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Governmentality and Violence towards Central American Migrants in the Gulf of Mexico

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GOVERNANCE AND SECURITY



Governmentality and violence towards Central American migrants in the Gulf of Mexico



HIPÓLITO RODRÍGUEZ^a

SUMMARY

Central American migrants crossing the Gulf of Mexico coastal plains to reach the United States are prey to violence caused by a combination of historical and geographical factors. In this part of the country, public security institutions have been taken over by organized crime, posing a risk to both national and human security.

Between 1995 and 2015, the U.S. and Mexican governments adopted migration and border security policies that have affected migrants' transit routes, making them an easy target for criminal networks. Human rights violations and organized crime proliferate, since migration control mechanisms have turned migrants into "illegal aliens". Combating this situation requires rethinking the governmentality of migration flows, by granting migrants rights and designing policies to change the contexts of origin and transit that jeopardize their mobility.

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International migration today poses unique challenges to the global system. Globalization has prompted an increase in cross-border flows, while migrants are perceived as a national security issue. The influx of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador is part of this problem.

The number of Central American migrants crossing Mexico to enter the United States has risen sharply since the 1990s (see CANAMID Policy Brief # 14), despite the restrictive measures implemented by the US and Mexican governments and the growing risks faced on their journey, particularly along the Gulf of Mexico migration corridor.


This corridor through the states of Tabasco, Veracruz and Tamaulipas exposes migrants to violence and human rights violations. Government containment measures have combined with organized crime activities to make migrants powerless against the authorities and criminals.

The Mexican and US governments have stiffened border security, substantially increasing their security budget. Migrants' attempts to sidestep these obstacles force them to use high-risk routes, driving them in the hands of criminals, intermediaries (human smugglers or coyotes) and corrupt authorities.





The violence used by criminal gangs to strip migrants of their few possessions has been encouraged by the state's attitude towards them and its definition of the governmentality of the migratory flow. By declaring migrants "illegal," it has turned them into people without rights



The violence used by criminal gangs to strip migrants of their few possessions has been encouraged by the state's attitude towards them and its definition of the governmentality of the migratory flow. By declaring migrants "illegal," it has turned them into people without rights. Since sovereign states are entitled to control their borders, deportation has become the method of choice, appealing to the notions of sovereignty, citizenship and national identity. Declaring human mobility "illegal" is a strategy for controlling and regulating populations' freedom of movement.¹ By persecuting irregular migrants, the Mexican state forces them into lawless areas, such as the Gulf of Mexico corridor, where criminal groups have established control of migrants' main areas of mobility.

How do Central American migrants experience vulnerability?

Since 2000, the southern border and the Gulf corridor have become the first line of containment for migrants en route to the United States. The border separating Mexico from Guatemala and Belize has become an internal frontier, with a set of checkpoints in the shape of a funnel, whose base is in the Tehuantepec isthmus (see Map 1). As anti-immigrant policies gained momentum, especially during the 2010-2014 period, when the Southern Border Plan and the Merida Initiative were launched, containment points multiplied and spread over the main overland routes leading to the northern border. Migrants opting for the Gulf route are forced to cope with other hazards in addition to natural hurdles (such as rivers, forests and mountains), such as roads and railway lines controlled by migration agents authorized to detain them.



Map 1: Map of main Central American transit migration routes highlighting the Gulf corridor

Contrary to popular belief, migrants are not a homogeneous group; their differences being determined by their resources for making the journey. Some have relatives or friends at their destination while others have hired a smuggler or coyote, and still others make their way unassisted. Knowledge of the risks involved and the capacity to build supportive relationships increase the likelihood of survival and success in reaching the United States. Unsurprisingly, the poorest migrants are the most vulnerable. Unable to afford reliable transportation, they use a freight train known as La Bestia, exposing themselves to enormous risks (see testimonial cited in the margin).



