

RISKS AND PROTECTION THROUGH THE MOST DANGEROUS ZONES ALONG TRANSIT MIGRATION ROUTES IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO



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INTRODUCTION

The increase in irregular migration in some of the main border corridors of Central America¹ and Mexico has been coupled with an increase in transit migration through areas where migrants are exposed to different dangers (IOM, 2022a), such as the use of unsafe means of transportation (MMP, 2022). This occurs due to fears of being detected while crossing borders, or because they consider it their only option in the absence of regular pathways to migrate in a safer way.

There are reports (IOM, 2022b; MMC, 2020; UPMRIP, 2022a) of migrants who, while transiting these areas, have been exposed to exploitation, physical or sexual violence, extortion, human trafficking, kidnappings, disappearances and forced recruitment into organized crime groups among other dangerous situations. According to data from the [Missing Migrants Project](#) (MMP) of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), between January 2022 and May 2023, 368 migrants have been reported missing or dead, many at dangerous locations along the migration route in Central America and Mexico (MMP, 2023).

In addition to the aforementioned situations, risk factors to which migrants are exposed in dangerous zones may intensify due to the challenges and limitations of the protection services operating in such areas (IOM, 2022b; REDLAC, 2022). In this regard, the governments of Central America and Mexico have acknowledged the need to provide protection² and services that guarantee the physical, legal and emotional safety of migrants in vulnerable situations, particularly unaccompanied and/or separated minors, pregnant women, LGBTIQ+ persons, refugees or asylum-seekers, as well as extraregional migrants (RCM, 2021).

Moreover, government authorities show growing interest in identifying and minimizing the risks faced by migrants in transit as part of their efforts to comply with international commitments such as the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs),³ goals 1, 7 and 8 of the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#), and the [Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection](#).

In order to support the governments of the region to produce information and identify courses of action for the protection of migrants, IOM, with the support of the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration of the U.S. Department of State (PRM), conducted this study. Its findings will contribute to analyse and adjust policies and actions aimed at protecting migrants in transit through the Member Countries of the Regional Conference on Migration, contributing to the fulfilment of the [Strategic Plan of the Regional Conference on Migration 2023–2026](#), specifically by strengthening coordination among Member States for the assistance, care and protection of migrants in vulnerable situations (RCM, 2022).



¹ For the purpose of this study, Central America includes Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama.

² According to IOM, protection services are a set of activities aimed at achieving full respect for the rights of individuals, in accordance with the spirit of the law and its relevant branches (i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law, and refugee law) (IOM, 2021).

³ Specifically, it contributes to achieving targets 1.3, 1.4, 1.5, 3.7, 3.8, 5.2, 8.7, 10.7, 10.7.3, 16.1, 16.2, 16.5 and 17.18.



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SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



The most dangerous zones for migrants in transit are located in Panama and Mexico, including the Darién province and the states of Baja California, Chiapas, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas.



Insecurity and the presence of organized criminal groups are the danger factors most frequently reported by migrants in transit.



Buses and cargo trucks are the most dangerous means of transport, followed by skiffs or non-powered boats, and trains or railroads.



Accidents along the routes are the most recurrent risks associated with means of transport.



The main protection services accessed by migrants in dangerous zones are shelter, food and medical care.



Civil society organizations and some United Nations agencies are the entities that provide most of the protection services in these zones, many operating beyond their capacities and under hazardous conditions.



Being a woman and travelling alone increase vulnerability to sexual violence in Central American migration routes. Unaccompanied children and adolescents may be exposed to forced recruitment by organized crime groups.



At least 20 per cent of surveyed migrants reported not having access to any type of protection services in the dangerous zones identified.



The presence of government authorities responsible for providing security and protection in these zones is scarce.

METHODOLOGY



The objective of this study was to identify the zones in Central America and Mexico characterized by a significant combination of risks that increase the vulnerability of migrants in transit, and that lack sufficient protective factors and services. Furthermore, it offers recommendations to mitigate these risk factors and facilitate the implementation of protection measures, enhancing resilience through comprehensive, sustainable, and well-executed programmatic responses.

SECONDARY DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Desk reviews: This included a review of bibliographic and technical documents on the risks faced by migrants in transit, as well as on the protection services available along the routes; all of these publications were released between 2019 and 2023. Documents from governments, academia and international organizations, were also consulted, including IOM's [Displacement Tracking Matrix \(DTM\)](#) reports conducted between 2021 and 2023.

Delimitation of danger factors : The determination of danger factors relied on specialized reports and technical studies from international agencies, governments and civil society organizations. These reports and studies focused on the dangers and risks encountered by migrants in transit. Accordingly, the following factors were identified: presence of organized criminal groups, abuses of authority, missing/deceased migrants, smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons, challenging geography and transportation accidents.

PRIMARY DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders:

A total of 74 semi-structured remote and face-to-face interviews were conducted with representatives of governments, international organizations and civil society.

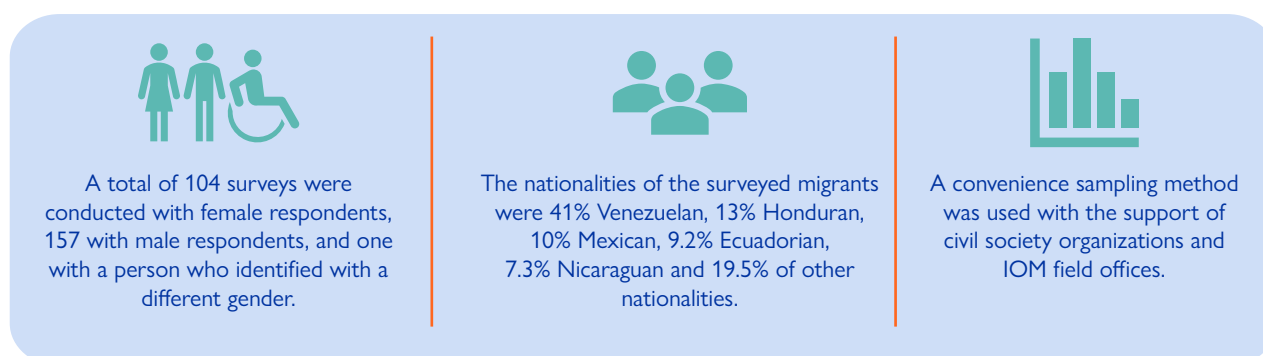
Focus group with representatives from migrant shelters:

A focus group was held in the municipality of Trojes in Honduras with personnel from shelters for migrants in transit. They provided information on the hazardous and dangerous situations experienced by said population as well as on their specific protection needs.

