

From victims of trafficking to felons: Migrant smugglers recruited by Mexican cartels

De víctimas de trata a victimarios: Los agentes facilitadores del cruce fronterizo reclutados por los cárteles mexicanos

Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios ^{***}  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0523-305X>

^a Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, Unidad Académica Multidisciplinaria de Ciencias, Educación y Humanidades, Mexico, e-mail: sizcara@uat.edu.mx

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to examine what are the methods used by Mexican drug cartels to recruit migrant smugglers and which are the activities carried by former migrant smugglers in these organizations. A qualitative methodology was used, consistent in the realization, between 2011 and 2015, of interviews with 107 migrant smugglers (105 men and 2 women). This paper concludes that after 2013 former migrant smugglers have been recruited by drug cartels in higher numbers without coercion, and that the activities carried out by them are increasingly violent.

Keywords: migrant smugglers, drug cartels, Mexico, United States.

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*Corresponding author: Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios, e-mail: sizcara@uat.edu.mx

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es examinar qué métodos utilizan los cárteles de la droga mexicanos para reclutar a agentes facilitadores del cruce fronterizo y cuáles son las actividades que los ex agentes facilitadores del cruce fronterizo realizan para estas organizaciones. Para ello se utilizó una metodología cualitativa que incluyó la realización, entre los años 2011 y 2015, de entrevistas a 107 agentes facilitadores del cruce fronterizo (105 varones y 2 mujeres). Este artículo concluye que a partir de 2013 se ha producido un incremento del reclutamiento no forzado de agentes facilitadores del cruce fronterizo por los cárteles de las drogas mexicanos, y que las actividades que realizan son cada vez más violentas.

Palabras clave: agentes facilitadores del cruce fronterizo, cárteles de la droga, México, Estados Unidos.



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Introduction

In Mexico, the violence associated with drug trafficking has escalated in the last decade due to two processes: a) greater belligerence among drug cartels for control of the territories, and b) the war against drug trafficking to recover the territories monopolized by organized crime (Pereyra, 2012, pp. 435, 446). As Ríos (2013, p. 142) explains, the passage from an oligopolistic market, in which an organization controlled drug trafficking in a territory, to a competitive market, in which more than one organization entered into a dispute over that territory, increased violence and led to the intervention of the armed forces. The presence of the army has fragmented these organizations and intensified conflicts, generating a feedback loop. The fragmentation of the cartels has led to a replacement of fallen leaders by more violent leaders and to a diversification of activities to counteract the loss of revenues from drug trafficking (Beittel, 2013, p. 20).

One of the most profitable businesses into which Mexican drug cartels have penetrated is irregular migration. This activity involves few risks because migrants rarely report the aggressions that they suffer, and it generates high benefits because most of them have capital that they use to reach the United States. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH for its acronym in Spanish) uncovered the massive phenomenon of kidnapping of Central American migrants by registering 198 kidnapping events and 9 857 victims from September 2008 to February 2009 (CNDH, 2009, p. 9). Another subsequent report reported a worsening situation by adding 214 kidnapping events and accounting for 11 333 victims between April and September 2010 (CNDH, 2011, p. 26). Additionally, an Amnesty International report (Amnistía Internacional, 2010, p. 11) spoke of a generalized kidnapping of migrants to obtain a ransom payment, in addition to torture, forced disappearance, and murder.

Mexican drug cartels exploit irregular migration through three mechanisms: a) the kidnapping of migrants (CNDH, 2009, 2011; Izcara, 2016); b) the imposition of increasingly high quotas, which must be paid by migrant smuggling networks to be able to move safely through the areas controlled by the cartels (Izcara, 2012a, p. 359; Slack & Campbell, 2016, p. 1384; Spener, 2009, p. 158) and c) the recruitment of human smuggling facilitators¹, whom they incorporate into these organizations (Izcara, 2015, p. 330).

The demand for new arms to face a more belligerent scenario and to hoard more diversified activities has led these organizations to modify their strategies of recruitment. Criminal groups no longer incorporate their new members through persuasion, through the promise of benefits; the use of deception and violence as recruitment mechanisms is increasingly common (Izcara, 2016; Slack, 2016; Slack & Whiteford, 2013).

A social group that soon attracted the attention of the cartels were the human smuggling facilitators. They have knowledge and skills that are highly valued by these organizations, given that they are the most knowledgeable about the border's geography and the most able to dodge the strong surveillance that exists in these spaces. In addition, they are people who present a high tolerance to risk and who do not easily frighten. Hence, criminal groups are recruiting human smuggling facilitators in increasing numbers. This

¹ In this article the terms: human smuggling facilitator, pollero, coyote and migrant smuggler are used as synonyms. Likewise, the terms coyotaje and migrant smuggling are also used as synonyms. The Spanish term *traficante* and the English word trafficker have the same root; however, the legal texts translate the English term trafficker with the word *tratante*, as well as human trafficking for *trata de personas*, and the word migrant smuggler for *traficante de migrantes*, as well as migrant smuggling for *tráfico de migrantes*.

recruitment process does not always occur with the consent of the latter. Many have been recruited under threats or coercion, through kidnapping or deceit, for the purpose of being involved in criminal activities.