The most vulnerable group, women, may be forced into prostitution and obliged to exchange sex for protection

During the journey, migrants often look for ways to earn money to cover their expenses. They can resort to the charity of local people, beg or do odd jobs. However, being “undocumented” makes them vulnerable to abuse. Classified as “illegal” by the state, migrants appear to lose all rights and may be coerced by both immigration agents and employers and criminal gangs. The most vulnerable group, women, may be forced into prostitution and obliged to exchange sex for protection. Abuse may come from any quarter: fellow migrants, criminal gangs, human smugglers, the authorities, or even the population of the places they travel through.

Some migrants call the train The Beast because you are outside, with nothing to cover you except a sheet of plastic or nylon you use to protect yourself from the drizzle, although I prefer that to the sun because that tires you out and makes you hot where you're sitting, because then you travel up to 14 hours, with the risk of falling from a height of more than six meters from a moving train, and although the train only travels at a speed of 20 kilometers per hour, you have to keep your wits about you to get onto it. Otherwise, you get hurt. And you get hungry and thirsty. You go through isolated areas with lots of vegetation. You have to be careful because you can get knocked down by a tree branch or killed if your head touches one of those high voltage cables, since you're traveling on top of the train. Or if not, if you're unlucky, you might run into the migration authorities or get attacked or extorted by the thugs who hover around and try to pass themselves off as your mates. That's why I've always said it's a question of luck because it doesn't happen every day.

[Andrés, Honduran, aged 24. Testimonial recorded at the Casa del Migrante, in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz state

The drug war in transit regions

During Mexican President Felipe Calderon's administration (2006-2012), the massive crack-down on drug trafficking groups triggered a spike in violence. The constant presence of the Army and Navy was required for police work and over the years, the military became a familiar sight in many parts in the country. The “war on drugs” was concentrated in certain areas, severely affecting human rights.

Despite the Mexican government's efforts, in some areas, drug traffickers managed to infiltrate local and federal public security authorities, enabling criminal gangs to begin to extort the population. Joining the migratory circuit became an extremely risky enterprise for Central American migrants, not only because of their lack of proper documentation but also because criminals began to control transit areas, where they can still demand payment, kidnap and rob migrants of their possessions, and abuse women. Migrants wishing to continue their journey are forced to provide information to enable criminals to extort money from their relatives waiting for them in America. A migrant who has no relatives on the oth-



Photo credit: Alonso Hernández/FM4

The weaknesses of the Mexican state cast their shadow over the whole country, their intensity varies. The state's failure to enforce the rule of law is particularly noticeable in the corridors linking the northern and southern borders, used to transport prohibited goods such as drugs and weapons as well as "irregular" migrants, also treated as a commodity

er side of the border or refuses to cooperate may be killed. At key points across the country, bands routinely abduct migrants, hiding them in "safe houses".

Migrant routes are selected according to ease of access – based on the number of new checkpoints or migratory stations, the movements of criminal gangs— and migrants' perceptions. At present, most migrants opt for one of two main routes: 1) the east route, through the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz and Puebla to the Mexico City Metropolitan Zone, mainly on La Bestia, and subsequently the border states of Coahuila and Tamaulipas; and 2) the west route between Mexico City and the border states of Sonora and Baja California.

During the first decade of this century, the Mexican National Public Security System² identified hot spots for the extortion and abuse of undocumented workers, mainly in towns located on the eastern route, connecting the southern border to the Gulf corridor through the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Veracruz and Tamaulipas.

The regions where these crimes are committed form part of the Mexican zone of impunity. Although the weaknesses of the Mexican state cast their shadow over the whole country, their intensity varies. The state's failure to enforce the rule of law is particularly noticeable in the corridors linking the northern and southern borders, used to transport prohibited goods such as drugs and weapons as well as "irregular" migrants, also treated as a commodity.

The Mexican states with the most severe security problems – Guerrero, Michoacán and Sinaloa in the Pacific; Tabasco, Veracruz and Tamaulipas, in the Gulf corridor; and Chihuahua and Baja California on the northern border, coincide with the areas through which these illegal goods are transported. Organized crime took



The main crimes in these regions are extortion, kidnapping and robbery, with migrants –together with local businesses and other populations— being the main victims

advantage of a region with an already weak state presence and a lucrative drug trafficking business to hijack certain institutions, leaving certain groups, such as migrants, in an extremely vulnerable position.