Surveys for migrants in transit:

During the first quarter of 2023, 262 surveys were conducted with migrants in transit in Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Panama. The objective was to identify the dangers and crimes perceived during transit, their needs and the available protection services. In order to facilitate quantitative analysis, the survey used closed-ended questions. Information from 757 DTM surveys in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Panama conducted in the first quarter of 2023 was also collected.

Figure 1. Description of the sample and the sampling technique used in the survey of migrants in transit



Source: Own elaboration based on information from surveys with migrants.

Review and analysis of missing/deceased migrant databases: To expand the information on disappearances or deaths⁴ of migrants in transit, 1,018 records of such events occurring between January 2018 and May 2023 were analysed from IOM's [Missing Migrants Project database](#).

METHODS FOR THE CARTOGRAPHY OF DANGEROUS ZONES

The cartography of dangerous zones was carried out by means of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) based on the following data: (a) crime and hazard statistics with periods from 2021 to 2023; and (b) surveys with migrants in transit, data collected by the DTMs and the [Missing Migrants Project](#) database. These data were systematized using spatial scales of the first administrative level (departments, states and provinces, as appropriate) for Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Panama.

The data were standardized and regrouped according to the previously defined danger factors. Finally, the weighted overlay method to create integrated analysis was used to perform a multicriteria analysis. This resulted in the generation of a graduated symbology map where zones are visualized according to a four-class danger index (low, moderate, high and very high). In order to validate the findings of the danger zone cartography, 11 interviews were conducted with national IOM experts, and information from the 74 stakeholder interviews was used as an additional variable called “expert judgment”.

VALIDATION OF RESULTS

The primary data collected in the interviews were validated with the interviewees. The cartography and the final report were validated with regional specialists and IOM country offices. Moreover, recommendations stemmed from consultations with the Member Countries of the Regional Conference on Migration in July 2023.

LIMITATIONS

- The following factors affected the data collection process for the construction of the cartography: (a) official data on the incidence of criminal activities differ across countries in terms of timing and methodology; (b) some official figures, such as those related to crime events, are not exclusive to migrants; and (c) some variables had information gaps, which generated biases that were mitigated by contrasting the information and the qualitative analysis of the study.
- The determination of the most dangerous zones at the regional level is the result of the weighted overlay process and its comparison with key informant interviews.
- The sample used for the survey is not representative, so the results cannot be generalized. The data allow for the identification and geo-referencing of the dangers detected by surveyed migrants at a specific moment in time.
- The analysis of protection services should not be considered exhaustive as the information available is not always up to date or is limited in terms of location and contact information.

⁴ Given the fact that bodies of missing migrants are not consistently recovered, and deaths may go unreported to authorities, the Missing Migrants Project adopts a methodology where disappearances and deaths are treated as comparable records in the project databases.

Map 1. Danger zones and main transit routes in Central America and México, according to danger level



Source: 1. Base map prepared with resources from United Nations World Map, DIVA GIS and HDX.

2. Cartographic analysis based on primary and secondary data collected during the research process (see methodology section for further detail).

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

MOST DANGEROUS ZONES IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

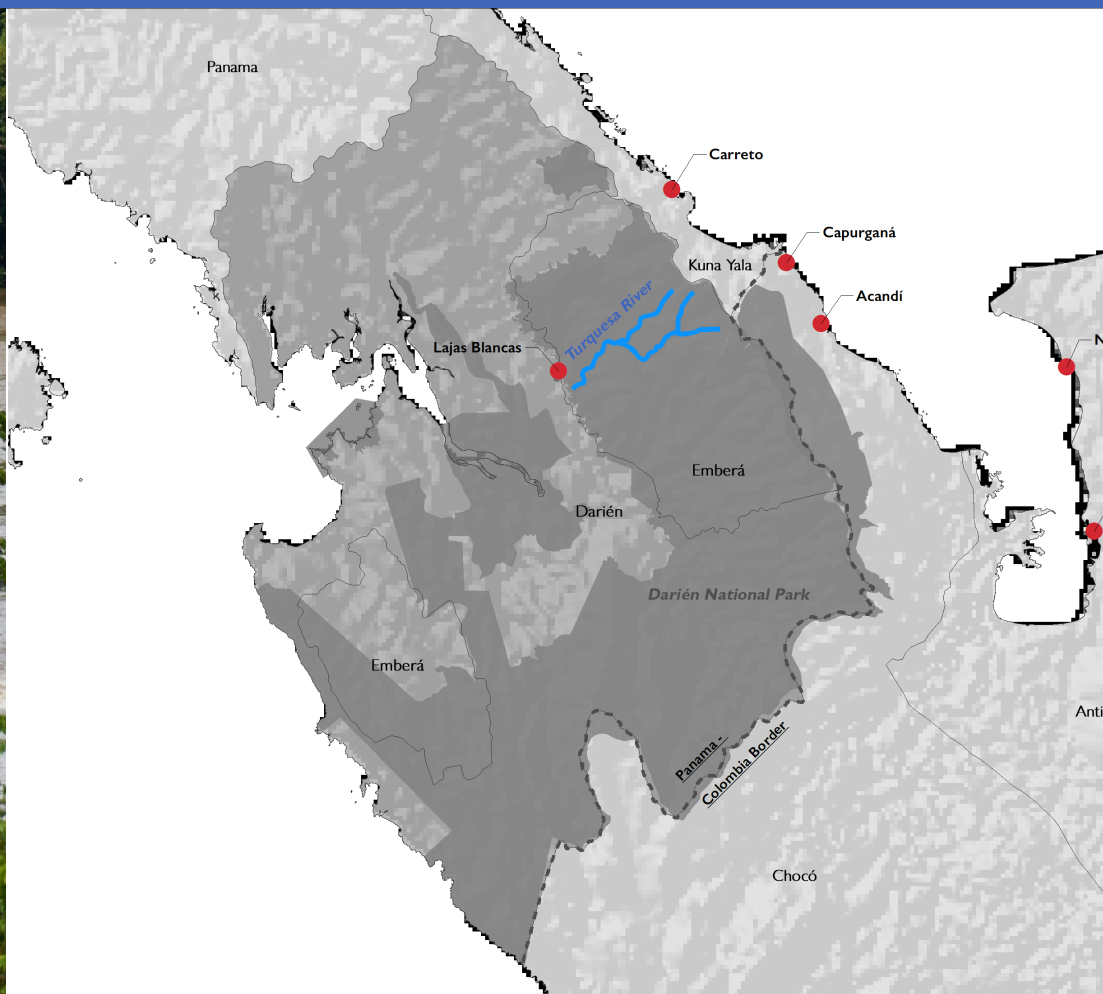
The following section describes the eight most dangerous zones identified in the transit migration route through Central America and Mexico. Some zones are considered danger clusters encompassing neighbouring territories with similar characteristics. The section lists the zones categorized as “High” or “Very High” danger from south to north, starting at the southern border of Panama and finishing at the northern border of Mexico.