Human smuggling facilitators involved with drug cartels on a voluntary basis are criminals. On the other hand, those who were forced into and forced to commit crimes are victims of trafficking. In these situations, international law advocates not criminalizing victims by noting that victims of trafficking should not be blamed for acts committed as a result of the deprivation of liberty that they suffered. International law contemplates two legal models: the “causality” model and the “coercion” model. The first model considers the crime to be a result of the trafficking situation; the second treats crime as a coerced act (Gallagher, 2010, p. 284). In the case of Mexico, Article 37 of the General Law to Prevent, Punish, and Eradicate Crimes in Trafficking in Persons and to Protect and Assist Victims of these Crimes is supported by the model of “coercion”, stating that: “The victim of the crimes provided for in this law shall not be prosecuted for crimes committed while they were subject to the control or threat of their perpetrators, as no other conduct can be carried forth” (Ley general para prevenir, sancionar y erradicar los delitos en materia de trata de personas, 2012, p. 12).

Based on qualitative interviews with 107 human smuggling facilitators operating on the us-Mexico border, this article aims to examine the process of recruiting human smuggling facilitators by Mexican drug cartels and seeks to answer the following research questions: What methods do drug cartels use to recruit human smuggling facilitators? What are the activities that former migrant smugglers perform for these organizations?

First, the methodology is presented and the sample described; the literature on the relationship between *coyotaje* (migrant smuggling) and drug trafficking is then examined; we subsequently examine how former Mexican human smuggling facilitators have been involved with the drug cartels; finally, we analyze how the activities performed within the criminal organizations have evolved.

Methodology and Description of the Sample

Many migrants are deceived or become victims of violence by human smuggling facilitators (Izcara, 2017a, p. 90). However, migrant smuggling is a different activity from drug trafficking. As Correa-Cabrera (2017, p. 10) has noted: “We have essentially found that migrant smuggling networks and drug trafficking organizations operate separately”. However, since 2004, the cartels have begun to scrutinize the irregular movement of migrants in the territories that they control (Izcara, 2012a; 2012b). As a result, human smuggling facilitators have been forced to pay increasing fees to the criminal groups to avoid being victimized by them. Correa-Cabrera (2017, p.10) emphasizes that “these groups collaborate, but they are not managed by the same people”. Migrant smuggling networks collaborate with the drug cartels by giving them a share of their earnings as a “renters’ fee”. Apparently, the payment of quotas brings some benefits to the former. The cartels have reduced the local gangs that previously assaulted the groups led by the *polleros* (smugglers), and in many cases, the former contain the police authorities that haunt the latter (Izcara, 2012a, p. 356).

However, none of the interviewees stressed the benefits of collaborating with the cartels through the payment of fees. For them, the presence of the cartels had made everything worse. As Vicente (2015) noted: “paying fees is money lost because it is given away”; or as

Felipe (2013) said: “the issue for *polleros* is to be alert and to pay the quotas asked for so as not to have problems; nothing has improved; on the contrary, they have made things worse” (Felipe, 2013). All spoke of a worsening of the job² of migrant smuggling facilitator due to the presence of drug cartels and an escalation of violence. This was reflected in expressions such as: “what has worsened is the violence here in the border” (Santiago, 2013); “Things here are bad because of the crime there is” (Sergio, 2014); “there is a lot of violence; things have not been better; on the contrary, things are worse than before” (Servando, 2014); “increasingly, everything is worse, and everything goes down because every day is worse ... violence has made everything that is happening worse” (Tadeo, 2014); “delinquency and all that is bad; that is happening and growing worse” (Uriel, 2014); “violence is the worst thing that could happen” (Valerio, 2015); and “since the beginning of these shootings, kidnappings, and deaths, everything has worsened” (Vicente, 2015). Cartels sometimes prevent human smuggling facilitators from being detained by the authorities. However, for *polleros*, this was not an advantage because it was simpler, less risky and less expensive to handle the latter than the former. The cartels were viewed as undesirable allies of those who wanted to part with them. The interviewees feared the cartels more than the authorities and criticized that the latter did not effectively combat the former. As Ignacio (2013) said: “violence has grown more, has worsened, and the authorities do nothing”. Some wanted more vigilance and for the military to defeat the drug cartels, but they were hopeless because the presence of the army had not led to a withdrawal of the criminal groups. As Juan (2013) noted: “violence has worsened the work of the *pollero* and has not improved anything; there is a lot of surveillance, and the border has been militarized; but it’s for nothing; the violence remains the same, and I think there’s even more” (Juan, 2013).

