



# Center for Law & Human Behavior

The University of Texas at El Paso



**CROSSING BORDERS**

MIGRANT SMUGGLING ORGANIZATIONS ON THE US MEXICO BORDER

DHS SYMPOSIUM SERIES NO. 2

April 27, 2016

## *Research in Brief*

**CBTIR**

A Department of Homeland Security  
Center of Excellence



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This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number DHS-14-ST-061-COE-00.

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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This report provides an overview of the social organization of migrant smuggling groups operating along the US Mexico Border. It is based primarily on extensive interviews and field observations conducted among migrant smuggling facilitators active in the US market, their clients, and on legal case files. The research indicates the majority of migrant smuggling facilitators are ordinary men and women who perform compensated services in coordination with friends and family members leading to the irregular migration of individuals seeking to enter US territory undetected. Smuggling facilitators' immediate social contexts provide the contacts and the material resources needed to carry out their activities successfully.

### What Are The Research Findings?

Smuggling facilitators lack a specific demographic profile. Their participation or involvement in the market is often the result of their ties to friends or family members already partaking of the market. Involvement in most cases is temporary, occasional and/or seasonal – there are few “career professionals.” Most facilitators work as part of groups with the common goal of facilitating journeys for profit, yet operate independently. There is no evidence of smuggling being organized under a single, unified or centralized form of leadership. This is the result of the practice's highly specialized nature: most facilitators perform a single, specific task among the many needed to carry out a successful journey. While smuggling is generally depicted as exploitative and violent, smugglers' continued success depends on their ability to provide efficient

–if knowingly precarious-- journeys. Tensions are ever present, yet business opportunities depend on referrals from past clients who can attest to the quality of the services provided. The reliance on and the demand for smuggling facilitators who can fulfill transnational mobility needs often make 'clients' feel inclined to accept less than ideal terms or conditions for their journeys. Additionally, clients may feel reluctant to disclose the smuggler's identity in the event of an arrest, fearing the loss of their financial investment or in some cases retaliation. While migrants, refugees and smuggling facilitators acknowledge the practice of smuggling as illicit, they often do not consider it criminal, describing it instead as a “necessary evil” in light of migration-law related restrictions and enforcement.

### What Were the Study's Limitations?

Findings are to be interpreted with caution given the sampling technique and the focus on a specific geographic region. Furthermore, the work conducted to this day purposely documents the perspectives of smuggling facilitators themselves, and those of migrants who were successful on their attempts to enter US territory with the assistance of smuggling facilitators, rather than on testimonies on failed smuggling attempts or those that singlehandedly emphasize violence or victimization alone.

### Who Should Read This Report?

Federal, state, and local law enforcement agents who conduct smuggling and transnational organized crime investigations.

## Introduction

Despite being perceived as a recent phenomenon, human smuggling – the process of clandestinely facilitating the transit of a person into a country other than his or her own while avoiding state controls – has a long history on the US Mexico Border.<sup>i</sup> Official documents attesting to smuggling activity date back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the placement of a 10 year absolute moratorium on Chinese labor led to the demand for smuggling services from Chinese nationals seeking to enter or in many cases, re-enter US soil through the US Mexico Border.<sup>ii</sup> For most of the 20th century, and particularly following the end of the Bracero Program, the irregular migration of Mexican nationals into the United States dominated the conversation on migrant smuggling. Currently, the significant reduction of US-bound migration from Mexico<sup>iii</sup> the focus on smuggling has turned to the journeys of Central American migrants primarily from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras fleeing poor economic and security conditions in their countries. Among these journeys, those involving unaccompanied minors have generated a particular level of concern, given this population's inherent vulnerability.

Multiple US government agencies and independent organizations have claimed smuggling organizations are behind the present migratory flows, arguing that in order to secure business smuggling facilitators have spread false or inaccurate information pertaining to US immigration policy among the scores of desperate Central Americans trying to leave the security crisis afflicting the region.<sup>iv</sup> Many

other reports indicate smuggling facilitators operate in collusion with Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), often deceiving migrants who then fall prey to organized crime, becoming the targets of extortion, kidnapping, sex trafficking, forced labor or even murder in the course of their precarious journeys to the US. It is often alleged that the practice of smuggling has evolved from a cottage industry to a highly complex, transnational business of ample reach and immense profits.