DARIÉN NACIONAL PARK (PANAMA)



MIGRANT PERSONS. DARIÉN, PANAMA.
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Source: Base map prepared with resources from United Nations World Map, DIVA GIS and HDX.

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CONTEXT AND ROUTES

According to Panama's National Migration Service (SNM for its acronym in Spanish), between January and June 2023, at least 196,371 irregular migrants arrived in the country, mainly from the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Haiti and Ecuador (IOM, 2023a). Most of them transit through the Darién National Park, located along the border between Colombia and Panama, covering more than 575,000 hectares and connecting South and Central America (FIP and GI-TOC, 2022; United Nations, 2023). The Darién is a very humid and hot region, with temperatures ranging from 17° to 35°C (59° to 95°F), fast-flowing rivers, steep trails and a lack of potable water. From May to December, there is usually heavy rainfall, resulting in increased river flows and making Darién National Park one of the wettest places in the world (OAS, n.d.).

Two main routes used by irregular migrants crossing the Darién National Park were identified here:

1. The most frequented route begins in Necoclí or Turbo in Antioquia (Colombia) where migrants take boats to the municipality of Acaandí (also in Colombia). From this second point, they walk for approximately three to six days to reach the border with Panama, where they board informal boats to the Bajo Chiquito community in the Emberá Wounaan region. From there, people may choose to walk to the Migrant Receiving Station (MRS) in Lajas Blancas or take a boat during the rainy season (MPI, 2023; FIP and GI-TOC, 2022).
2. A second route begins in Capurganá (Colombia) and heads towards Carreto (Panama). Once there, migrants walk for approximately four days to Canaán Membrillo in the Emberá Wounaan comarca (Panama) to take a second boat to the National Border Service (SENAFRONT for its acronym in Spanish), and from there, to the MRS (ibid.). According to semi-structured interviews, this route is less frequent due to its high cost, between 400 and 1,500 United States dollars per person (IOM, forthcoming).

RISK FACTORS

According to the data collected, Darién National Park is one of the most dangerous zones in Central America and Mexico for migrants in transit, especially because of challenging geography, strong river currents, abrupt climate changes (including heavy rainfall during the rainy season), and the prevalence of wildlife, all of which has been linked to numerous deaths and disappearances (FIP and GI-TOC, 2022; Ocando, 2022). Regardless of which route migrants choose, those transiting this zone often face food and drinking water shortages (MPI, 2023). Regarding this matter, the [Missing Migrants Project](#) (MMP) has documented 82 migrant deaths from January 2021 to May 2023.⁵ Of this total, at least 50 per cent are attributed to complications linked with the geographical challenges or drowning incidents caused by river flows, especially in the Turquesa River (MMP, 2023).

Additionally, individuals involved in the smuggling of migrants (SoM) have settled at key points along these two routes to expand their operations in Darién National Park (FIP and GI-TOC, 2022). This is one of the reasons of the absence of safety reported by migrants, which is linked to acts of violence and scams perpetrated by groups affiliated with the SoM and criminal organizations operating in Colombia (especially the Gulf Clan). Key informants also highlighted that, in communities inside the Darién National Park, such as Bajo Chiquito, risk factors may be exacerbated by the exhaustion experienced by migrants, as well as by the presence of local residents seeking to take advantage of migrants in vulnerable situations (IOM, 2023b; Associated Press, 2023; AFP, 2021).

A recent IOM study identified Bajo Chiquito as one of the communities whose economy revolves around the irregular migration through its territory (IOM 2023b). Furthermore, SoM networks have been documented to coerce migrants into paying for goods and services leading to high levels of gender-based violence, kidnappings, assaults and extortion (FIP and GI-TOC, 2022; Ocando, 2022; United Nations, 2023; Doctors Without Borders, 2022).

⁵ According to the Missing Migrants Project (MMP) and the semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, this data is an underestimation of reality as there are significant methodological and logistical difficulties in recovering the remains of missing or deceased migrants in Darién National Park.

“We almost went crazy in the jungle; nobody told us where we were going, just walking and walking without ever seeing an end, and finding horrible things like dead bodies. The thirst killed us; there was no water, and we couldn’t drink from the river.”





Louis (pseudonym), Haitian migrant.

Upon leaving the Darién National Park, migrants find themselves in situations of extreme vulnerability due to the hazardous conditions to which they have been exposed and their journey’s physical and emotional demands (AFP, 2021).

ASSISTANCE AND PROTECTION SERVICES

Despite the collaborative efforts of the Panamanian Government with non-governmental organizations and international agencies, some of the migrants who cross the Darién lack timely access to protection services. Of the total number of respondents who pointed to Darién National Park as one of the most dangerous zones in Central America and Mexico (80 out of a sample of 262), at least 21 per cent did not have access to any type of protection service.