The rapprochement between migrant smugglers and the drug cartels has led to the fact that the latter often ask the former to abandon their activities to join these organizations. Those who leave migrant smuggling to join the cartels stop leading migrants to the United States (Izcara, 2015, p. 331). In this investigation, no former border facilitator who works for the drug cartels could be interviewed; therefore, testimonies of informants reporting first-hand experiences were not collected. Those who know former human smuggling facilitators who have been co-opted by the cartels are their former comrades, and therefore, they are the most appropriate informants for answering the research questions raised in this article.³ The technique that was used to compile the discursive data was the open-ended interview, which was conducted with a guide that included aspects related to the factors that led the interviewees to enter the migrant smuggling business, the strategies used to cross the border, their relationship with criminal groups, etc. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. On the other hand, the procedure used to select the sample was chain sampling. The recruitment of the interviewees and the interviews were conducted through the social networks of the human smuggling facilitators.

² Unlike a profession, which requires specialized knowledge and academic backing of a schooling career, a trade is a labor activity that does not require formal studies. The job is learned empirically, mechanically and requires no theoretical knowledge. This learning through practice occurs either self-taught or under the tutelage of a person who knows the trade (Izcara, 2014, p. 84).

³ Drug cartels try to incorporate migrant smugglers into their organizations; but not all accept or are intimidated. Migrant smugglers who reject the invitation of the cartels to join these organizations differ from those that are co-opted in two aspects: they have more courage and are less ambitious. Faced with some of the migrant smugglers who are intimidated by the cartels, others confront them and refuse to collaborate with them, even at the cost of their lives (Izcara, 2017b). On the other hand, migrant smugglers who do not accept the invitation of the cartels are less ambitious people than those who do.

A total of 107 human smuggling facilitators (105 men and 2 women) were interviewed between 2011 and 2015 in different municipalities of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, San Luis Potosí, Veracruz, Mexico DF, Estado de Mexico and Chiapas; their ages were between 23 and 48 years of age, with their average age being 36.4 years. The interviewees began to work in this business between 16 and 36 years of age, and they had a wide experience in this line of work, given that the number of years that they had been dedicated to this activity was between four and 20 years, with the mean being 9.7 years (see Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of the human smuggling facilitators interviewed

	Mean	Median	Mode	Min.	Max.	Standard deviation
Age	36.4	37	35	23	48	5.06
Number of years dedicated to migrant smuggling	9.7	9	8	4	20	3.94
Age when they began to work as human smuggling facilitators	26.6	27	29	16	36	4.90

Source: Own elaboration based on the data collected in the interviews.

Most of the interviewees came from northeastern Mexico (Tamaulipas, Veracruz, Nuevo León, and San Luis Potosí), Mexico City, and Chiapas, and a small percentage of those interviewed originated from other areas of the national territory. Of the interviewees, 40.2% were born in Tamaulipas, and 48.6% of them resided in this state; 12.1% were born in Veracruz, and 10.3% lived in this state; 9.3% were born in Mexico City, and 11.2% lived there; 8.4% were born in Chiapas, and 6.5% lived in this state; 7.5% were born in Nuevo León, and 14% resided in this state; 7.5% were born in San Luis Potosí, and 6.5% resided in this state (see Table 2).

Table 2: Place of origin and residence of the human smuggling facilitators interviewed

Place of origin	n	%	Place of residency	n	%
Tamaulipas	43	40.2	Tamaulipas	52	48.6
Veracruz	13	12.1	Nuevo León	15	14.0
Ciudad de México	10	9.3	Ciudad de México	12	11.2
Chiapas	9	8.4	Veracruz	11	10.3
Nuevo León	8	7.5	Chiapas	7	6.5
San Luis Potosí	8	7.5	San Luis Potosí	7	6.5
Puebla	4	3.7	Tabasco	2	1.9
Coahuila	3	2.8	Estado de México	1	0.9
Estado de México	2	1.9	Total	107	100
Sonora	2	1.9			
Tabasco	2	1.9			
Guanajuato	1	0.9			
Guerrero	1	0.9			
Oaxaca	1	0.9			
Total	107	100			

Source: Own elaboration based on the data collected in the interviews.

The interviewees were informed about the institution conducting the research and the general objectives of the research and were invited to participate in this study. Those who accepted to participate were informed of the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected. On the other hand, none of the participants received an economic incentive for the time spent because it would have raised the study costs and may have influenced their consent.

Four strategies were used to achieve the cooperation of the participants. a) It was explained to the interviewees that the purpose of the research was academic and that the data that they revealed during conversational interaction would be anonymous and confidential. b) The interviewees were instructed not to mention people's names, and no data were collected to reveal the identity of the interlocutors or other persons mentioned in the conversational interaction. c) I wrote a guide that started from the less intrusive aspects, to which the interlocutors responded more comfortably, and continued with increasingly intrusive aspects. In addition, I modified this guide on successive occasions to exclude issues that were saturated or provided little information and to include new aspects that emerged from contact with the empirical reality. Finally, d) the discursive relationship with the interviewees was non-confrontational. No value judgments were made on the answers obtained, nor was the search for answers to specific questions that the respondents shunned forced because doing so would have broken the climate of empathy necessary to conduct conversational interaction. To ensure the confidentiality of the data, neither the names of the interviewees nor any information that would allow them to be identified was collected.

