The profitability of human trafficking and drug trafficking makes them a desirable pairing for transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) seeking to increase profits and market control. The International Labour Organization (https://www.ilo.org/publications/profits-and-poverty-economics-forced-labour-1) estimated that human trafficking was a $236 billion-a-year business in 2021. Actual illegal drug trade profits are largely unknown due to the trade’s illicit nature. However, a 2014 report (https://secureservercdn.net/45.40.149.159/34n.8bd.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Transnational_Crime-final.pdf) from Global Financial Integrity, a Washington, DC-based think tank focusing on illicit financial flows, corruption, illicit trade, and money laundering, has estimated the global illegal drug market between $426 and $652 billion.

Human trafficking and smuggling are complex crimes that affect people differently. While sometimes related, these are separate crimes. Emerging research (https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38347820/#:~:text=Emerging%20research%20also%20suggests%20that%20after%20a%20natural%20disaster.) suggests that disasters, like the border crisis, increase the risk of human trafficking. Numerous factors drive migration, including natural disasters, regional conflicts, poverty, political instability, human rights violations, and fluctuating immigration policies.

Although the responsibility for immigration policy and enforcement lies with the federal government, state and local governments shoulder the burden for the stabilization of migrants remaining in the U.S. as they await immigration proceedings. State and local government efforts will be chiefly coordinated by emergency management personnel utilizing tactics similar to those for natural and human-caused disasters. They will assist social services agencies and their non-profit partners to quickly mobilize emergency migrant-serving facilities, programs, and services. Aside from the humanitarian lens, the policing lens has agencies shifting their “safeguarding” focus of respective communities to combat spillover violence associated with the border crisis:

- According to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director Wray (https://www.c-span.org/video/?534027-1/senate-select-intelligence-committee-hearing-global-threats) at a March 2024 congressional hearing, “I would say this from an FBI perspective: we are seeing a wide array of very dangerous threats that emanate from the border, and that includes drug trafficking. The FBI alone seized enough fentanyl in the last two years to kill 270 million people.”
- In March 2024, U.S. Border Patrol chief Jason Owens stated (https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jason-owens-border-patrol-southern-border-national-security-threat/) that the extraordinary flow of people into the U.S. is mainly driven by cartels, and they were setting “the rules of engagement” at the southern border.
Aside from illicit drug trafficking, Mexican TCOs are aggressively increasing their involvement in corresponding crimes like extortion, human smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking, and oil theft, according to the Congressional Research Service (https://www.fas.org/crs/row/R41576.pdf). Additionally, the level of violence associated with territorial control, trafficking routes, and criminal influence is increasing. According to the Global Risk Map (https://www.globalriskmap.net), Mexican TCOs control (https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-National-Interdiction-Command-and-Control-Plan-NICCP.pdf) a majority of the U.S. illicit drug market, have well-established transportation routes, possess advanced technological and communication capabilities, and have strong affiliations with criminals inside the U.S. Their routine participation and involvement with affiliated crimes such as human smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking, public corruption, and violence pose a serious threat to homeland security and further jeopardize public safety. The TCOs' production and trafficking of fentanyl to the U.S. has fueled a continuing opioid crisis. The DEA (https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/NDTA_2023.pdf) reported that fentanyl was responsible for the deaths of 74,225 Americans in 2022 and almost 38,000 Americans in the first six months of 2023, making it the deadliest U.S. drug threat.

TCOs continue to be the greatest ongoing drug threat to the U.S., according to the DEA (https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DIR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment_WEB.pdf). Mexican TCOs control (https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-National-Interdiction-Command-and-Control-Plan-NICCP.pdf) a majority of the U.S. illicit drug market, have well-established transportation routes, possess advanced technological and communication capabilities, and have strong affiliations with criminals inside the U.S. Their routine participation and involvement with affiliated crimes such as human smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking, public corruption, and violence pose a serious threat to homeland security and further jeopardize public safety. The TCOs' production and trafficking of fentanyl to the U.S. has fueled a continuing opioid crisis. The DEA (https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2023-04/NDTA_2023.pdf) reported that fentanyl was responsible for the deaths of 74,225 Americans in 2022 and almost 38,000 Americans in the first six months of 2023, making it the deadliest U.S. drug threat.