Figure 2. Risks, needs and protection measures in Darién National Park

			
DANGEROUS MEANS OF TRANSPORT	POPULATIONS IN SITUATION OF VULNERABILITY	MAIN PROTECTION NEEDS	PROTECTION SERVICE GOOD PRACTICE
<p>In this zone, boats are the most dangerous means of transportation; they are vulnerable to accidents due to overcrowding (mainly overturning) and lack of maintenance. In some cases, such accidents have resulted in fatalities.</p>	<p>Pregnant women and young children (zero to five years old) face the greatest risk of physical/sexual violence perpetrated by criminal groups. They may also face greater physical and psychological effects due to the demanding journey.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food, including access to potable water. • Shelter. • Medical care (ailments, injuries generated during the trip and chronic diseases). • Psychological care for problems associated with anxiety, depression and acute stress. 	<p>Migrant Receiving Stations (MRS): Stations of the Panamanian Government where international agencies, in cooperation with civil society organizations, provide information, basic health care, shelter and food.</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

PUNTARENAS AND ALAJUELA PROVINCES (COSTA RICA)



OFFICIAL BORDER CROSSING POINT
"LAS TABLILLAS," LOS CHILES, ALAJUELA,
COSTA RICA. © IOM 2023



Source: Base map prepared with resources from [United Nations World Map](#), [DIVA GIS](#) and [HDX](#).

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CONTEXT AND ROUTES

Puntarenas is one of the two southern provinces in Costa Rica that border Panama. The main point of entry into Costa Rica for migrants transiting through Panama and the Darién National Park is located here, specifically at the Paso Canoas border crossing point. After this location, the land migration route continues to the northern border of the country, specifically to the province of Alajuela (AFP, 2023), with the most frequented crossing point being Las Tablillas in Los Chiles (IOM, 2022c).

Home to both Costa Rican and Panamanian populations, Paso Canoas is a cross-border urban settlement. Its main economic activity is commerce, and most people transit this point by land, either by bus or in their own vehicles (Núñez, 2016). Transit to the country's northern border usually takes place in this same manner.

Los Chiles canton has a predominantly rural dynamic and is home to extensive land dedicated to agriculture and livestock. This region is home to the San Juan River, where at least 51 irregular crossing points into Nicaragua have been identified, including sites such as La Trocha or El Naranjal (Obrera de la Tecla, 2020). Migrants crossing through this point do so on foot, using motorcycles or private vehicles to move across agricultural farms for approximately two to three hours. They then board boats to cross the San Juan River and access Nicaraguan territory (ibid.). At the Costa Rican northern border, there are also migrant inflows, mainly from Nicaraguan workers engaged in agricultural, livestock and construction activities (IOM, 2023c).

RISK FACTORS

According to the collected data, Paso Canoas (in Puntarenas) and Los Chiles (in Alajuela) are very dangerous zones for migrants in transit. Although both are part of the same land route to North America, each one poses different risks. In Paso Canoas, there is a notable lack of protection services for migrants in transit, especially shelters for stranded migrants who do not have the economic resources to continue their journey to northern Costa Rica (AFP, 2023). According to IOM data, from January to July 2023, 21,471 people were stranded in public places and shelters in the southern zone of the country (IOM,

2023c). People located in public spaces have been reported to be victims of robbery or physical violence. Furthermore, they frequently face discrimination from local residents (AFP, 2023).

As a result, many people who made the journey through the Darién National Park and who have significant protection needs are unable to access assistance services, aggravating their vulnerable situation. In this regard, the Government of Costa Rica has reported that most people stranded in this area suffer from ailments such as gastroenteritis, respiratory problems and joint pain (Government of Costa Rica, 2023; Pomareda, 2023).

Meanwhile, interviewees who continued their transit to the northern border of Costa Rica reported various risks associated with the prevalence of SoM networks, such as robberies, scams and physical violence. Key stakeholders indicated that, in the Los Chiles area, smugglers coerce and intimidate public and private bus drivers to make unauthorized stops to board migrants and convince them to continue their journey using their services.

"A week ago, there was a death on the road as a result of the high speeds at which people involved in facilitating irregular migrant crossings drive their cars. Many people have already died because of these accidents. They drive at high speeds to avoid detection by the authorities".

Excerpt from interview with government representative.

SoM networks also conduct irregular crossings in private vehicles and motorcycles. These take place through unofficial crossing points at high speeds and late at night to avoid detection by immigration authorities. Between July and August 2023, at least three road accidents related to the high speeds of such vehicles were reported, resulting in approximately 133 injuries and three deaths of migrants, mainly Venezuelan nationals (Villanueva, 2023; Cabezas, 2023; Soto, 2023).

Another risk associated with these criminal networks is the use of stash houses to hide migrants, where migrants report experiencing violence and overcrowding.

PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE SERVICES

As mentioned before, there are significant gaps in the Paso Canoas zone in terms of addressing the protection needs of migrants in transit. Furthermore, the protection needs not addressed at Darién National Park or Paso Canoas persist and worsen when migrants continue their journey to the northern border.

In these zones, civil society organizations and international agencies provide food services and hygiene items, but they work at overcapacity while the presence of government authorities and institutions responsible for providing security, shelter, health and food services is scarce (IOM, 2023c). In both places, the absence of shelters has forced migrants, including children and adolescents, to remain in public areas such as parks or bus terminals.