Empirical Evidence on the Involvement of Human Smuggling Facilitators in Drug Cartels

The conceptualization of migrant smuggling has changed in recent decades. This business is no longer considered a harmless activity operated by people close to the migrants and linked to them by consanguinity or country of origin. At present, *coyotaje* is considered a threatening activity conducted by transnational criminal organizations that abandon migrants, rob them, kidnap them, lead them in an unsafe manner using strategies that endanger their lives, or force them to transport drugs. This discourse is deeply rooted in official statements, reports, and documents (Eldridge et al., 2004; House Committee on Homeland Security, 2006; United States General Accounting Office, 2010; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2011). However, it is also prevalent in the media, and a part of the academic community shares this view.

The influential theoretical model of human trafficking developed by Salt and Stein (1997, p. 480) called this activity an increasingly sophisticated global business linked to organized crime and described migrants as passive victims subjected to inhumane conditions, including their use as mules to transport drugs. Other empirical studies have also linked migrant smuggling to drug trafficking and have noted that smugglers urge migrants to carry drugs. Slack and Whiteford (2013, p. 201) note that *narco-coyotaje* is a recent consequence of the war on drugs and state that this activity has developed more in the Sonora-Arizona border territory than on the Texas border. In a study of migration flows from Asia and Africa to Europe, Triandafyllidou and Maroukis (2012) associate migrant smuggling networks with illicit activities such as kidnapping and migrant participation in

drug trafficking; however, they also highlight the migrants' agency and note that these networks do not resemble mafia organizations.

The association of migrant smuggling to drug trafficking is related to the development of more restrictive border control policies since the 1990s. A greater difficulty in surreptitiously crossing borders due to an increase in surveillance transformed *coyotaje*, thus, organizations that were less violent and closer to migrants languished, and this business was co-opted by the groups with the greatest capacity to corrupt the authorities: transnational organized crime. The United Nations Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants, adopted on November 15, 2000, linked migrant smuggling to transnational organized crime because it was not designed as an autonomous instrument to protect the human rights of migrants but, rather, as a complement to the United Nations against transnational organized crime (Gallagher, 2010, pp. 89-95), seeking to combat "uncivil society", in which migrant smugglers are placed within the same group as terrorists and drug traffickers, who exploit open borders. The Protocol was the result of the interest of certain European states, Australia, and the United States to accelerate international cooperation against migrant smuggling, described as an organized crime business. However, it does not pay attention to the causes of irregular migration and lacks a human rights approach; it only requires states to criminalize migrant smuggling, strengthen border enforcement, and cooperate in combating migrant smuggling (Gallagher, 2010, pp. 89-95).

According to Andreas (2013, p. 307), reinforcing border control made migrants dependent on migrant smugglers, who increased their fees and became more sophisticated and better organized. This business went from being described as an activity managed by the social networks of migrants to being defined as an industry operated by organized crime. Carrasco (2013, p. 178) states that until 2006, *coyotaje* was an activity performed by *pasantes*, *pateros*, *coyotes*, or *polleros*, but these traditional figures were gradually and violently displaced by criminal organizations that used their infrastructure and drug traffic routes to move undocumented migrants. Other recent research also highlights the existence of a growing alliance between drug trafficking and immigrants (Shelley, 2012, p. 248; Slack, 2016, p. 275; Slack & Whiteford, 2013, p. 201; Vogt, 2013, p. 775).

Possibly, the most important work on *coyotaje* in the border between Mexico and the United States is the book *Clandestine Crossings* (Spener, 2009). This study, based on extensive ethnographic research, presents *coyotes* as allies of migrants and denies the hypothesis of drug cartel involvement in this business. Although this work has been praised by some of the most outstanding scholars in the area of migratory studies, it has been criticized by other researchers, who note that it offers an image of *coyotaje* that is too benevolent (Meneses, 2013; Slack & Whiteford, 2010).

Empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis that migrants and drugs are transported by the same groups using the same routes is weak. There is more evidence of migrant smugglers who become drug traffickers, or vice versa, either to substitute a riskier trade for a less risky trade or a less profitable business for a more profitable business (Slack & Campbell, 2016, p. 1390; Spener, 2009, p.156).

There are many empirical studies that have decoupled migrant smuggling from drug trafficking and that have described the former as a peaceful business in contrast to the violent character of the latter. The investigations that gather the discourse of human smuggling facilitators tend to conclude that migrant smuggling and drug trafficking are different activities. In a pioneering study on migrant smuggling between Mexico and the United States, López (1998, p. 972) did not find any evidence linking drug trafficking and highlighted the existence of a dividing line between these two activities due to the greater

risk of the latter. More recent research has also highlighted the existence of a separation between these two activities.

