

DANGEROUS BORDER

# How the Migration Industry Fuels the Extortion Industry

DAVID STOLL

*If the Mexican border tells us anything beyond partisan dispute, it is that welcoming more migrants will require more policing.*

With plentiful assistance from Donald Trump, immigrant-rights advocates are persuading many Americans that U.S. enforcement of the Mexican border is cruel and unjust. What exactly would constitute justice is not an easy question: The border was created by one republic's invasion of another republic, both of which were seizing territory from indigenous groups who were also at war with each other.

Two centuries later, the wage gap between the United States and low-income countries fuels two lucrative industries, an underground migration industry and a taxpayer-financed deportation industry, whose interactions cause enormous suffering. Now that President Trump is getting tough with Central American asylum seekers, Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders is calling for decriminalizing unauthorized border-crossing and a temporary moratorium on deportations.

Don't we need border enforcement and deportation to keep Americans safe? The question is unavoidable because the difference in homicide rates north and south of the border is astonishing. El Paso, Texas, is one of the safest cities in the United States, but its sister-city Ciudad Juárez has one of the highest homicide rates on the planet. Whatever U.S. border authorities inflict on migrants, this is surpassed by what Mexican crime organizations, often referred to as cartels, do to their fellow Mexicans and anyone else who falls into their hands. Due largely to the cartels, 37,435 people were "disappeared" in Mexico between 2006 and 2018. But it wasn't a cartel executioner who shot 46 people at an El Paso Walmart last year; it was an Anglo supremacist targeting Hispanics.

In this paranoid multi-threat environment, citizen-security has a way of trumping every other issue. Border-fortification is a reliable vote-getter on the American side. But nothing about the border is simple, because neither side can prosper without easy access to the other. Most Americans who live along the 1,260-mile boundary have Mexican heritage and relatives. Due to birthright

**Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City**

Anthony Fontes  
University of California Press,  
2018, 332 pp., \$34.95

**When I Wear My Alligator Boots: Narco-Culture in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands**

Shaylih Muehlmann  
University of California Press,  
2014, 240 pp., \$29.05

**Deported to Death: How Drug Violence is Changing Migration on the U.S.-Mexico Border**

Jeremy Slack  
University of California Press,  
2019, 280 pp., \$29.95

**The Shadow of the Wall: Violence and Migration on the U.S.-Mexico Border**

Jeremy Slack, Daniel E. Martínez, and Scott Whiteford  
University of Arizona Press,  
2018, 280 pp., \$34.99

**Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey**

Wendy Vogt  
University of California Press,  
2018, 272 pp., \$85

How the Migration Industry Fuels the Extortion Industry - The Am... <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/02/19/dangerous-bord...>  
citizenship, non-citizens give birth to citizens. Then there is the gravitational pull of the American economy and the American dollar. This includes the weaponry wielded by Mexican cartels, most of which comes from north of the border, and their profits, most of which come from selling heroin, cocaine, and marijuana to American customers.

Border violence goes back a long way, but in the 1980s the United States began to export its war on drugs to the foreign countries that produced the drugs. Interdiction in South America and the Caribbean failed to stop the flow, but it did push up drug prices and profits, giving the cartels enough cash to corrupt almost any government and security force. So destructive were the cartels that, in 2006, Mexico's President Felipe Calderón declared war on them. That turned conflicts between rival cartels and state security forces into public killing sprees. Cartel assassins terrorized their opponents and the citizenry with staggering displays of cruelty, especially in Mexican border cities.

Into those same cities the U.S. government has never stopped deporting thousands of Mexican citizens who have been living in the United States. In the same border cities mingle thousands of Central Americans who hope to escape low-paying jobs and crime waves of their own by asking the United States for asylum. Now the Trump Administration is discouraging the Central Americans by returning them to Mexican soil until an immigration judge hears their case. The advocacy group Human Rights First has documented [636 attacks](#) on applicants waiting in Mexican border cities.

This is such a miserable situation, with so many different authors, that Americans need to ask: Would dialing back border enforcement, and ending or at least reducing deportation, make much difference? Were there less U.S. border enforcement, would northern Mexico be significantly safer than it is at present? Answering "yes" are social researchers who compile the experiences of border victims.