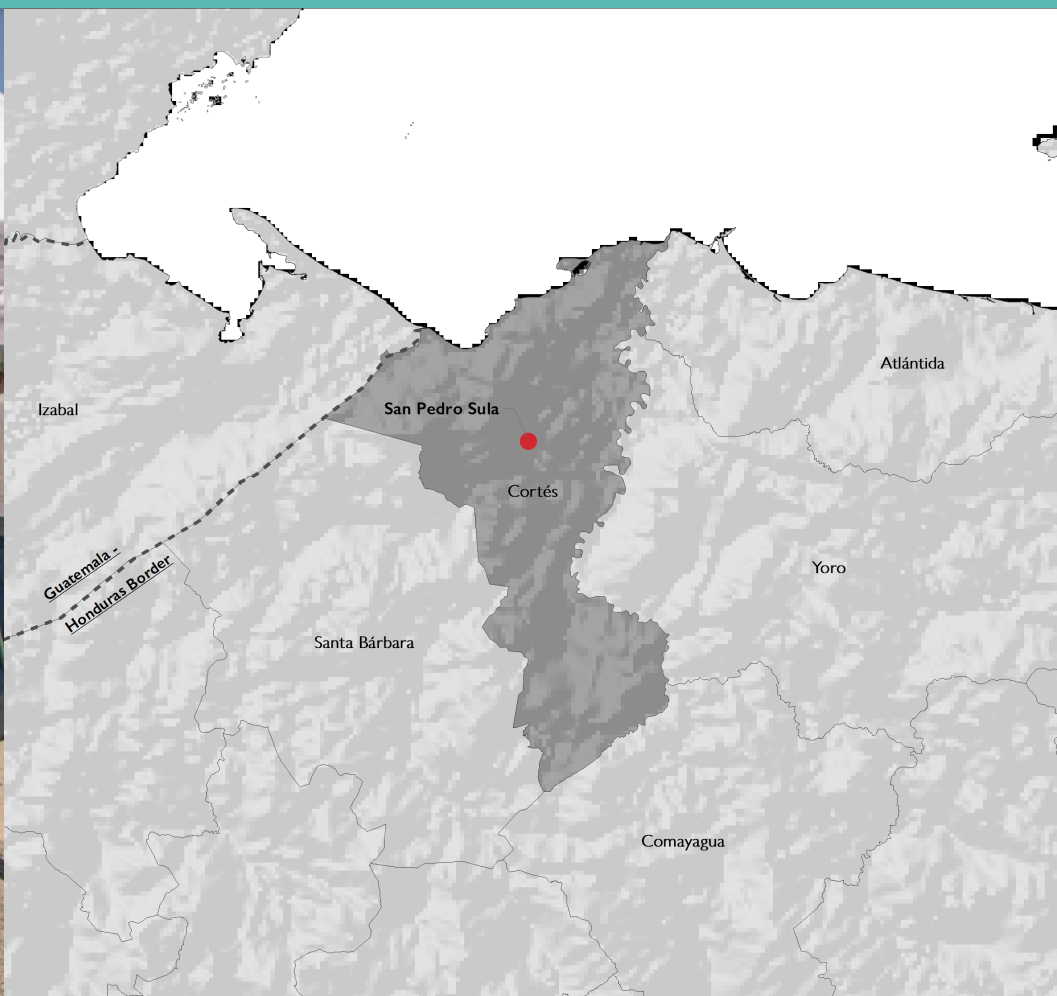
Figure 3. Risks, needs and protection measures in Alajuela and Puntarenas

			
DANGEROUS MEANS OF TRANSPORT	POPULATIONS IN SITUATION OF VULNERABILITY	MAIN PROTECTION NEEDS	PROTECTION SERVICE GOOD PRACTICE
<p>In this zone, cars (informal taxis) and buses are the most dangerous means of transportation. They are responsible for multiple traffic accidents due to excessive speed. Private automobiles are also used, mostly for SoM.</p>	<p>Women (mainly pregnant ones) and children and adolescents who arrive with unsatisfied protection needs from crossing the Darién National Park.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelter (there are not any formal shelters). • Food. • Medical care for illnesses and injuries resulting from the journey, which people carry over from Darién National Park. 	<p>Mano Amiga Community Dining Room: Non-profit civil society group that provides food to migrants staying at the bus terminal in Los Chiles at night.</p>

Source: Own elaboration.



DEPARTMENT OF CORTÉS (HONDURAS)



Source: Base map prepared with resources from [United Nations World Map](#), [DIVA GIS](#) and [HDX](#).

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CONTEXT AND ROUTES

The department of Cortés is located in north-western Honduras, bordered to the north by Guatemala, to the east by the Caribbean Sea and to the south by the interior of the country. Its departmental capital is San Pedro Sula, and its surroundings feature large rural areas dedicated mainly to agriculture (Becerra, 2021). The large tracts of agricultural land mean that migrants must travel long distances on foot without access to basic care and protection services.

The Corinto border crossing is located on the border between Cortés and Guatemala (Government of Honduras, 2023). This location is known to be a focal point for massive flows of migrants heading to North America (Gordon, 2022; Pérez, 2020). From there, migrants travel to the zones of Izabal and Petén in Guatemala and then on to El Ceibo, El Naranjo and La Técnica-Bethel, which border the states of Tabasco and Chiapas in Mexico (REDLAC, 2020). This is known as the “Honduran route” as most of the people who cross it come from Honduras and travel by bus and on foot.

Four types of cross-border movements have been identified at this border point: Honduran economic migrants, internally displaced Hondurans, Honduran returnees and transit migrants with other nationalities (Brewer et al., 2022).

“Corinto is dangerous because they rob and extort migrants along the border; they charge them money to travel freely on buses, otherwise they are forced to get off, robbed and beaten.”

Excerpt from an interview with a civil society organization.

RISK FACTORS

Migrants surveyed and key stakeholders interviewed indicated that Corinto is the scene of multiple crimes against migrants, including abuse of authority, robbery, physical violence and extortion. Two criminal groups have been identified in this area: the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the Barrio 18 gangs. These groups focus on drug and arms trafficking to Izabal and Petén, in Guatemala.




Moreover, these groups have been fighting each other for control of the territory of Corinto, seeking to expand the scope of their operations into Izabal (Insight Crime, 2021a and 2021b). Given that Izabal is a key transit point for migrants, the increased presence of these criminal groups could significantly exacerbate the danger in this zone. According to interviewees, these criminal groups coerce and trick transit migrants into smuggling drugs across international borders.

PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE SERVICE

This zone, known for the convergence of migration flows, also stands out as a point of convergence for multiple protection and assistance needs. Due to the rural nature of the territory, migrants often have to walk at least 15 kilometers to obtain assistance and protection services such as medical care and food (Becerra, 2021).

Civil society organizations are the main entities providing assistance services in the area, and have reported a significant demand for general health and psychosocial care services, particularly for children and adolescents migrating from South America.