Drug trafficking destroyed public security in various regions in the span of a few years, eroding the state's ability to control the territory. In 1998, on the eastern side of the country, a powerful criminal organization, the Gulf Cartel, created an organization to defend its territories, Los Zetas, a paramilitary group with members drawn from the Mexican Army. In 2000, in order to finance their operating structures, they gradually extended their activities beyond the drug circuit, to pay for bribes and hired killers. This ushered in an array of activities that would have an extraordinary effect across the country.

Through coercion, these criminal groups took over the authorities, local government and eventually regional spaces. Gangs that grew up in the shadow of drug trafficking soon learned to obtain resources from the populations whose public security institutions they had commandeered. The main crimes in these regions are extortion, kidnapping and robbery, with migrants –together with local businesses and other populations— being the main victims.

Weakening of the state in Mexico and Central America

The state has also been weakened in certain parts of Central America. Paramilitary gangs, a remnant of the civil wars that ravaged their populations in the late 20th century, have managed to capture segments of the state in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala (see CANAMID Policy Brief # 01). The functions of the institutional framework designed to prevent insecurity have been deviated, enabling territorial corridors of lawlessness and violence to be formed, where a toxic blend of criminal organizations and corrupt public officials have begun to operate.³ This has enabled gangs or “Maras,” composed of young Salvadorans deported from the United States because of their violent behavior, to implement their modus operandi, including Mafia-style protection schemes, in various regions of Central America. Their growth, through compulsory recruitment, can be understood in the context of dysfunctional societies where young people have seen their opportunities for social and economic integration evaporate.

Central American gangs have extended their activities beyond their borders, establishing cooperative relations with oth-

In Mexico, particularly in the Gulf corridor, impunity—the result of strategic inaction by municipal and state authorities—has grown because of three structural problems affecting the administration of justice: understaffing, low budget and limited territorial presence

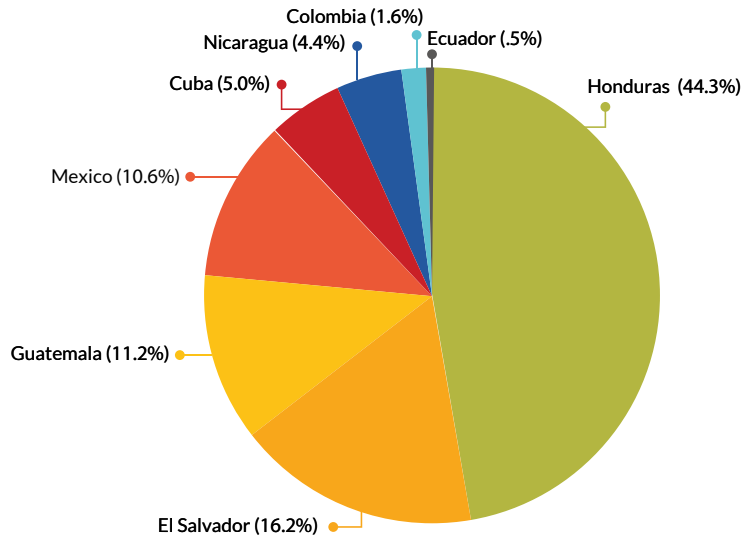
er criminal actors, including Mexican drug cartels. In both Central America and Mexico, these coalitions of criminals and former soldiers have created a parallel state, an invisible power that thrives in certain regions despite the Mexican government's efforts to prevent it. By co-opting public security mechanisms, these coalitions neutralize justice institutions. In Mexico, particularly in the Gulf corridor, impunity—the result of strategic inaction by municipal and state authorities—has grown because of three structural problems affecting the administration of justice: understaffing, low budget and limited territorial presence.