#### *What Happens to Deportees*

**I**n 2010-12 a binational research team interviewed 1,100 deportees on the Mexican side of the border. Interestingly, 86 percent said that they had been treated respectfully by all or a majority of U.S. personnel who had been involved in deporting them. Only 14 percent said that they had been disrespected by all or a majority of U.S. personnel. Only 30 percent regarded the United States as their current home, and only 23 percent said they had U.S.-born American citizen children. The results corroborate the stereotype that the majority of deportees are male labor migrants with only limited attachments to the United States. But 55 percent of the deportees said they planned to return to the United States in the future. Some, with families in the U.S., were determined to rejoin them at any cost.

One of the researchers, University of Texas-El Paso geographer Jeremy Slack, has published an ethnography of conditions in Mexican border cities. *Deported to Death* focuses on deportees and other migrants in shelters and flophouses in Nuevo Laredo (on the Texas border), Nogales (on the Arizona border), and Tijuana (south of San Diego, California). Border cities have become so dangerous that Mexican authorities often try to move deportees farther south as soon as possible. But some deportees hang around hoping for a chance to return north.

This puts them at risk of kidnaping because their anglicized speech and clothing gives away the possibility that they have stateside relatives who can be extorted. In one nightmarish case, a group of deportees is offered half-price bus tickets by uniformed officers of Grupo Beta, the Mexican government agency that provides humanitarian aid to migrants. Once the deportees are on the bus and under way, the Grupo Beta officers reveal themselves to be Zetas, the most violent of the Mexican cartels.

Another high-risk category in Mexican border cities are migrants from the south. Currently these are mainly Central Americans, but they also include asylum seekers from Mexico and around the world. Those who do not hire “guides” have, by definition, failed to pay the tolls demanded by whatever cartel controls the city, so they too face a high risk of abduction. Merely by venturing around Nuevo Laredo with migrants, Slack learned that they were under constant surveillance from cartel look-outs on every block. When look-outs identified migrants who had not paid up, they demanded a hefty border-crossing toll (\$429 in 2014).

That was only the least-bad thing that could happen. Slack collected numerous stories about women being raped and forced into prostitution. Other kidnapping targets are deportees who have served in the U.S. armed forces—not just for their military training but for their linguistic and cultural competence in dealing with U.S. officials.

Because Mexican criminal organizations inflict high losses on each other (including many of the country’s 200,000 homicide victims since 2006), they have a hard time recruiting replacements. And so Slack and other investigators have collected horrendous testimonies of forced recruitment. But he acknowledges that joining these organizations is not necessarily coerced. In fact, he points out, the drug trade is far more accessible to lower-class youth than migration to the United States because the latter requires capital to pay smugglers.

#### *What Happens in Migrant Shelters*

**M**igrant shelters, operated mainly by Catholic clergy on shoe-string budgets, often fail to protect migrants from the worst threats they face. Not all Central Americans use them: Migrants who borrow large sums to pay smugglers are whisked across Mexico. But shelters are where migrants end up if they try to negotiate a bargain price with smugglers, or if they try to get across Mexico on their own. That shelters often fail to screen out smugglers posing as migrants is not very surprising. Smugglers are proficient liars, and this is where they find customers. That shelters fail to protect their lodgers from extortion, assault, and murder is far more serious.

Casting light on the reasons for this is a more detailed shelter ethnography by the anthropologist Wendy Vogt, who has volunteered in southern Mexico since 2007. Whether shelters like it or not, Vogt reports, they have become an important non-profit node in the for-profit migration industry. The humanitarians who run shelters have no foolproof way to distinguish between migrants and smugglers. Small groups traveling together claim to be family units. Many family units now include small children who require generous treatment. But if the actual relationship holding together a group is mercenary, this encourages acrimony and retaliation.

Even actual family groups can be a façade for exploitation, hence a Guatemalan

couple using their own small children to maximize sympathy as they take successive groups of migrants across Mexico. As one of their bitter relatives told Vogt, “money is thicker than blood.” Smugglers and their female clients often claim to be domestic partners, expedited by the fact that, when women are determined to reach the United States at any cost, some use transactional sex to protect themselves from being raped. Since shelter personnel include failed migrants, these can be vulnerable to financial temptations. For penniless female migrants, one temptation is to work in bars, which in this milieu can be hard to distinguish from brothels.