Figure 4. Risks, needs and protection measures in Cortés

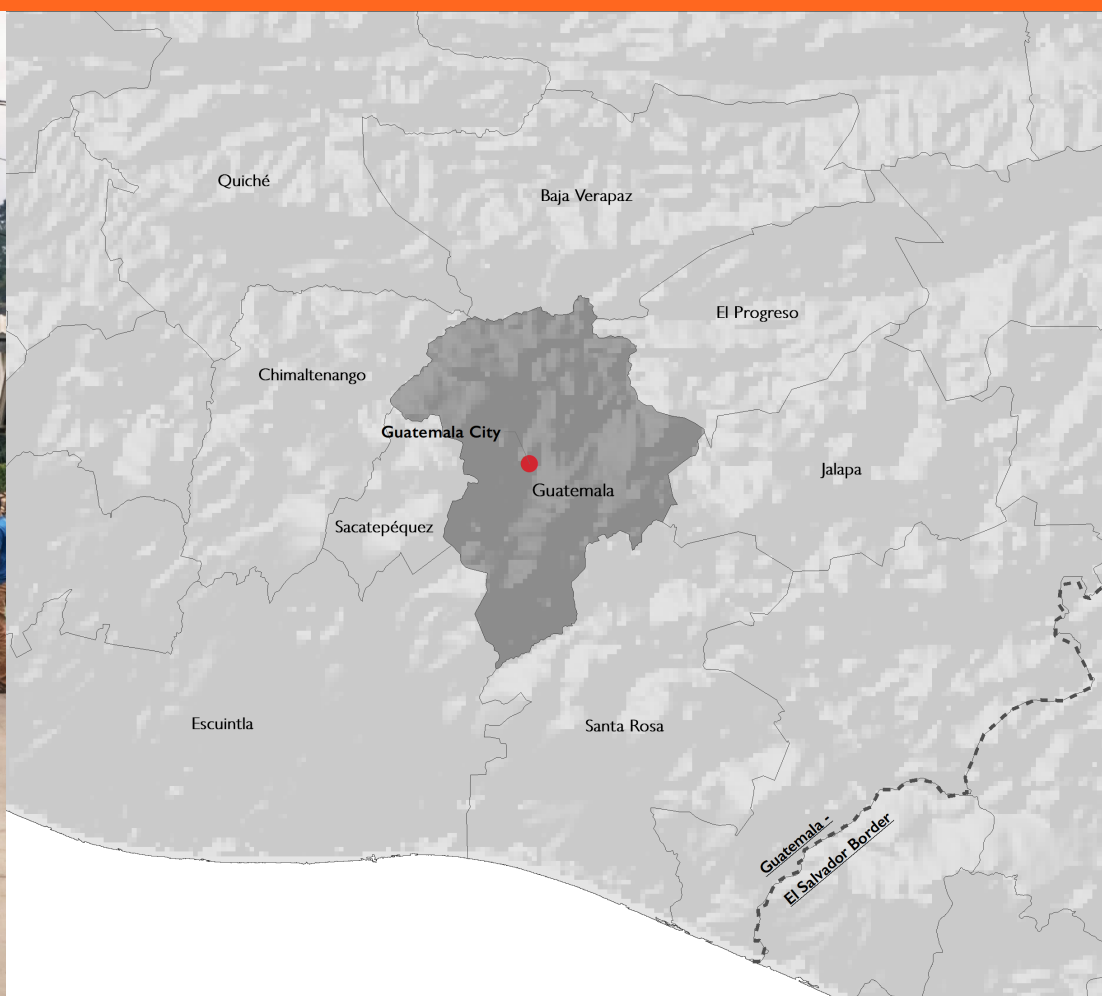
			
DANGEROUS MEANS OF TRANSPORT	POPULATIONS IN SITUATION OF VULNERABILITY	MAIN PROTECTION NEEDS	PROTECTION SERVICE GOOD PRACTICE
<p>As many people walk this route, they are exposed to adverse weather conditions and a lack of protection services. Buses are dangerous means of transportation where several migrants reported facing extortion by organized crime.</p>	<p>Migrants travelling alone are more vulnerable to organized crime and to being extorted. Other at-risk populations include children and adolescents, LGBTIQ+ migrants and migrants with disabilities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shelters (the shelters are separated by long distances between San Pedro Sula and Izabal, Guatemala). • General health and psychosocial care for migrants in transit, especially children and adolescents. • Food, clothing and hygiene items. 	<p>Irregular Migrant Attention Centres (CAMI for its acronym in Spanish): Protection service stations for irregular migrants in transit. They provide services such as information on immigration procedures, basic medical care and food. There are three of them located in San Pedro Sula, Tegucigalpa and Danlí.</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

DEPARTMENT OF GUATEMALA (GUATEMALA)



PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION TO GUATEMALA CITY. © IOM 2023



Source: Base map prepared with resources from [United Nations World Map](#), [DIVA GIS](#) and [HDX](#).

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CONTEXT AND ROUTES

The department of Guatemala is the most densely populated region of Guatemala, it has a territorial extension of 2,253 square kilometers and is home to Guatemala City, the urban settlement that serves as the country's capital. The Department also has the highest crime rates in Guatemala; according to data from the National Civil Police (PNC for its acronym in Spanish), in 2021 it accounted for 50.35 per cent of the total number of robberies registered nationwide, as well for 44.68 per cent of the total number of extortion complaints (Government of Guatemala, 2023).

The location of Guatemala City is strategic for migrants in transit because it is one of the main points of convergence of land migration routes to North America. There are two land routes that pass through this area:

1. One that departs from Agua Caliente (Honduras) and Chiquimula (Guatemala) to San Marcos or Huehuetenango (Guatemala).
2. The second one starts at the borders with El Salvador (specifically in the towns of Las Chinamas, La Hachadura and San Cristobal) and Honduras (departing from Esquipulas) with destination towards Huehuetenango (Guatemala) (REDLAC, 2020; UNODC, 2018).

RISK FACTORS

According to migrants surveyed and other reports (Dalby, 2019; MMC, 2020; REDLAC, 2020), Guatemala City is one of the most dangerous places for migrants in transit due to the presence of criminal gangs. According to a study by the Mixed Migration Centre (2020), these groups increase the risk of migrants suffering physical aggression as well as being victims of theft, extortion, intimidation (mainly through physical violence) or deception. Surveys show that these groups position themselves outside shelters, hotels and guesthouses where they coerce migrants into joining criminal networks or demand fees to release them and allow them to continue their transit.

"They take advantage of people's needs. There is a lot of recruitment around the migrant houses and guesthouses. There, they offer work to migrants. In some cases, these same people want to engage in trafficking and sexual violence against migrant women and children."

Excerpt from an interview with a civil society organization.