In areas where the state has been weakened, migrants and local residents have been powerless to resist criminal gangs. According to Tomás Castillo, a priest involved in Central American migrant support networks, in 2010, approximately 20,000 migrants were abducted, yielding profits of \$50 billion USD for criminals, with the states of Veracruz, Tamaulipas and Tabasco being the most heavily affected.⁴

In 2010, Amnesty International conducted a study of the various forms of human rights violations of Central American migrants in Mexico.⁵ It noted that crimes, although widespread, are almost never reported, and cited a lack of action by the state to ensure the prevention, detection, investigation, punishment and effective reparation of these abuses. The situation has evolved to such an extent that by the end of first decade of this century, the southern border and the Gulf migratory corridor had become a national and transnational security issue. According to the Mexican National Human Rights Commission, kidnapping mainly involves Central American migrants (44.3% Hondurans, 16.2% Salvadorans, 11.2% Guatemalans and 4.4% Nicaraguans), together with migrants from other areas and countries (5% Cubans, 1.6% Colombians and 0.5% Ecuadorians). It also excludes Mexicans, who account for 10.6% of the total number of victims (see Figure 1).⁶



Figure 1. Incidence of abduction by nationality of the victims (percentage)



Source: Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos (2011). Informe especial sobre secuestro de migrantes en México.

A survey published in 2012 by Mexico’s prestigious Colegio de la Frontera Norte shows that migrants deported by the U.S. government suffered various types of attacks and abuses that went unpunished.⁷ Of the more than 514,000 people deported during the survey (69.4% Mexicans, 13.9% Guatemalans, 10.7% Hondurans and 5.7% Salvadorans), 28,695 reported having experienced some form of assault or abuse in Mexico, mainly in the border states. Most of the aggression reported involved extortion (41%), theft (35%), threats (14%), physical aggression (8%) and kidnapping (3%), perpetrated by criminals and smugglers (34% and 16% respectively), military and police forces (31%) and immigration officials or authorities (8.8%).

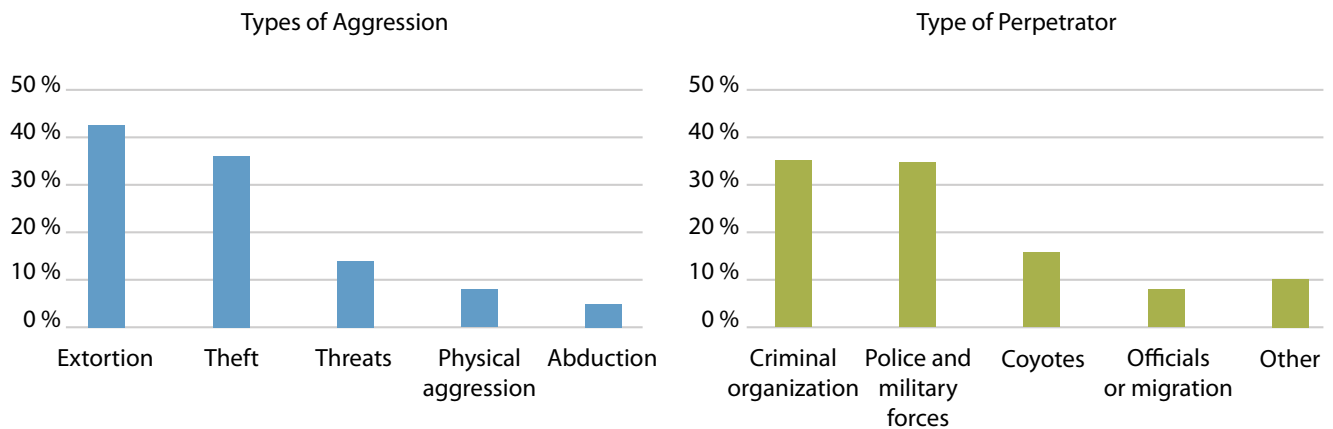
The attacks and abuses involving deported migrants between 2009 and 2011 prompted the passage of various state and federal laws. On May 25 2011, a new Immigration Act provided for unconditional respect for the human rights of migrants, both national and foreign, regardless of their origin or immigration status. The new law focuses on vulnerable groups such as children, women, indigenous people, adolescents and senior citizens, stipulating that in no case is irregular immigration status equivalent to committing a crime. On paper, it guarantees migrants’ human rights. However, the subsequent amendments have meant that in practice, it is little more than a dead letter, since the authorities responsible for its enforcement either lack sufficient resources or have not been trained to assist migrants, as a result of which the crimes committed against them are neither combated nor inves-

tigated. Weak institutions of justice allowed networks of police officers and criminals to neutralize the basic functions of these authorities, leading to high impunity rates.