While reports on migrant victimization, troubling numbers of crimes targeting migrants and high profile smuggling tragedies have shed light on the perils faced by migrants in transit, actual research on the social organization of smuggling groups and their ability to successfully facilitate irregular migration is scant at best. Furthermore, work that specifically documents the perspectives of smuggling facilitators themselves as facilitators of irregular migration is even more uncommon.

The present document summarizes the findings of ongoing and completed research mapping the activities of smuggling facilitators operating in the United States. It includes data from legal records pertaining to the activities of smuggling facilitators on the US Southwest from 2007 to the present day. Yet most importantly, it includes the findings from interviews conducted directly with smuggling facilitators operating in the US describing the scope of their activities. These data are further supplemented with formal and informal interviews on the social dynamics of migrant smuggling facilitation

conducted with smuggling facilitators' friends, relatives, clients, and through extensive field observations on failed and successful smuggling attempts. Human smuggling is the legal term used to designate the transportation of an individual into a country different from his or her own by a broker or facilitator for a fee or in-kind payment.

### Project Overview

Hired by those seeking to migrate and who are unable to secure the protection of visas, permits and/or passports, smuggling facilitators, known along the US Mexico border as *coyotes* or *polleros* have been throughout history important actors of US bound migration flows. While often described as exploitative and violent, their services maintain a systematic demand among those seeking to migrate amid stepped-up migration and border enforcement measures.

Despite smuggling's apparent ubiquity, research on its social organization is scant. Most reports on smuggling activity focus on fraudulent, exploitative, and violent incidents involving migrants scammed by con-artists who disappear after having been advanced fees or who abandon groups to their fate during transit; more tragic incidents often involve cases of migrants being the target of physical and emotional abuse, sexual violence, forced labor, kidnappings and even mass killings.

While identifying the incidence and the nature of smuggling related victimization and/or violence constitutes a fundamental part of mapping the market's structure, little is known about the mechanisms leading to successful smuggling journeys

and the social dimensions that to the inside of smuggling organizations allow for them to take place. The continued reliance on smuggling of migrants and refugees constitutes an indication of the successful nature of the market, despite frequent reports of smuggling related tragedies. Over the last decade social scientists have called for a more nuanced understanding of the smuggling phenomenon. Through fieldwork conducted among smuggling facilitators and those who rely on their services they have been able to improve our collective understanding of smuggling.

The United Nations Anti-Smuggling Protocol refers to migrant smuggling as "procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or permanent resident."<sup>v</sup> In addition, migrant smuggling constitutes the *legal* term used to designate the criminalized activity of facilitating the unauthorized or fraudulent entry of a person into a country different than that of his or her own. Yet, despite its designation by the state as a crime within migrant and refugee communities smuggling is most often not perceived as a criminal activity, although it's illicit nature is vastly recognized. By acknowledging, and framing the contexts of smuggling facilitation as a community based practice aimed at securing safe transits, rather than solely as a criminal activity, the present project is an example of how researchers can collect data directly from smuggling facilitators in order to map the markets' structure and dynamics.

## Objectives

The work conducted to this date has sought to map the social dynamics present in the everyday interactions among smuggling facilitators operating on the US Southwest border and the structures they rely upon to facilitate the irregular journeys of migrants across the US Mexico border. It has relied on qualitative analysis to document the perceptions of smuggling facilitators and those in their immediate circle of activities they perform from a social-sciences perspective. The work being carried out at UTEP further identifies the impact of local immigration enforcement on the facilitation of smuggling services.

## Methodology

The qualitative data and the findings discussed in this report summarize research projects conducted from 2007 to the present day among migrant smuggling facilitators as well as migrants who successfully crossed the US Mexico Border with smugglers. In addition to legal records, local social networks in predominantly migrant communities are tapped to identify men and women who worked in the provision of smuggling services. For data purposes, a facilitator or coyote is defined as the individual who for a fee or in-kind payment participates in the facilitation or provision of the irregular migration of a border crosser who seeks to enter the United States undetected. Smuggling, simultaneously, is defined as the collective steps involved in the provision of irregular migration.