Interviewees confirmed that, in this context, those most at risk are migrant children and adolescents. Boys are separated from their families and recruited to work with these criminal groups, while girls are at risk of being coerced into trafficking for sexual exploitation or forced labour in Guatemala or in neighbouring countries (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Additionally, families face significant risks of being kidnapped by organized crime groups, which capture them at bus terminals and subsequently request payments to allow their release.

In general, bus terminals from border routes were identified as high-risk zones. In 2022, at least 400 migrants reported being victims of excessive charges from people offering transportation services in this department (EFE, 2022a).

Abuse of authority is another important risk factor. According to data from the United Nations (2019), the Mixed Migration Centre (2020) and interviews with government and civil informants, there exist reports of government authorities participating in kidnappings, extortion, robberies and even using force during capture. In addition, testimonies

"Part of the criminal structure that we have identified as facilitating the smuggling of migrants are Guatemalan police. These officers go to the airport to facilitate the smuggling of migrants and help them evade immigration control (...), they charge 500 or 1,000 dollars to facilitate the crossing."

Excerpt from an interview with a government representative.

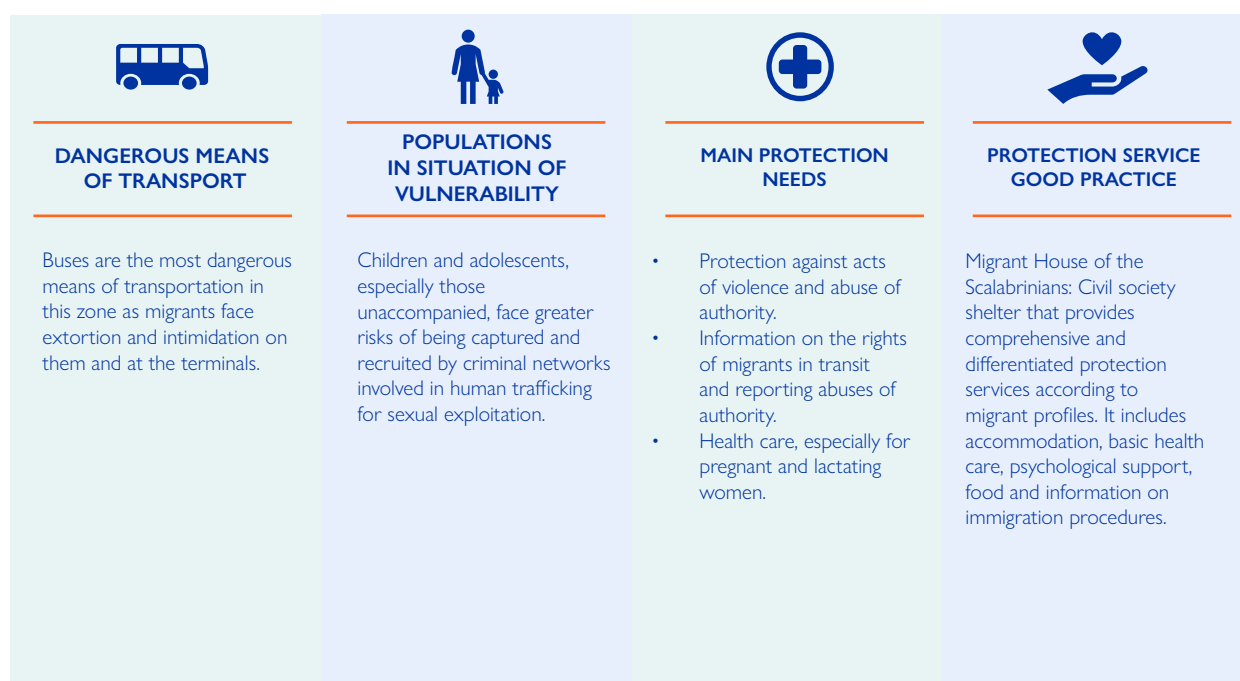
from civil society organizations, government representatives and surveyed migrants indicate that some government officials have been involved in smuggling operations (see quote from interview with government representative). Although this information was reported by several sources, it is considered anecdotal since there are no official corroborating data.

In addition, given that insecurity is an important risk factor in this department, it is necessary to strengthen the institutional framework for the establishment of protection and reporting mechanisms accessible to migrants regardless of their immigration status.

PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE SERVICES

According to data from IOM Migrantinfo (2023), this department has the largest number of governmental and civil society institutions providing care to migrants in transit through the country. However, key informants reported that these are insufficient to meet the high demand, particularly for shelter, and the migrants surveyed stated that they did not have clear information on the availability and accessibility of these protection services.