This explains why the criminal groups controlling the drug routes to the border have been able to engage in levels of violence hitherto unheard of in Mexico. One event that attracted worldwide attention was the massacre by Los Zetas in the El Huizachal ejido in the municipality of San Fernando, Tamaulipas between August 22 and 23, 2010. The 72 victims, 58 men and 14 women, were mostly migrants from Central and South America. Initial investigations revealed that they had been killed because after being kidnapped, they refused to pay the money demanded of them for their release or to join the criminal gang.

Migration should not be a sphere of vulnerability, yet regional scenarios of institutional weakness, state indifference and exposure to organized crime mean that migrants' rights are rarely respected. Moreover, state control devices have continued to allow migrants to be harassed. The Southern Border Plan, enacted in July 2014, designed to stem the flow of Central American migrants near the border, allowed the dynamics of persecuting them to continue, driving them into more sparsely populated areas, making them easy prey for criminal networks.

Figure 2. Types of attacks and identity of attackers to migrants deported from the U.S.



Source: Colegio de la Frontera Norte (2012), Encuesta sobre Agresión y Abuso al Migrante.

Note: Figure bars do not add up to 100% due to rounding



The presence of paramilitary gangs, the unfettered proliferation of organized crime and the complicity of corrupt officials with extortion and kidnapping companies that prey on migrants all contribute to the official objective of curbing migratory flows

Containment policy in a scenario of impunity

Following the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, Mexico became the main U.S. ally for preventing Central American migration from reaching the United States. Thereafter, hundreds of thousands of migrants began to be arrested, detained and deported by Mexican police before reaching the northern border. The containment activities of Mexican security agencies have combined with those of organized crime to produce the same effect: obstructing and discouraging the mobility of Central American migrants.

Mexico has therefore become an ally that surpasses the U.S. as regards immigration control, expelling more migrants than the latter in 2014: 107,814 as opposed to 70,448. A large proportion of the flow of Hondurans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans who had previously managed to reach the northern border are stopped in transit through Mexico. The Southern Border Plan has proved effective in controlling the primary means of transport used by the poorest migrants: the train that runs through Chiapas, Oaxaca and Veracruz. This has only exacerbated the vulnerability of migrants, who now seek other transit routes. Moreover, a small proportion of the agents responsible for performing containment tasks have given up their institutional work in order to take action against a population regarded as “invisible”, in other words, without rights. The presence of paramilitary gangs, the unfettered proliferation of organized crime and the complicity of corrupt officials with extortion and kidnapping companies that prey on migrants all contribute to the official objective of curbing migratory flows.

Governmentality and violence

The situation of Central American migrants in transit through Mexico poses significant challenges for public policy design, and requires new ways of addressing the problem. Although migration is often considered from an economic perspective, it should also include political aspects.

The concept of governmentality, coined by French philosopher Michel Foucault,⁸ solves this dilemma by viewing governing as a practice structured by a plurality of authorities and agencies whose purpose is to organize the population's behavior.

In this respect, migrants fleeing societies marked by the lack of opportunities, poverty and violence are located in a field of forces. On the one hand, transnational organizations create a scenario in which states and regional economies lose government faculties. And on the other, when the structures for their insertion are eliminated, the inhabitants of regions where the state has been weakened are forced to migrate.

This scenario is the perfect breeding ground for criminal gangs. Given the failure of state structures to guide behavior, individuals are exposed to new models of governance: that of the survival of the fittest and those with the capacity to exert violence. Migrant traffickers operate within this same scenario. Migrants within their sphere of influence may be abused and handed over to criminal gangs if they consider it necessary.