TCOs currently control transportation routes inside Mexico, smuggling corridors, and distribution hubs in every U.S. state, as well as synthetic drug manufacturing facilities. Encrypted messaging applications and social media platforms facilitate these drug sales, making detection more challenging for law enforcement. TCOs can advertise drugs and cross-border human-smuggling services on social media platforms, communicate with co-conspirators and drug purchasers over encrypted applications, and receive payment via cash apps and cryptocurrency platforms on a single electronic mobile device.

**EXPANDING BEYOND DRUG TRAFFICKING**

Capitalizing on their existing drug routes, TCOs have expanded and diversified into human smuggling and, subsequently, human trafficking. Targeting migrants desperate to enter the U.S. and escape violence and economic poverty in their own countries, TCOs offer struggling migrants paid unauthorized transportation. Many migrants cannot pay the transportation cost and become the TCOs' indentured servants. Repayment for this service takes many forms, primarily sex trafficking, labor trafficking, drug smuggling, and other associated criminal activity. Refusal to comply with TCO demands for trade-based repayment often means violence to migrants or their family members who remained in the country.

**RECRUITING AND TRANSPORT**

Common human trafficking recruitment methods include familial relationships, smuggling, and migration, specifically targeting migrants who originate in or pass through Mexico en route to the U.S. Many migrants have preexisting vulnerabilities and are unlikely to report trafficking crimes to law enforcement for reasons (https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/labor-trafficking-vulnerabilities-victimization/) including the lack of self-identification, TCO retribution, deportation, and arrest. TCOs control (https://www.americansecurityproject.org/mexicos-transnational-criminal-organizations-are-benefitting-from-the-pandemic/) the 2,000-mile U.S.-Mexico-U.S. border which has escalated violent competition between groups over illicit markets and trafficking routes. The smugglers, often known as “foot guides,” “coyotes,” or “polleros,” recruit victims with promises of safe passage. Sometimes, victims are kidnapped en route to their destination and controlled with debt bondage, physical violence, and threats to family members.

Smuggling endeavors are highly sophisticated. In 2021, TCOs earned (https:// homeland.house.gov/2023/12/14/now-nobody-crosses-without-paying-senior-border-patrol-agents-describe-unprecedented-cartel-control-at-southwest-border/) an estimated $13 billion from human smuggling. Migrants agree to pay TCOs to travel from Southern or Central America to the U.S. Before the journey occurs, TCOs do the equivalent of a background check to learn about the migrants' family members and friends and where they live. The family members or friends become “collateral” for the migrants. When the journey begins, TCOs require migrants to wear color-coded and serial-numbered wristbands that reflect how much money is outstanding and who they may have to work for once inside the U.S.

During the trip, TCOs often increase the price or “piso” (tax), making it difficult for migrants to back out of deals or negotiate lower fees. Most migrants have some money, but not always enough to pay for the entire journey, with smuggling rates (https:// homeland.house.gov/2023/08/23/chairman-green-holds-secretary-mayorkas-accountable-for-deeply-troubling-ignorance-of-cartel-strategy-at-southwest-border/) ranging from $3,000 to $60,000. At the border, TCOs remove the migrants' wristbands and collect any remaining piso and smuggling fees. Migrants refusing to pay risk having someone kill their family members or friends. Any migrant who owes money must go to a work location in the U.S., where the migrant stays enslaved in debt bondage to the trafficker until the full amount is paid.