The work performed by *coyotes* is not often frowned upon activity among migrant and refugee communities. This, in addition to contacts, has allowed access to interview

smuggling facilitators. To this date, over 100 interviews among coyotes and their clients on their activities in smuggling and the perceptions of their work have been collected and analyzed qualitatively. The interviews are supplemented by additional formal and informal interviews among smuggling facilitators' friends, relatives, and clients. Lastly, data also include extensive field observations in the communities where smuggling activity occurs.

## Major Study Findings

The projects have sought to answer a series of key questions:

1. Who are migrant smuggling facilitators?
2. How are facilitators organized?
3. How are smuggling facilitators perceived by migrant communities and by themselves?
4. What are the elements of the smuggling economy?
5. What is the role of violence in smuggling?

***Smuggling facilitators and their backgrounds.*** There is no specific demographic profile of the smuggler. Although men and women of all ages, including minors, participate in the industry, a few generalizations can be made. The majority of those arrested for smuggling offenses tend to be adult men (typically in the 20 to 35 year range). Even though women are also important actors in the market, they are less likely to be identified as involved and arrested. Most facilitators are working class individuals and hold regular jobs in the mainstream economy or support themselves by performing side jobs. The majority of coyotes were undocumented migrants

themselves and often share the same origin of their clients. The majority of smuggling facilitators lack documents to reside in the country permanently. US citizens and permanent residents also participate in the market. Personality wise, as identified by Zhang in his work among Chinese migrant smuggling facilitators, coyotes tend to be highly entrepreneurial,<sup>vi</sup> are self-starters and highly independent.

***The Social Organization of Migrant Smuggling.*** Those charged with smuggling offenses most often enter the market by two routes: through friends and family members already active in the provision of smuggling services, or when approached to participate in the smuggling process in the context of their own journey as migrants, most often in exchange for a reduction of their fees.

Most smuggling facilitators operate independently, relying on their personal resources and social networks, and perform a single, specific task (driving, cooking, guiding groups, etc.). There is no specialized or technical training required to join in as a smuggler. This eases the incorporation of those who participate in the market and who most often simply rely on skills or knowledge they already possess. Facilitators include recruiters, drivers, guides, lookouts, even *borra-huellas* whose role is to erase the foot tracks left behind by migrants in transit to avoid law enforcement detection.

Smuggling groups lack a centralized leadership or hierarchy mechanism. Tasks are performed in coordination with other facilitators, but most often participation is dependent upon each facilitator's individual availability, time and skills. On occasion,

smuggling facilitators rely on the services of individuals who coordinate contacts between facilitators, clients, and community members; yet this role is one of logistical nature only. Occasionally individual smuggling facilitators may assume control over the organization of specific journeys or the border crossings of individual groups. Yet this control is temporary and always dependent on logistical contexts. In other words, there is no indication that successful smuggling journeys require the existence of a permanent leader to be successful; rather it is the ability of smuggling facilitators to improvise and make decisions as needed that most often allows for the successful facilitation of irregular border crossings. This does not suggest individual facilitators with leadership ability or inclination do not exist in the market, but rather that the effectiveness of a smuggling group is not solely dependent upon the existence of a leader.

***Self/Perception of Smuggling tasks.*** Despite the poor reputation of smuggling facilitators coyotes are hardly despised among migrant and refugee communities. Information on how to access reliable trusted facilitators is highly valued amid the desire or the need to migrate and the abundance of reports on the inherent risks pertaining to clandestine journeys across borders. Those seeking to travel and their families solicit references from friends and relatives who have completed the journey in the past and "shop around" until they identify the facilitator who suits their needs in terms of reliability, cost, and risk-ameliorating factors.

The continued success of a smuggling group or facilitator (success defined as the

ability to secure work opportunities) relies on referrals from past clients and from other facilitators. Reports of clients over the treatment received during transit, reliability, punctuality, cost, risk levels, transportation quality, distance, etc., play a role in the ability of facilitators to generate business for themselves and others. Smuggling facilitators and their clients do not perceive the tasks they provide as criminal, although recognize its illicit nature and the potential for prosecution. Many facilitators and their clients see the work as beneficial and as needed amid the challenges posed by immigration and border enforcement. Some coyotes view their work, in addition to constituting an income generating strategy, as an attempt to pay forward the favors done onto them by other coyotes, to assist others like themselves in achieving their migration goals, and as a mechanism to increase their social status and reputation. A tool that may come in handy when in need to access goods and services within their community once having left the smuggling industry.