In this context, immigration authorities acquire the brutality so many migrants have reported. Migrant women realize their bodies are a desirable commodity for these agents and that they must trade their sexuality to survive. Officials have learned to ignore the law and demand bribes in exchange for granting undocumented migrants mobility. Corruption involves a chain of command in which low-level officials pay a fee to those above them. Officials obey instructions and silence is the rule: anyone who files a complaint will be liable to reprisals.

Migrants believe it is pointless to denounce cases of abuse, since those recording complaints can expose them in order to punish their audacity to challenge power relations.

Governmentality depends on power relations specific to a territory and the correlation of forces. Thus, over the years, various reforms or mechanisms have been designed to “fix” the migrants' situation. As long as capitalism permits, migrants can

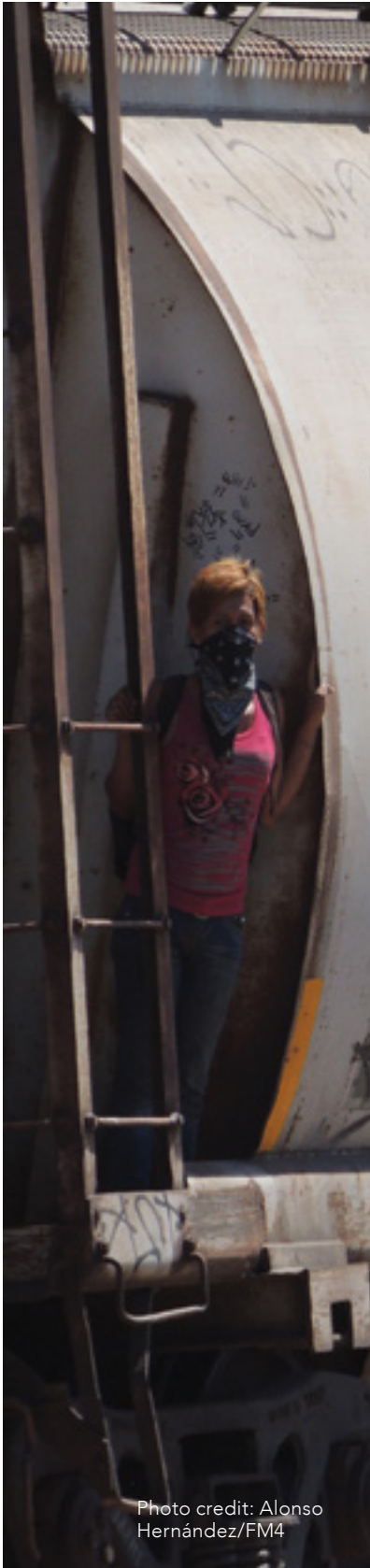


Photo credit: Alonso Hernández/FM4



Containing migratory flows without jeopardizing migrants' lives calls for public policies to control impunity and neutralize crime through development options to encourage the economic conditions that will in turn reduce the exodus of Central American populations



be integrated. Yet when there are fewer opportunities for integration, exclusion mechanisms become more stringent, with policies and discourses demanding that borders be closed and offenders punished.

The violence perpetrated against migrants by organized crime has thrived because of the weakness of the state.

Since this phenomenon occurs in specific territorial contexts, it is essential to consider regional policies to restore the rule of law. Impunity has enabled human rights violations to reach unacceptable proportions, constituting a humanitarian crisis. Containing migratory flows without jeopardizing migrants' lives calls for public policies to control impunity

and neutralize crime through development options to encourage the economic conditions that will in turn reduce the exodus of Central American populations. Ensuring national security would therefore be achieved without endangering human security.