So treacherous is the migrant trail through Mexico, and so under siege are the shelters, that even inside them migrants are afraid to share personal information, for fear that an informer will betray them to kidnappers out on the street, with the result that they are seized to extract ransom from relatives. There are so many incentives for false identities, and it is so challenging to know who is who, that shelters are not popular with local residents, who assume that the lodgers are criminals. One shelter was shut down by a mob after three denizens allegedly raped a 13 year-old neighbor. By 2013 an Oaxaca shelter where Vogt volunteered had become a fortress protected by barbed wire and security cameras. Following death threats by the Zetas, its founder was assigned bodyguards by the Mexican government.

Under such conditions, Vogt and Slack acknowledge the challenges in evaluating the stories told by deportees and migrants. All the fear in a shelter skews a researcher’s sample in favor of talkative characters. When talkative characters trade accusations, who to believe? So many migrants pass through a shelter that it is hard to know what happened next. Did they finally make it across the border, are they languishing in some jail, or did they get murdered?

Still, story after story demonstrates that the “ubiquitous” danger in border towns and along the migrant trail is extortion—of the migrants themselves, and, if kidnappers can get their hands on personal information, of their relatives back home or in the United States. Thanks to cellphones, gangsters can transmit the cries, whimpers, and supplications of captives to the ears of horrified relatives.

#### *How Extortion Rackets Stretch Back to Central America*

**H**ow did extortion become such an industry, stretching all the way back to Central America? How do failed migrants coalesce into bands of predators? Democratization, unfortunately, is an important part of the story. In El Salvador and Guatemala, peace accords in the 1990s ended civil wars and strengthened civil liberties. In Mexico one-party rule by the Party of the Institutional Revolution ended in 2000. Longstanding partnerships between officials and mafias were destabilized by the new, more open regimes. There was more room for competition, and more civil liberties created more liberty to join gangs and attack other people without consequences.

Gang structures make sense for criminals because they fortify impunity—when a gangster is arrested, his cronies can intimidate or kill anyone who wants to help the police. Such organizations do not welcome enquiring minds, so they are quite a frontier for social researchers. One way of accessing gang killers is through prisons. In Latin America, prison authorities tend to have surprisingly little control over the daily lives of prisoners. And so outsiders are free to roam inside—

if they entrust their safety to inmates who can protect them.

That was the entrée for Anthony Fontes, an American University geographer who got inside Guatemalan prisons through gang-rehab organizations. Some of the prisoners and ex-prisoners he befriended were so beset by predicaments that they did not live to see publication of his writerly but gritty *Mortal Doubt: Transnational Gangs and Social Order in Guatemala City*.

The fallen include Andy, whose parents belonged to Barrio 18. After a Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) clique captured his neighborhood and executed his mother and uncle, it became his new family and turned him into a child killer, supposedly at the age of nine. His stories for Fontes included improbable exploits. But he did participate in gruesome publicity stunts such as MS-13's decapitation of four randomly chosen victims whose heads it placed around Guatemala's capital. After a dismembered woman turned up in a trash bag outside his house, he was arrested and became an informer for the Guatemalan justice system, only to be executed by his own gang soon after Fontes met him.

Are U.S. deportations to blame for the growth of Central American gangs? Famously, both MS-13 and its rival Barrio 18 originated in southern California. MS-13 was started by youth whose parents brought them north to escape the economic devastation of the Salvadoran civil war. When the Rodney King riots led to widespread looting in 1992, half the arrestees turned out to be Latinos—mainly young Central Americans. A national crime wave was putting U.S. voters in the mood for law and order, so the Federal government deported thousands of non-citizens, either convicted or suspected gang members, back to their countries of birth.

Simultaneously—but also coincident with the end of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan civil wars—youth gangs in these two countries plus Honduras became far more lethal than before. Many of the murders were committed in the name of “13” and “18”—that is, the gang topography of south-central Los Angeles. Interestingly, Fontes cites Salvadoran research that “less than 17 percent of gang youth [in El Salvador] had ever been to the United States, and less than 11 percent had even been gangsters when they lived there.” In Guatemala, he believes, the proportions of gang members deported from the United States “would have been even less.”

Sadly, the U.S. contribution to Central American gangdom is far wider than any particular policy that could be revoked. American dollars, consumption levels, and status symbols have become the standard by which Central Americans measure their personal wellbeing. The deficits are felt with special intensity by youth. For those whose only prospects are poverty wages, Fontes notes, a California brand “of deathless brotherhood and barrio pride” is ennobling. Gang-style clothing, body language, tattoos, and boasting are accessible even to low-income youth, and these are so glamorized by screen media that Fontes sometimes caught his sources claiming exploits from their favorite gang movie.