In the case of Latin American migration to the United States, Fuentes and García (2009, p. 98) note that drug trafficking is a separate activity from *coyotaje* because the former business, which is riskier and more profitable, uses more remote routes more difficult to detect. Similarly, Spener (2009, p. 156) argues that drug trafficking and migrant smuggling are two separate businesses and that migrants and drugs are not kept in the same places or transported by the same sites simultaneously. Sanchez (2016) criticizes speeches disseminated by the media and political and academic circles that characterize migrant smuggling as a violent, exploitative, and male-dominated activity and comes to value this activity as a legitimate form of work to cope with the precariousness that emanates from the reorganization of the labor market generated by the neoliberal model. These results, derived from qualitative studies supported by extensive field work, have been corroborated by quantitative research that has highlighted that the growth of the budget of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) diverts time and resources from combating illegal migration by the Border Patrol, which shows that they are two different businesses (Gathmann, 2008; p. 1933; Singer & Massey, 1998, p. 588). If migrants and drugs used the same routes, then an increase in resources in combating drug trafficking would have served to combat migrant smuggling.

In the case of Chinese migration to the United States, it has also been argued that migrant smugglers are not members of criminal organizations (Chin, 2011, p. 194; Zhang & Chin, 2002, p. 747; Zhang, Chin & Miller, 2007). Investigations conducted in other geographical contexts, such as Turkey (Icduygu & Toktas, 2002, p. 46) and Japan (Friman, 2011), have also decoupled migrant smuggling from drug trafficking and have emphasized that the former is a business into which organized crime has not penetrated. Other studies conducted in the European context have emphasized the non-criminal nature of migrant smuggling, migrant's agency, the existence of links between migrants and human smuggling facilitators maintained by reciprocal interests, and the honesty of the latter (Bilger, Hofmann & Jandl, 2006, p. 83; Van Liempt & Doomernik, 2006, p. 186). Additionally, in the Russian context, Finckenauer (2011) has questioned the role of organized crime in migrant smuggling. However, other research based on qualitative interviews with human smuggling facilitators, conducted in Istanbul, argues that there is a close link between migrant smuggling and drug trafficking (Içli, Sever & Sever, 2015; Narli, 2006).

In a recent study, Slack and Campbell (2016) avoid elucidating whether migrant smugglers transport drugs to examine whether migrant smuggling is an activity influenced by drug trafficking, and they conclude that migrant smuggling occupies a lower step within a criminal hierarchy commanded by drug trafficking, although this argument may lead to the erroneous conclusion that in the entire sphere of activities over which some form of control is exerted, drug cartels occupy a rank within the criminal world.

Strategies for Recruiting Facilitators of the Border Crossing by Mexican Drug Cartels

The diversification of activities of Mexican drug cartels has led to recruitment of people with different areas of *expertise*, such as undocumented migrants, police officers, military personnel, and human smuggling facilitators. The latter are highly appreciated by these

criminal organizations because of their knowledge of migratory routes, the border's geography, and their predisposition to take risks (Izcara, 2013, p. 126).

The data collected in this research indicate that in recent years, the number of human smuggling facilitators who have been recruited by drug cartels has grown substantially. In the interviews conducted in 2011, half of those interviewed did not know whether any of their colleagues worked for the cartels; in 2012, this percentage dropped to 42.5%; a year later it was below 6%, and everyone interviewed in 2014 and 2015 knew former colleagues who were now working for these organizations. Altogether, almost 80% of those interviewed said they knew or had heard of former human smuggling facilitators working for the drug cartels. The respondents said that a quarter of the former human smuggling facilitators who joined the cartels did so out of personal ambition; another similar percentage said that those who went to work for the drug cartels were forced to, and 16% said that although some had been seduced by the profits that they obtained working for these criminal groups, others were kidnapped and forced to join these organizations. On the other hand, 11% of those interviewed said that they knew or had heard of former human smuggling facilitators working for the drug cartels but did not know why they worked for them (see Table 3).

Table 3: Interviewees' discourse on how human smuggling facilitators are recruited by drug cartels

			2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total	
Know former human smuggling facilitators who now work for drug cartels	They became part of the drug cartels out of ambition	n	1	2	13	8	3	27	
		%	12.5	5	36.1	57.1	33.3	25.2	
	The drug cartels recruited them by force	n	3	10	7	5	3	28	
		%	37.5	25	19.4	35.7	33.3	26.2	
	Some went into drug cartels out of ambition, others were forced	n	0	3	11	1	2	17	
		%	0	7.5	30.6	7.2	22.2	15.9	
	Does not know why human smuggling facilitators work for drug cartels	n	0	8	3	0	1	12	
		%	0	20	8.3	0	7.2	11.2	
	Total		n	4	23	34	14	9	84
			%	50	57.5	94.4	100	100	78.5
Does not know whether there are human smuggling facilitators involved with drug cartels.	n	4	17	2	0	0	23		
	%	50	42.5	5.6	0	0	21.5		
Total		n	8	40	36	14	9	107	
		%	100	100	100	100	100	100	

Source: Own elaboration based on the data collected in the interviews.