Conclusion

- Although the decline of migratory flows depends on economic factors, a sphere that obviously transcends national borders, the human security issues faced by migrants hinge on actions undertaken by the state to regain control of the territorial contexts where security has been compromised. The fight against crime has focused on military devices, while failing to develop specific policies to control impunity in the areas where migrants circulate, or to guarantee their human rights.
- Migrant rights organizations have called for the reorientation of migration policies, by promoting a human security framework for the region focusing on people rather than the state, to minimize the risks to which migrants are exposed in transit. However, both the U.S. and the Mexican government are responding to the growing wave of Central American migration in the same way as they seek to curb the flow of drugs and weapons: by stiffening border security. From their perspective, migrants are a threat to be controlled, rather than a humanitarian phenomenon to be managed.⁹
- Historically, U.S. government concern over its southern border has revolved around three threats to homeland security: migration, drug trafficking, and, as of September 11, 2001, terrorism. The overlap between these threats has led it to confuse them and design an increasingly costly and aggressive immigration policy, in which deportation has become a technological issue. Hence the ongoing campaign of mass raids against innocent people, harmless yet “undocumented” migrants.
- Although civil society and Catholic Church organizations have denounced this situation, their voices have gone largely unheeded. Although migration policies have undergone a number of changes, the factors triggering the humanitarian crisis involving Central American migrants have not disappeared. Moreover, the Mexican state’s migratory policy has been largely dictated by U.S. homeland security interests.



- Although the migratory flow responds to the regional inequality that drives populations to seek alternative employment in far-off economies where investment and the benefits of infrastructure and equipment are concentrated, no significant efforts have made to reduce this inequality. Solving the migrant crisis requires re-designing public policies. An issue with economic, political and social dimensions must be addressed through a comprehensive policy rather than sectoral policies. If a significant portion of the insecurity suffered by migrants is caused by organized crime, new models must be used to deactivate the latter. The damage it has caused to public security systems has been used to launch all kinds of criminal operations. In Mexico, particularly in the Gulf of Mexico corridor, these operations focus on the most vulnerable groups.
- Since they are regarded as “illegal,” migrants in transit become unprotected persons, the victims of abuse from those responsible for either upholding or breaking the law. The human rights of migrants, regarded as non-citizens, are repeatedly violated by public officials and immigration agents. Caught between two threats, they are either imprisoned or condemned to a life deprived of rights.

Policy recommendations

- **1)** The fight against crime has focused on military devices, while failing to design a specific policy to control impunity in the territories where migrants circulate or guarantee their human rights.
- **2)** Reorienting migration policy requires a change in the model of governmentality, by promoting a human security framework for the region, and focusing on people rather than the state, in order to minimize the risks to which migrants in transit are exposed.
- **3)** Although it has been reported that violence and impunity for criminal groups who smuggle “undocumented” migrants, drugs and weapons are due to an absence of policies to punish the corruption of officials tasked with administering justice and protecting society, the government has failed to implement a mechanism to neutralize the widespread corruption in the management of migration flows.
- **4)** A policy designed to contain the migratory flow must focus on the contexts that cause it. Lack of employment options, the weakness of public security institutions and economic instability are issues that must be addressed.
- **5)** If a significant portion of the insecurity suffered by migrants is a result of criminal practices by criminal gangs, new social policy models must be designed to influence the contexts where their members are recruited and taught to become criminals.



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The main objective of the CANAMID project is to generate useful and current evidence to support the design of public policies that address the problems of Central American migrants, including the conditions they face in their countries of origin, in transit, and upon arrival to the United States or settlement in Mexico, as well as their potential return to their places of origin (El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras).

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SUMMARY

Central American migrants crossing the Gulf of Mexico coastal plains to reach the United States are prey to violence caused by a combination of historical and geographical factors. In this part of the country, public security institutions have been taken over by organized crime, posing a risk to both national and human security.

Between 1995 and 2015, the U.S. and Mexican governments adopted migration and border security policies that have affected migrants' transit routes, making them an easy target for criminal networks. Human rights violations and organized crime proliferate, since migration control mechanisms have turned migrants into "illegal aliens". Combating this situation requires rethinking the governmentality of migration flows, by granting migrants rights and designing policies to change the contexts of origin and transit that jeopardize their mobility.

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