**FORCED LABOR IN THE U.S.**

Once in the U.S., large percentages (https://www.policiechiefmagazine.org/labor-trafficking-vulnerabilities-victimization/) of undocumented illegal migrants smuggled into the U.S. from TCOs fall prey to labor trafficking, which expands beyond laboring on a farm, cleaning hotels, doing construction, or working in factories for little or no wages. According to research (https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Polaris-2019-US-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline-Data-Report.pdf) conducted by one of the nation's leading anti-trafficking organizations, Polaris, the National Human Trafficking Hotline identified that, between 2015-2018, 50% of persons trafficked for labor were from Latin America. Research indicates the existence of a large network of illegally working undocumented migrants in the U.S. While these workers are often paid or paid at rates below the prevailing market wage, the migrants operate in a system of fear and exploitation. Migrants are often forced to work without breaks, pass police查验, and face the possibility of deportation or arrest for any non-work related activity. Migrants are also often held in poor working conditions, including the lack of access to restroom facilities, air conditioning, or heating. Migrants are often forced to work for extended periods of time with little or no rest, and are paid in cash or through a system of debts, with the amount owed increasing with each subsequent paycheck. Migrants are often forced to work for extended periods of time with little or no rest, and are paid in cash or through a system of debts, with the amount owed increasing with each subsequent paycheck. Migrants are often forced to work for extended periods of time with little or no rest, and are paid in cash or through a system of debts, with the amount owed increasing with each subsequent paycheck. Migrants are often forced to work for extended periods of time with little or no rest, and are paid in cash or through a system of debts, with the amount owed increasing with each subsequent paycheck.

**TRANSNATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

The overwhelming number of undocumented, illegal migrants entering the U.S. is alarming. In 2023, Customs Border Patrol reported (https://homeland.house.gov/2023/10/26/Factsheet-final-by-23-numbers-show-worst-year-at-americas-borders-ever/) over 2.4 million encounters at the Southwest border and 3.2 million encounters nationwide. TCO violence and corruption, coupled with inadequate U.S. immigration policies and enforcement, have increased the number of asylum seekers entering the country. According to a 2022 report (https://migrationnetwork.un.org/resources/world-migration-report-2022) by the United Nations' International Organization for Migration, the U.S. is the largest in the world for people fleeing violence, extortion, armed clashes, or organized crime groups. Conflicts and competition for control between TCOs in violent states and battlegrounds – expanding into formerly peaceful areas – fuel a large exodus of people. Smugglers are capitalizing on opportunities for diversification and exploitation.

Global Risk Map (https://www.globalriskmap.net) shows how much money is outstanding and who they may have to work for once inside the U.S.

**EXPANDING BEYOND DRUG TRAFFICKING**

Capitalizing on their existing drug routes, TCOs have expanded and diversified into human smuggling and, subsequently, human trafficking. Targeting migrants desperate to enter the U.S. and escape violence and economic poverty in their own countries, TCOs offer struggling migrants paid unauthorized transportation. Many migrants cannot pay the transportation cost and become the TCOs' indentured servants. Repayment for this service takes many forms, primarily sex trafficking, labor trafficking, drug smuggling, and other associated criminal activity. Refusal to comply with TCO demands for trade-based repayment often means violence to migrants or their family members who remained in the country.
SAME ROUTES, MORE COMMODITIES

Unlike the Colombian cartels of the 1980s and 1990s, disrupting and dismantling Mexican TCOs have proved difficult because of corruption in the Mexican government and because arresting TCO leaders results in further fragmentation, cartel expansion, and extensive violence in geographic turf battles. TCOs control the areas along the Southwest border and exploit that control and long-established transportation routes. Capitalizing on their already prosperous business model for drug cargo, TCOs diversified into human smuggling using the same routes and procedures to transport human commodities. As an added benefit, desperate migrants rarely have the total funds required for their transportation, so TCOs accommodate them by forcing them into sex work, forced labor, drug trafficking, drug production, and associated criminal activities.

Exploiting migrants provides an endless supply of TCO personnel and income not dependent on the manufacture and transportation of illicit narcotics. The diversification into human smuggling and trafficking is a simple business decision for TCOs who have no regard for human life and make no distinction between drugs and human commodities. Profits effectively triple with minimal effort while providing an endless supply of personnel and diversified illicit business opportunities should the narcotics trade become disrupted. With money as a prime motivation for these illegal activities, transnational crime is likely to increase until authorities challenge the high-profit, low-risk paradigm. Enacted or amended legislation is needed to address the immigration crisis, as well as training for law enforcement to recognize human trafficking when encountering migrants.