In 2011 and 2012, most interviewees did not know whether some of their fellows had joined the drug cartels, and many of those who knew former human smuggling facilitators

who worked for organized crime did not know how and why they had become involved with criminal groups. As Juan (2013) asserted, he did not initially believe that there were migrant smugglers who went on to work for the drug cartels and that instead of leading migrants to the United States in a safe manner, they turned them over to organized crime. However, he had recently learned that some of his fellow colleagues were now part of the criminal groups.

The *polleros* who are bad are organized crime workers, and when they take people, they deliver them to the bad people, who take their money to set them free. Yes, there are *polleros* who do that because they work with bad people, and yes, they do; I did not believe it, but they do (Juan, 2013).

On the other hand, in the interviews conducted in 2011 and 2012, most of the interviewees responded that those who had been involved with the drug cartels had been recruited against their will. That is, the former human smuggling facilitators were mostly victims of trafficking forced to commit a crime under duress. In this sense, Slack and Campbell (2016, p. 1392), analyzing the relationship between migrant smuggling and drug trafficking in the Altar region (Sonora), underline the overlap between these two activities; however, they cannot say whether coyotes volunteered for economic gain or whether they were coerced. Many interviewees spoke of the drug cartels' aggression toward migrant smugglers and noted that in recent years, many of their comrades had been victims of enforced disappearance. This is reflected in expressions such as: "many (*polleros*) have disappeared; nothing is known. It is not known what happened; they are thought to have been abducted, but it is not known, they are only thoughts" (Arturo, 2011); "they take them, and they disappear. That has happened, and it is happening" (Erasmus, 2012); "several have disappeared" (Felipe, 2013); "Yes, there are (*polleros*) missing; maybe they are dead, or who knows; God knows what would happen" (Sergio, 2014); and "I had some friends who were abducted, kidnapped, and nothing is known" (Zacarias, 2015).

In contrast, from 2013 a change in the trend appears in the responses. The percentage of respondents who claimed that ambition was the reason former human smuggling facilitators worked for drug cartels outnumbered those who claimed that the former were forced to work for organized crime (See Table 3). Valerio (2015) stated: "Some have changed jobs and gone to work for crime, the cartels that are on the border, because they pay more". Additionally, Vicente (2015) said:

There are some *polleros* who have gone to work with the people [the drug cartels] because they offer to pay them more, because they want to be able, because they think that they are going to be better, that is why they have come to go. I had a friend, a very close friend, who told me: I was invited to work, I'm leaving. He is not a *pollero* anymore; he does another job, but he left because, there, he is doing better. I do not know what he is doing because since he went he is no longer my friend, we do not talk or anything anymore, but he left because they paid more money. Money changes people (Vicente, 2015).

In 2011 and 2012, most respondents said that those who worked for the drug cartels because they had been driven by ambition, realized their mistake, were repentant of the

decision that they had made, and wanted to leave these organizations. In contrast, over the last three years, there is increasing evidence that former human smuggling facilitators who chose to join drug cartels are satisfied with the decision that they made because they earn more money than facilitating clandestine crossings for migrants. In addition, until 2012, the former human smuggling facilitators used by the cartels mainly played subaltern roles, whereas in recent years, some have acquired command positions. Gaspar (2013) said that some people who were former human smuggling facilitators “have been appointed heads of command in different states”.

Additionally, before 2013, former human smuggling facilitators who became members of drug cartels voluntarily or involuntarily remained isolated; they disappeared, and their comrades were unable to contact them. In contrast, from 2013, they seem to have gained more freedom. In this sense, some manage to sporadically come into contact with their former colleagues. This is reflected in expressions such as: “some have gone to work for them; they go because there they pay more; this is what they say. When I find them, I greet them and ask them how they are; they say that there they have more money, more freedom” (Santiago, 2013); “they say that they are doing better working there” (Tadeo, 2014); and “some have gone to work for them because there they are better; they are paid more and leave the job of *pollero*” (Uriel, 2014). The apparent change in attitudes of former migrant smuggling facilitators involved with drug cartels may be due to two factors: a) they have risen in position in the hierarchical structure of these organizations, and b) an improvement in their economic situation in the new job, compared to a loss of profitability and progressive loss of income in the previous activity (Izcara, 2014, p. 95).

It may therefore be inferred that in recent years, a growing number of former human smuggling facilitators operating for drug cartels are criminals who voluntarily follow the orders given by these criminal organizations rather than be victims of trafficking retained under duress and forced to commit crimes under threat.

The Activities Performed by Human Smuggling Facilitators for Drug Cartels

The human smuggling facilitators recruited by the drug cartels stop serving migrants who hire them to cross the US border and begin a criminal career, which often involves kidnapping people who place their trust in them, from which they cannot back down.

Of those interviewed, 22% did not know what the former human smuggling facilitators who had gone to work for the drug cartels did because they stopped interacting with their former trade partners. When they go to work for the drug cartels, these groups often force them to cut ties with the social world outside these organizations. However, most of the interviewees had some type of knowledge about the activities of their former comrades within these criminal organizations.