***The Economy of Smuggling.*** The cost involved in the facilitation of a smuggling journey varies considerably. It is often dependent on the distance between place of origin and destination, means of transportation, routes, age, and gender or health status of the person who seeks to travel, among other factors. Some facilitators provide specialized crossings for children, the elderly, or pregnant women at a cost many times higher than a 'regular' service. A trek which may involve several days of walking and extreme often lethal levels of environmental exposure. There appears to be a relationship between the cost of a journey and its level of risk, which in turns creates a hierarchy of protection

among those who travel. In other words, those with the largest amount of resources will travel facing the lowest level of risk through the use of private routes, the existence of pre-arranged crossings in collusion with law enforcement, the reliance on specially adapted or non-conspicuous vehicles, etc. Those unable to secure financial or social capital to cover the cost of these more expensive services must travel on their own or depend on less-reliable, more dangerous routes and mechanisms, and on smuggling facilitators of poor or ill-repute where the dangers are exponentially higher.

Despite the exorbitant prices often quoted in association with smuggling costs, individual facilitators' earnings are quite limited. After all travel-associated costs have been recovered, the remainder of the fee is often split among the many individuals who perform different tasks along the route. Tasks performed by men have a tendency to be compensated at a much higher rate than those of women. Most facilitators maintain full time jobs as smuggling provides only a supplemental occasional form of income. Most earnings are immediately circulated into the local economy as the majority of those involved in the smuggling industry are members of working-class migrant families.

***Violence.*** The smuggling market is often described as being plagued by high levels of risk, danger and violence, or as being under the control of transnational criminal organizations. Criminological research however shows that forms of violence in illicit markets are specific to the market and not random in nature.<sup>vii</sup> Tensions between facilitators and clients, and among facilitators themselves, often over the

payment or non-payment of fees are quite common. Many facilitators may add additional charges and fees to initially agreed-upon prices, and refuse to allow clients to leave until these additional costs are covered. Loud arguments and threats are common, yet hardly ever escalate as both parties often negotiate to avoid the loss of capital or detection by law enforcement. Among themselves facilitators also reconcile their differences in order to ensure continued business opportunities.

In the context of organized smuggling, cases of migrants removed forcefully during transit or from drop houses by groups of *bajadores* who “unload” them from smuggling facilitators<sup>viii</sup> with the attempt to profit through extortion or ransom are a constant reason for concern. Typified by the criminal justice system as kidnappings, these cases often involve migrants being subjected to psychological, physical and sexual forms of abuse, many times at the hands of other migrants (themselves unable to cover their own ransom fees). While women are often the target of sexual violence, threats and actual incidents of sexual assault are committed regularly against men.

### Future Areas of Research

Over the last decade, testimonies from policy analysts, migrant advocates, law enforcement officials and migrants themselves point at the increased involvement of Mexican drug trafficking organizations in US migrant smuggling facilitation. While these interactions do take place, their dynamics have yet to be explored in detail, systematically and critically.

While the irregular migration of unaccompanied minors has received significant attention, their involvement in criminal activity along the US Mexico border as guides or drug carriers has generated concern among law enforcement agencies and policy circles. The implications of minors’ participation in drug and human smuggling markets in the context of border enforcement remain understudied.

The National Security Studies Institute and the Center for Law & Human Behavior at UTEP are currently supporting exploratory research in both areas with the hope of understanding the implications of other forms of criminal activity on the migrant smuggling market and on irregular migration flows.

### Implications for Practice

There is a vast body of literature on the dramatic journeys of migrants and asylum seekers. This work however has primarily documented the incidences involving the wide range of abuses and forms of victimization faced by those on the move. While the precariousness and danger inherent to clandestine journeys should not be underestimated, the emphasis on violence reduces the ability to map the effectiveness of migrant smuggling facilitation, its organization and scope. Studies that provide qualitative data into the actual decision making processes of smuggling facilitators, the complexity of their market interactions, their encounters with members of other criminalized activities, and the span of their careers are fundamental elements towards the crafting of potential mechanisms to detect, prevent and eradicate exploitative, violent and

predatory forms of migrant smuggling worldwide.



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