U.S. EFFORTS TO COMBAT TRAFFICKING

The decades-long war on drugs has had minimal progress in eradicating TCOs' illicit businesses. The illegal drug market has transitioned from cocaine and heroin to even more deadly inorganic intoxicants such as methamphetamine, fentanyl, and xylazine. The major geographical drug threats are no longer South America for its cocaine production and the Middle East for its heroin but are geographically now Mexico and China. Drug-trafficking routes have evolved from private and commercial air carriers, drug mules and body carriers, and maritime routes via the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic and Pacific oceans to land routes along the Southwest border. Mexico's entry into drug production and its partnership with China to obtain precursor chemicals has further fueled the U.S.'s deadly opioid epidemic.

Despite its tremendous amount of demand for reduction programs, the U.S. remains the leading consumer of illicit narcotics globally. Traditional enforcement efforts used in the past to disrupt and dismantle TCOs have proven unsuccessful in Mexico and have only led to fragmentation, violence, and furtherance of territorial control. Implementing programs such as the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force, High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas, and High-Intensity Financial Crimes Areas have had some level of success. However, TCO expansion and diversification into other criminal activities such as human smuggling, human trafficking, arms trafficking, and fuel theft have boosted their profits. Open-border policies facilitate TCOs to conduct criminal activities within the U.S. and exploit migrants who embark on the cross-border smuggling journey.

A RENEWED AND EXPANDED CALL TO ACTION

Immigration reform, legislation with harsher penalties for the manufacture, possession, and distribution of synthetic drugs, and training drug enforcement organizations on human trafficking and smuggling investigative approaches can help combat TCOs. Collaborative and multifaceted steps are needed to address this nexus between drug and human smuggling.

- Prevention of migrant smuggling
  - Aside from proactive investigations and disruptions of TCOs, other measures are key in addressing migrant smuggling, such as accurate information about smuggling risks for migrants to make educated decisions about their journeys. Some technology-based initiatives could disseminate information by sharing migrants' experiences and the dangers of their migration journeys.

- Immigration reform
  - Current immigration policies provide opportunities for TCOs to victimize migrants. Migrants who involuntarily congregate along the Southwest border awaiting their eligibility to seek asylum may contemplate alternate avenues to U.S. entry, thus increasing their vulnerability to extortion and kidnapping.

- Prosecution of traffickers
  - The criminal justice approach or "all-crimes approach" to counter trafficking is critical for dismantling TCO trafficking networks, preventing trafficking, and protecting its victims.

- Utilization of an Enhanced Collaborative Model
  - Multidisciplinary teams should include law enforcement, prosecutors, medical staff, mental health staff, forensic interviewers, victim services specialists, advocates, housing personnel, treatment facilities, and personnel, nongovernmental organizations, and travel and transportation personnel, all with an understanding of the victim-centered approach.

- The Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force
  - Enhances funding and training budgets to target high-level transnational, national, and regional criminal organizations. This task force provides investigative funding and intelligence-driven strategies, ensures U.S.-Mexico cooperation along the Southwest border, and offers an assortment of assets globally. Programs should not be reduced, but some of this funding should be reallocated from enforcement to education.

- The High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas
  - is part of the National Drug Control Strategy to assist and coordinate law enforcement agencies by addressing drug threats, trafficking, and production in the U.S.
  - This program recognizes the expansion of Mexican cartel activities. Providing training to regional High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas offices can help identify human trafficking victims during narcotics investigations.

- The Financial Crimes Enforcement Network
  - is administered by the U.S. Department of Treasury to safeguard the U.S. financial system by combating money laundering and terrorist financing. This network supports law enforcement with expertise in narcotics money laundering and should utilize its current monitoring system for monetary commodities to flag financial transactions associated with the movement and sale of human commodities.

- The High-Intensity Financial Crimes Areas
  - complements the High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas program by focusing on the financial aspect of transnational crimes in Northern and Southern California, New York, New Jersey, Chicago, Puerto Rico, South Florida, and along the Southwest border. Better integration across the enhanced multidisciplinary team approach would help combat the illicit human-drug trafficking enterprise across the U.S.