Extortion is how local cliques support themselves. It has become easier to commit now that throw-away cellphones can penetrate walls with deadly threats, coercing victims into a cash payment or bank wire. At first extortionists targeted the upper classes; as these hired private security firms, cellphone threats shifted to lower social classes who cannot afford to protect themselves but who, thanks

How the Migration Industry Fuels the Extortion Industry - The Am... <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2020/02/19/dangerous-bord...>  
to small businesses or remittances from relatives in the United States, have bank accounts that can be drained. Demands for protection payments (*renta*) are backed up by threats to kidnap, rape, or murder a victim's children.

Many extortionists recruit womenfolk—sisters, other relatives, neighbors—to hide weapons, collect payments and care for prisoners held for ransom. One Mother's Day, in a courtroom, Fontes observed two dozen women in handcuffs for extorting a bus company; none seemed to be denying the allegations. Extortion has become such a profitable industry that many threats no longer come from MS-13 and Barrio 18 cliques, but from pretenders exploiting their fearsome reputation to do the "*mara* [gang] masquerade."

The more credible threats require personal information of the kind that, if you did not carelessly post it to Facebook, only your relatives or neighbors are likely to know. And so extortion rackets undermine family as well as neighborhood relationships. As Fontes puts it:

the kin networks, neighbors and other gang associates through which the maras collect la renta make extortion far more than merely a brutal criminal business. . . . Rather, extortion constitutes a pivotal social relation in the communities where it has become entrenched. Residents survive by either taking part in or capitulating to the maras' rules, by either preying upon their community or being preyed upon.

Residential streets have been forced to become gated enclaves or organize self-defense committees, which can degenerate into lynch mobs or protection rackets of their own.

#### *Narco-Governmentality*

**B**order researchers seem to agree that tough-on-crime policies divert attention from what really drives extortion rackets and gang homicides—underlying structures of inequality that incentivize destructive behavior. In a collection called *The Shadow of the Wall: Violence and Migration on the U.S.-Mexico Border*, Slack and his colleagues argue that U.S. border enforcement has become a major driver of violence against unauthorized crossers. Their target is a system of escalating penalties for repeat offenders that U.S. authorities call the Consequence Delivery System (CDS). Interestingly, CDS was set in motion not by Donald Trump, but by the preceding Obama Administration.

For Slack and company, treating undocumented migrants as if they were criminals is like spreading fertilizer on gang networks: It makes them grow. Thus, for example, jailing labor migrants together with criminals is like enrolling them in crime college; it teaches them more criminal ways to achieve their goals. The broader problem is that, the higher the border wall, the higher the price that criminal organizations can charge. The higher the price, the higher the revenues available to corrupt officials, and the more potential there is for violent competition over the spoils.

If U.S. border enforcement has increased the profitability of breaking the law, would less border enforcement decrease the profitability? Slack and his colleagues think so. They want to decriminalize unauthorized border crossing, by decreasing the penalties for doing so, and they want to minimize the number of immigrants who are deported. Their recommendations do not include

Such policies would invert law-and-order populism, and they would be more plausible if only labor migration and drug addiction were at issue. But now that extortion is such a profitable industry, how can U.S. authorities extend a generous welcome to all and sundry while maintaining constant vigilance against any sign of gang affiliation?

Migrant advocates want freedom of movement for migrants, and they also want strong protection for them. But if freedom of movement requires limiting the sovereign right of states to exclude outsiders, protecting migrants requires strong police authority, including the right to verify identity claims, detain suspects for careful investigation, and exclude anyone who shows signs of being involved in predation. Waving through ambiguous cases, on the grounds that any migrant is innocent until proven guilty, will increase the number of predators disguising their identity.

After nine members of a Mormon family were murdered in November, President Trump threatened to classify the cartels as terrorist organizations. He is not the first to notice parallels between the two. Like the Islamic State, cartels stage gruesome displays to intimidate opponents, assert control of disputed territories, and turn these into zones where they can do anything they want.

One reason not to designate gangsters as terrorists is that this justifies military rather than police responses, with a higher level of force that injures a wider population. The danger is illustrated by Shaylih Muehlmann's ethnography of a Mexican village south of Tijuana and Mexicali. An anthropologist at the University of British Columbia, Muehlmann says that she wanted to avoid the drug wars by studying political ecology. Where she chose was a transportation corridor where the drug industry has become the most prestigious form of employment.

