not controlling the recruitment of victims, nor the exploitation that takes place and the rates that are paid, one local expert said.<sup>54</sup>

However, the Gulf Cartel's control, while seemingly at arm's length, is hardly benign. A group of migrants in Matamoros told InSight Crime about a Venezuelan migrant who had turned to sex work in a desperate bid to continue her journey north. The woman had been snatched from a corner where she was reportedly soliciting customers -- a consequence, the story went, of the victim presumably not asking the local criminal overlords for permission to work. As it is in this space, the story, while plausible, was impossible to independently verify.

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52 US Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "[Southwest Land Border Encounters](#)," 2023.

53 InSight Crime interview, Pastor Abraham Barberi, Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico, 10 May 2023.

54 Ibid.

## 8

# Opportunities for Intervention

- 1. Increase special training and technical assistance for law enforcement to improve and expand attention to victims and resources allocated for victims' services.**

With increased resources, authorities can keep victims at safe locations and use the information they provide to build stronger cases that do not rely solely on the victim. This not only allows for a better chance at securing a conviction but also understanding the networks involved and using that information to combat them.

- 2. Establish clearer protocols so units dedicated to combating human trafficking routinely share insights and collaborate with anti-narcotics and organized crime units to broaden the ways in which human traffickers can be targeted.**

In some corridors, local criminal networks may sell drugs at the same establishments where women are being exploited sexually. Investigations into the groups selling drugs could provide valuable insight for investigators also working to combat human trafficking.

- 3. Secure funds for journalists, academics, and civil society groups to continue research, develop uniform data collection systems, improve record keeping of victims and victimizers, and effectively analyze that data.**

At the height of extreme violence in Juárez between 2008 and 2010, locals developed roundtables where all levels of government discussed security matters with members of civil society. A similar collaborative effort could be used to better understand human trafficking, collect data about this criminal economy, and analyze that data to inform efforts to combat the crime.

- 4. Create programs that include trustworthy interlocutors, so victims can denounce the individuals and criminal organizations committing the crimes. These interlocutors would facilitate the passing of vital information to build criminal cases and accompany victims throughout the process and thereafter.**

Victims very rarely see security forces as allies when trying to denounce human trafficking. By establishing a system of trusted intermediaries with expert knowledge of human trafficking, victims may feel more comfortable denouncing the crime, thus giving law enforcement the information needed to combat human trafficking networks without exploiting victims.

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