A quarter of those interviewed said that former human smuggling facilitators who had gone to work for criminal groups were engaged in drug trafficking, and 10% also reported that they were engaged in arms trafficking. Seven percent indicated that they worked as *sicarios* (hitmen) by removing members of rival cartels, members of the security forces, and so on, and 18% said that they engaged in different activities related to the world of organized crime; however, the most frequently reported criminal activity was migrant abduction: 30% of the respondents reported that the drug cartels recruited them to seize migrants (see Table 4).

It is not surprising that the cartels recruit human smuggling facilitators to kidnap Central American migrants, both men and women, who have relatives who can pay a ransom for their release or relatives of Mexican migrants who have accumulated money in the United States. This activity leads to millions in income for these criminal organizations. It was the National Commission of Human Rights that exposed the massive phenomenon of the kidnapping of migrants (CNDH, 2009, 2011). The kidnapping of migrants is a business of scale that only generates high profits when handled in large numbers. Unlike kidnappings in which millions are required, migrants only pay a few thousand dollars to be released. For the kidnapping of migrant workers to be profitable, kidnappings cannot be performed indiscriminately because many migrants have no money. A Guatemalan woman with a long migratory experience, interviewed in 2013, explained how migrant abductions occurred. The kidnappers infiltrated migrant groups and obtained information that drug cartels used to conduct selective abductions.

They do not kidnap everyone, only some, those who have been working in the United States and who have relatives there. So, the *polleros* are suspicious and do not want us to talk to unknown people because the kidnappers enter here among them; this is how they obtain information, and they know who they are going to kidnap. That is the way things are; they kidnap those who can afford what they ask for, those who have families who respond for them. They do not kidnap ordinary people, only those who can pay (Mujer guatemalteca, 2013).

The task of the former human smuggling facilitators is to differentiate the migrants who do not have any type of capital from those who do. As Ignacio (2013) affirmed: “they tell them to infiltrate among the illegals and obtain information; that’s how those people work”. In addition, former human smuggling facilitators have the ability to persuade migrants to follow them because, in the past, they led them to the United States. However, migrants who are deceived by those who went to work for drug cartels instead of being driven north will suffer kidnapping.

From 2013 onwards, the percentage of respondents who say that the human smuggling facilitators recruited by the drug cartels extort others in the same trade and engage in drug trafficking and arms trafficking decreased. In contrast, the percentage of interviewees who report that their former trade partners involved with the drug cartels are involved in the kidnapping of migrants and as hired assassins increased. This fact implies that the human smuggling facilitators involved with organized crime perform increasingly violent activities (see Table 4). This may be due to an increasing diversification of the sources of income of organized crime and an increasing financial dependence on the resources obtained through the kidnapping of migrants.

Table 4: Interviewees' speech on the activities of former human smuggling facilitators working for drug cartels

		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	Total
Drug trafficking	n	1	1	3	1	1	7
	%	25.0	4.3	8.8	7.1	11.1	8.3
Drug and arms trafficking	n	1	3	3	0	0	7
	%	25.0	13.0	8.8	0.0	0.0	8.3
Trafficking in drugs and arms and abduction of migrants	n	0	0	2	0	0	2
	%	0.0	0.0	5.9	0.0	0.0	2.4
Drug trafficking and abduction of migrants	n	0	0	1	1	0	2
	%	0.0	0.0	2.9	7.1	0.0	2.4
Trafficking in drugs, thefts, kidnapping of migrants, or hired as hitmen	n	0	0	1	1	1	3
	%	0.0	0.0	2.9	7.1	11.1	3.6
Kidnapping of migrants	n	0	3	13	1	1	18
	%	0.0	13.0	38.2	7.1	11.1	21.4
Extortion of human smuggling facilitators	n	0	3	0	0	0	3
	%	0.0	13.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.6
Informants	n	0	0	1	3	0	4
	%	0.0	0.0	2.9	21.4	0.0	4.8
<i>Sicario (hitmen)</i>	n	0	0	0	2	1	3
	%	0.0	0.0	0.0	14.3	11.1	3.6
Perform different illicit activities	n	1	5	5	2	2	15
	%	25.0	21.7	14.7	14.3	22.2	17.9
I do not know what they do	n	1	8	5	3	3	20
	%	25.0	34.8	14.7	21.4	33.3	23.8
Total	n	4	23	34	14	9	84
	%	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Own elaboration based on the data collected in the interviews.

The kidnapping of migrants is an attractive activity for drug cartels because of their low risk. Migrants rarely report out of fear of reprisals and because they are found irregularly in Mexico (CNDH, 2009, p. 11). Those who are freed wish to reach the United States; therefore, denouncing their kidnappers would hinder their purpose. This element protects migrants because it is easier for criminal groups to release a person who is not going to report them than someone who will. Many migrants are released within a few days of being abducted (CNDH, 2009, pp. 39-49 and 2011, p. 93). However, the ease with which migrant abductions occur and their low monetary value favor expeditious executions (CNDH, 2009, p. 37 and 2011, p. 76). The cartels pursuing a rapid gain of ransom money use extreme violence because in the case of migrants who will pay a few thousand dollars, these organizations are not willing to prolong negotiations with relatives for a long period of time. For this reason, the number of missing migrants in Mexico is so high (Reveles, 2015, p. 11).