Traditional agriculture and ranching are in decline, with the main legal occupations being day-labor or border assembly plants. Not only does working as a narco pay better; it also incarnates the proud masculinity of northern Mexico. Muehlmann's friends see defiant narcos as national heroes in the mold of Pancho Villa, that is, as defenders of their country against the Behemoth of the North. Once one narco boss is captured and photographed in a Ralph Lauren polo shirt, seven others are arrested with the same trademark look, and Ralph Lauren polo shirts became all the rage in street stalls. When children play *narcos y federales* (their version of Cowboys and Indians), younger kids are forced to play federales as the side that always loses.

Narco-machismo is toxic masculinity, but this does not prevent women from aspiring to the power and glory of becoming a narco-wife. Thus the 18 year-old Isabella's attraction to the unremarkable Andrés, thanks to his new alligator boots and newly-minted status as a narco. Unfortunately for Andrés, after he disappears into prison, Isabella pursues other men, to the point of telling two different ones that she is carrying their baby when she's not even pregnant. Having raised money from both, she takes up with a truck driver who transports drugs.

Muehlmann's friends are not assassins—the men seem to be family-oriented even

if, in their increasing absence, households are becoming matrifocal. So much of the population is involved in organized crime, or closely related to those who are, that it is challenging to define its boundaries. The narco trade has become so influential as a source of prosperity that, Muehlmann argues, there is really no way to escape it. Hence the trucker who is so afraid of being busted as a “blind mule” (for a drug shipment placed on his rig without his knowledge) that he decides he might as well become a smuggler and get paid for it.

Like Muehlmann, Slack and his colleagues agree that figuring out who is and is not part of a cartel is not the critical question for social researchers. Networks of smugglers, enablers, enforcers, and law-enforcers are loose, with the roles of each individual multiple and subject to change. In *The Shadow of the Wall*'s most interesting chapter, Slack and his colleague Howard Campbell suggest that we look at cartel power in places like Muehlmann's village in terms of “narco-governmentality.”

What they mean, in a few words, is that controlling corridors and coopting (or outgunning) law enforcement leads to a system of illicit taxes and punishments in which cartels mimic some aspects of state governance. Unlike a revolutionary movement, Mexican cartels do not seek to overthrow the state or replace it with their own—all they want is lucrative co-existence. The result for the citizenry, Slack and Campbell conclude, is a “double jeopardy” in which they are beset by “two oppressive systems in collusion and conflict with each other,” and in which the illicit regime can become even more violent than the state it is mimicking.

Narco-governmentality is not the same as a narco-state. The cartels have been able to corrupt local, state, and federal officials, but they have never captured the Mexican state. Nor does narco-governmentality imply moral equivalence between the different contenders. Whatever the limitations of the Mexican, Guatemalan, and U.S. governments, and whatever abuses have been committed in their name, these are more accountable than a drug cartel. That is the silver lining when, for example, a gun battle between Guatemalan cops reveals that an elite police unit is extorting gang members for protection money. Thanks to successful blows against police corruption, as well as other less glamorous police and judicial reforms, Guatemala's homicide rate has dropped from a high of 45 homicides per 100,000 people in 2009 to 22 per 100,000 in 2018.

If the Democrats win control of the U.S. government in the November election, should they decriminalize border-crossing and drug smuggling? That will deprive cartels of the revenues they need to corrupt Mexican and U.S. officials, and it will un-trap large numbers of deportees and other migrants who are currently stuck in high-risk borderlands. Most of these individuals will move north, to a wide array of less violent U.S. destinations, and among them will be past and future predators.

If migrants have some kind of legal status, temporary or permanent, they will be more willing to cooperate with American police than undocumented migrants are. That is a solid argument for decriminalizing unauthorized border-crossing. But some migrants will be manipulating more than one identity—the United States has long been a destination for Central American fugitives from justice. This will add to the already powerful pressures in U.S. society for higher levels of surveillance and security. If the Mexican border tells us anything beyond partisan dispute, it is that welcoming more migrants will require more policing.



**David Stoll** is the author of *El Norte or Bust! How Migration Fever and Microcredit Produced a Financial Crash in a Latin American Town*. He teaches anthropology at Middlebury College.