- The President's Interagency Task Force to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons
  - is comprised of 20 federal agencies tasked with coordinating government-wide efforts to combat human trafficking. Its primary focus is enforcing criminal and labor laws, victim-centered and trauma-informed assistance, data collection, education, public awareness, foreign aid, and diplomatic engagement. The Human Trafficking Institute's 2022 Federal Human Trafficking Report states U.S. federal prosecutors concentrated 97% of trafficking prosecutions on sex trafficking and only 3% on forced labor cases. Conversely, experts estimate that 70% of persons trafficked are forced labor. Better agency-wide coordination would provide data-driven intelligence by improving the collection and sharing of data pertaining to the types of prosecutions.
The illicit drug market, smuggling, and human trafficking at the Southwest border are profitable for TCOs. They reap enormous profits from drug trafficking, human smuggling, and human trafficking. The diversification into human commodities has expanded profits by exploiting migrants. TCOs will continue to utilize their long-established drug routes between the U.S. and Mexico to smuggle and force many into indentured servitude, which can result in debt bondage, sexual exploitation, labor trafficking, and forced criminality. Migrant smuggling and human trafficking are different but often overlap, which makes it imperative that policymakers, immigration officers, law enforcement, and organizations are conscious of the differences between them and the fluidity of moving from one to another. According to the Texas Border Czar Mike Banks, “Every state has really become a border state. Never in my career have I seen such large numbers entering the country illegally. And so, I think we should be worried about it.”

Communities, resources, and emergency management agencies across every state, county, and city are strained. In 2021, the Federal Emergency Management Agency deployed to the Southwest border to assist with an incursion of migrants. In April 2024, the administration announced $300 million in grants through the Shelter and Services Program to support communities across the U.S. that are providing services to migrants. The U.S. must multilaterally prepare for the continued insurgency of migrants by utilizing disaster management best practices, continuing to aggressively target TCOs with anti-smuggling campaigns before migrants are recruited and reach the border, and combating smuggler misinformation so migrants are duly informed. Without additional action, the TCOs become stronger, more diversified, and harder to combat.

### Richard Schoebel

Richard Schoebel, Ph.D., has over 30 years of law enforcement experience, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). He has served in a variety of positions throughout his career, ranging from a supervisory special agent at the FBI’s headquarters in Washington, DC, to unit chief of the International Terrorism Operations Section at the NCTC headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Before those organizations, he worked as a special agent investigating violent crime, human trafficking, international terrorism, and organized crime. Additionally, he has authored numerous scholarly articles, serves as a peer mentor with the Police Executive Research Forum, is currently a professor of Criminality and Homeland Security at the University of Tennessee-Southern, and works with Hope for Justice – a global nonprofit combating human trafficking.

### Jeff Bolettieri

Jeff Bolettieri is a 27-year veteran with the Suffolk County Sheriff's Office, New York, where he spent 12 years assigned to the Special Investigations Unit, and 11 years assigned as an Investigator Sergeant with the Special Investigations Unit. Additionally, Jeff spent 15 years assigned to the Drug Enforcement Administration New York Drug Enforcement Task Force. Eleven of those years, he was assigned as the executive officer supervising task force personnel and overseeing cases. Jeff currently serves as an Investigator Instructor for Hope for Justice, an international non-profit organization combating human trafficking. Jeff is responsible for specialized training to include Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces human trafficking training and working in Hope for Justice’s Investigative model across the U.S.

### Bill Loucks

William “Bill” Loucks Jr, has over 20 years of law enforcement experience, the majority working as a gang and narcotics detective with the Metro Nashville Police Department. Following, Metro Nashville Police Department, Bill served as an Instructor for the North Carolina Department of Justice, Justice Academy, where he instructed gang and narcotics related courses. Bill is also a North Carolina General Instructor, North Carolina Specialized Explosives and Hazardous Materials Instructor, and Tennessee Specialized Police Instructor Certified for gangs. Bill is currently a senior investigator with Hope for Justice, where he conducts human trafficking investigations and serves as an instructor for law enforcement agencies. He is also a staff member of the International Narcotics Interdiction Association.

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