Drug cartels have increased their efforts in locating an increasing number of victims. In this sense, 5% of the respondents indicated that migrant smugglers were recruited by criminal groups to provide information on people who had high-income relatives in the

United States to abduct them. As Servando (2014) noted: “*polleros* know a lot about the people who go to the United States and that these same people have money, property, and investments; *polleros* know a lot, and that information is of interest to the bad people to do their work”.

Conclusion

This article does not present evidence on the participation of drug cartels in migrant smuggling. None of the interviewees had been involved in the activities performed by these criminal groups. Migrant smuggling has not changed substantially. Migrant smuggling networks serve migrants, surreptitiously leading them to the United States in return for money, although many migrants are deceived. Those who have changed are the drug cartels, which in the past did not systematically recruit human smuggling facilitators but do so now. The testimonies of the respondents indicate that in Mexico, a growing number of migrant smugglers have voluntarily abandoned migrant smuggling and have gone to work for drug cartels in activities ranging from drug and arms trafficking to kidnapping and killing. That is, drug cartels do not recruit human smuggling facilitators to engage in migrant smuggling but, rather, to perform more harmful activities, given that these organizations do not provide services to labor migrants.

Not all former human smuggling facilitators who have joined the drug cartels want to work for these organizations. Many are victims of trafficking because they were kidnapped and forced to commit a crime. In contrast, others were voluntarily integrated into these groups. According to the data collected in this research from 2013, the ratio between those who voluntarily joined and those who were forced into the drug cartels has increased.

In the last decade, the relationship between human smuggling facilitators and the drug cartels has narrowed because the former must pay a fee to the latter. This fee has increased so much that many human smuggling facilitators have had to fire some of their helpers to retain their purchasing power; others have chosen to work alone and fired their assistants in order not to share a diminishing income. Therefore, migrant smuggling has become a more laborious, more demanding, and less profitable activity. Migrant smugglers perform more tasks because they have fewer helpers, and their incomes are narrower because drug cartels take a portion of their profits. On the other hand, this occupation carries increasing risks due to tougher penalties and more violence in the territories through which they transit. These factors have increased the attractiveness of abandoning their former trade (transporting migrant workers to the United States) to join the drug cartels.

Drug cartels recruit human smuggling facilitators because these people bring together a set of qualities that make them desirable for these criminal organizations. First, they are highly tolerant of risk, which makes them suitable for engaging in activities that involve serious dangers, such as killing people. Second, they possess a detailed knowledge of the border's geography and less traveled roads. This knowledge is fundamental to carry some of the activities performed by these groups, such as drug and arms trafficking. Finally, they have information about people who migrate (they know migrants, their economic resources, and those of their families). Therefore, they are the best people to carry more efficiently migrant abductions, an increasingly important source of income for these criminal organizations.

These skills, so much appreciated by the drug cartels, make some former human smuggling facilitators able to rise to high positions in these organizations. Therefore, the attractiveness of ascending in the hierarchical structure of these organizations together with a loss of profitability of the occupation that they abandoned explain why more migrant smugglers enter on their own free will into the drug cartels. On the other hand, the activities that they must perform when they join these organizations are increasingly violent and involve a betrayal of the solidarity of the group they belonged to. Their new job involves, among other activities, betraying former trade partners, kidnapping the migrants whom they previously helped, and gathering information on migrant's families.

The data from this research indicate that only a few years ago, the former human smuggling facilitators working for the drug cartels were mostly victims of trafficking who had been forcibly recruited or deceived. At present, the number of them who join these organizations to maximize their economic well-being seems to be higher. This tendency exacerbates conflict and hampers peacemaking processes because people who are voluntarily recruited are more loyal than those who were forced. The latter must be disciplined to prevent them from fleeing, and if they have the opportunity, they will escape. In addition, exploiting the expertise of migrant smugglers in a more violent criminal activity than that which they previously performed, driving migrants to the north, makes drug cartels more difficult to combat.

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Legislative material

Ley general para prevenir, sancionar y erradicar los delitos en materia de trata de personas y para la protección y asistencia a las víctimas de estos delitos. Art. 37. June 14, 2012. New law published in *Diario Oficial de la Federación*.

Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios

Born in Burgos (Spain). He holds a PhD in Sociology from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and is a professor of Sociology at the Multidisciplinary Academic Unit of Sciences, Education and Humanities of the Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, Mexico. His lines of research include agrarian journalism, irregular migration, migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Recent publications: (2017). Los polleros que engañan a los migrantes: norma o excepción *Convergencia*, 24(74), 13-38; (2017). La precarización extrema en el mercado de trabajo agrario en Estados Unidos. *Colombia International*, (89), 109-132; and (2018). Centroamericanas menores de edad prostituidas en California. *Nósis. Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 27(53), 77-97.