



The Mexican-American border (Source: Greg Bulla/Unsplash, 2021).

THE NEXUS BETWEEN DRUG AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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RICHARD (<https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/author/richard-schoeberlschoeberl>), JEFF (<https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/author/jeff-bollettieribollettieri>) AND BILL (<https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/author/bill-loucksloucks>)

ARTICLE OUT LOUD
(<https://www.domesticpreparedness.com/article-out-loud/article-out-loud-the-nexus-between-drug-and-human-trafficking>)

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 \(https://www.ilo.org/publications/profits-and-poverty-economics-forced-labour-1\)](https://www.ilo.org/publications/profits-and-poverty-economics-forced-labour-1) estimated that human trafficking was a [\\$236 billion-a-year business \(https://www.ilo.org/publications/profits-and-poverty-economics-forced-labour-1\)](https://www.ilo.org/publications/profits-and-poverty-economics-forced-labour-1) in 2021. Actual illegal drug trade profits are largely unknown due to the trade's illicit nature. However, a 2014 [report \(https://secureservercdn.net/45.40.149.159/34n.8bd.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Transnational_Crime-final.pdf\)](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 \(https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38347820/#:~:text=Emerging%20research%20also%20suggests%20that,and%20after%20a%20natural%20disaster.\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38347820/#:~:text=Emerging%20research%20also%20suggests%20that,and%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 \(https://www.c-span.org/video/?534027-1/senate-select-intelligence-committee-hearing-global-threats\)](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 \(https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jason-owens-border-patrol-southern-border-national-security-threat/\)](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.

TRANSNATIONAL DRUG TRAFFICKING

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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 \(https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41576.pdf\)](https://sgp.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 \(https://www.globalguardian.com/risk-map?utm_medium=email&hsmi=277709007&hsenc=p2ANqtz-89W-Yg6fx_ssi844Sy7HEznrH8N-D7b8owU31Plvn2MiVkkvJoay8m1ZN3HbR8uhi9lBkBNivi7naMnt0wGFCiKLDTVa&utm_content=277709007&utm_source=hs_automation\)](https://www.globalguardian.com/risk-map?utm_medium=email&hsmi=277709007&hsenc=p2ANqtz-89W-Yg6fx_ssi844Sy7HEznrH8N-D7b8owU31Plvn2MiVkkvJoay8m1ZN3HbR8uhi9lBkBNivi7naMnt0wGFCiKLDTVa&utm_content=277709007&utm_source=hs_automation), Mexico remains at “high risk,” crediting the enduring narco-war that threatens the balance of power and fuels upticks in violence. Over the past few decades, Mexican TCOs have fragmented the seven original Mexican cartels into twelve. In addition to large TCOs, approximately [200-400 smaller criminal organizations \(https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41576.pdf\)](https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41576.pdf) operate in Mexico.

The fragmentation and evolution of criminal enterprises did not happen instantaneously. In 2018, instead of directly combating TCOs, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador adopted a policy addressing social conditions within the country, allowing these organizations to flourish. Unlike Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s, where dismantling the Medellín and Cali cartels led to less violence overall, dismantling the Mexican TCOs has fragmented criminal groups and encouraged widespread violence, largely due to Mexico's governmental corruption and lack of enforcement.

TCOs continue to be the greatest ongoing drug threat to the U.S., according to the [DEA \(https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DIR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment_WEB.pdf\)](https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-02/DIR-008-21%202020%20National%20Drug%20Threat%20Assessment_WEB.pdf). Mexican TCOs [control \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/2022-National-Interdiction-Command-and-Control-Plan-NICCP.pdf\)](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 criminal groups 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 \(https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/NDTA_2024.pdf\)](https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/NDTA_2024.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 over 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.

TRANSNATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The overwhelming number of undocumented, illegal migrants entering the U.S. is alarming. In 2023, Customs Border Patrol [reported \(https://homeland.house.gov/2023/10/26/factsheet-final-fy23-numbers-show-worst-year-at-americas-borders-ever/\)](https://homeland.house.gov/2023/10/26/factsheet-final-fy23-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 \(https://migrationnetwork.un.org/resources/world-migration-report-2022\)](https://migrationnetwork.un.org/resources/world-migration-report-2022) by the United Nations' International Organization for Migration, the Mexico to U.S. corridor is the largest in the world, with nearly 11 million 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.

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. Migrants often have preexisting vulnerabilities and are unlikely to report trafficking crimes to law enforcement for [reasons \(https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/labor-trafficking-vulnerabilities-victimization/\)](https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/labor-trafficking-vulnerabilities-victimization/) including the lack of self-identification, TCO retribution, deportation, and arrest. TCOs [control \(https://www.americansecurityproject.org/mexicos-transnational-criminal-organizations-are-benefitting-from-the-pandemic/\)](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 \(https://homeland.house.gov/2023/12/14/now-nobody-crosses-without-paying-senior-border-patrol-agents-describe-unprecedented-cartel-control-at-southwest-border/\)](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 \(https://homeland.house.gov/2023/08/23/chairman-green-holds-secretary-mayorkas-accountable-for-deeply-troubling-ignorance-of-cartel-strategy-at-southwest-border/\)](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 \(https://www.policechiefmagazine.org/labor-trafficking-vulnerabilities-victimization/\)](https://www.policechiefmagazine.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 \(https://humantraffickinghotline.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/Polaris-2019-US-National-Human-Trafficking-Hotline-Data-Report.pdf\)](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. Agriculture has the distinction of being the U.S. industry with the greatest number of reported immigrant victims of human trafficking.

Latin American migrants are not the only victims of the gateway from smuggling to trafficking. Labor trafficking also occurs at legal and illegal marijuana farms, which may be operated by TCOs or Asian Criminal Organizations with ties to the Chinese Communist Party, who also function as [money launderers \(https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/115542/witnesses/HHRG-118-BA10-Wstate-RealuyoP-20230323.pdf\)](https://www.congress.gov/118/meeting/house/115542/witnesses/HHRG-118-BA10-Wstate-RealuyoP-20230323.pdf). According to the [U.S. Customs and Border Patrol \(https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters\)](https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters), encounters with Chinese nationals have significantly increased over the past four years: 450 in FY2021, 2,176 in FY2022, 24,314 in FY2023, and 27,700 in the first 7 months of FY2024.

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.

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- *Human trafficking task forces* – The FBI and Homeland Security Investigations have limited resources applied to human trafficking task forces within their domestic field offices. Much like the Joint Terrorism Task Force, the establishment of human trafficking task forces at the 56 FBI field offices could better combat the drug trafficking nexus.
- *Easily accessible, low-cost training* (<https://us.learningacademy.hopeforjustice.org/store>) and *education in human trafficking recognition for the public, law enforcement, and the judicial system* – Screening for human trafficking indicators is necessary any time law enforcement officials identify migrants during operations associated with migrant smuggling. Educating first responders in recognizing trafficking, using a trauma-informed approach, and employing investigative procedures is critical as they are likely to be the first to encounter victims and perpetrators. Additionally, educating judges, prosecutors, and jurors to better understand human trafficking crimes could result in more effective 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 (<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2024/04/25/texas-border-czar-enforcement-migrants/73203531007/>) 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 (<https://www.fema.gov/press-release/20240412/department-homeland-security-announces-300-million-direct-funding>) \$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 SCHOEBERL

Richard Schoeberl, 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's headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Before these 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 Criminology and Homeland Security at the University of Tennessee-Southern, and works with Hope for Justice – a global nonprofit combating human trafficking.



JEFF BOLLETTIERI

Jeff Bollettieri 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 16 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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