Figure 5. Risks, needs and protection measures in Guatemala

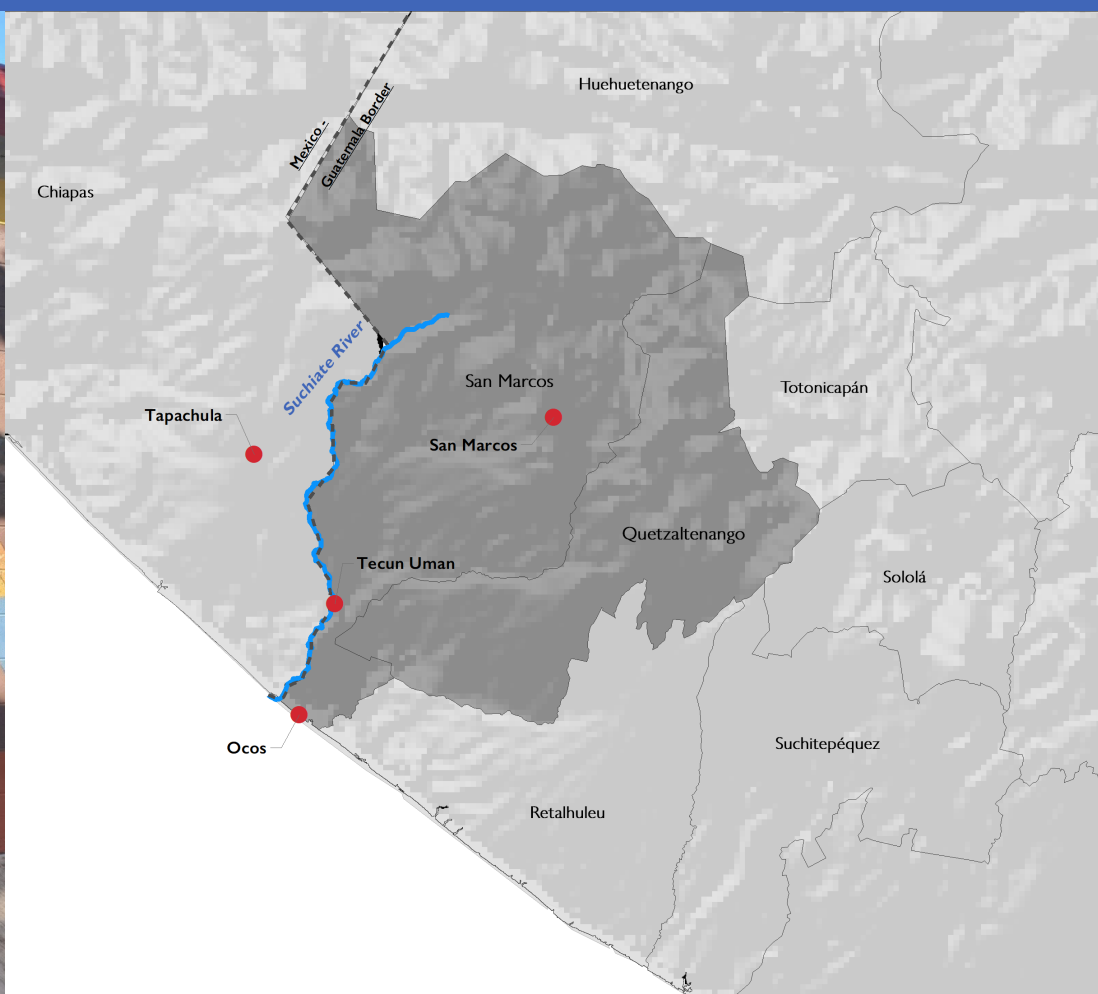


Source: Own elaboration.

DEPARTMENTS OF SAN MARCOS AND QUETZALTENANGO (GUATEMALA)



EXTORTION AND ORGANIZED CRIME
MURAL, GUATEMALA. © IOM 2023



Source: Base map prepared with resources from United Nations World Map, DIVA GIS and HDX.

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CONTEXT AND ROUTES

The neighbouring departments of Quetzaltenango and San Marcos are located along the border area near the state of Chiapas and the municipality of Tapachula (Mexico). Due to their strategic position, they have become two of the main transit points for migrants seeking to reach North America (EFE, 2023; Espina, 2023), as well as strategic points for trade in goods and services (Government of Guatemala, 2019).

The city of Tecún Umán is located in the department of San Marcos, which receives migrants from multiple migration routes from the interior of the country, as well as from other countries in northern Central America (REDLAC, 2020). Due to the high flow of migrants transiting through these two departments, migrant smuggling networks offering to facilitate transit through Mexico and reach the border with the United States of America have been detected in these areas (IOM, 2022d; Espina, 2023). In addition, at the San Marcos - Tapachula border, the Suchiate River strongly influences migration flows. Crossings at this natural border take place either on handmade rafts or on foot when there is no money to pay for the rafting. The boats are built with truck tires and wood, making them unsuitable for transporting people (Red Cross, n.d.; Semple and Malkin, 2018; Sherman, 2019).

Quetzaltenango is one of the main urban settlements in Guatemala. It is one of the municipalities with the highest number of migrant returnees and with the highest homicide rates (REDLAC, 2020). Different migration flows converge in this zone while various organized crime networks, including human trafficking and smuggling networks, have been identified (IOM, 2022d).

RISK FACTORS

In Tecún Umán, the expense of hiring smugglers is linked to their ability to facilitate illegal border crossings across the Suchiate River. The risk and cost of the journey depend significantly on the river's flow dynamics. According to interviews, there are several dangers associated with the use of this route, including robbery, threats and abandonment (Espina, 2023; Sherman, 2019).

In the municipality of Ocos in San Marcos, there is also a large influx of smugglers, largely because the route is also used for drug smuggling (ibid.). According to secondary data, the beach in this town is home to organized crime groups dedicated to transferring migrants to Mexico, where they continue their overland journey to the United States of America (ibid.). Key informants and different reports indicate that this boat passage is one of the most dangerous points on the Pacific maritime route, due to overcrowding, poor boat conditions and maritime conditions. Multiple accidents have been reported, such as capsizing of rafts and even the death of migrants by drowning (IOM, 2022d; MMP, 2023).

Also in Quetzaltenango, migrants who hire services related to smuggling operations, especially migrant children and adolescents, LGBTIQ+ or extraregional populations, face greater risks of being deceived about the distances and dangers along the migration route (IOM, 2022d).

Similar to the dangers reported in the department of Guatemala, there are cases in San Marcos and Quetzaltenango where government authorities maintain ties with SoM operations, engaging in kidnappings and even facilitating irregular border crossings. In the case of San Marcos, migrants and secondary sources indicate that dangers are also associated with abuses of authority (United Nations, 2019); there are reports of Guatemalan authorities charging unofficial fees and carrying out arbitrary detentions (Barreno, 2022; United Nations, 2019). There is no data to corroborate these cases; however, the anecdotal information collected points to the possible occurrence of this danger factor.

PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE SERVICES





Most of the protection services in this zone are centralized in Tecún Umán, where shelters have been operating over capacity since 2020 (Díaz, 2021). This means that migrants have to spend the night in public areas and bus terminals. In addition, there are no initiatives to facilitate access to food and drinking water in these areas.

Furthermore, migrants reported a lack of information on the available mechanisms available to report crimes committed by organized crime groups or the abuses of authority they have experienced.

Quetzaltenango is home to the Centre for Attention to Migrants and Refugees (CAPMiR for its Spanish acronym). Established as an effort by the Government and various United Nations organizations, the CAPMiR provides information to migrants in transit or planning to migrate. It has a referral system for

prospective refugee cases, and it offers humanitarian assistance, psychosocial support, and direct attention to migrant children, among other services (United Nations, 2021).

Figure 6. Risks, needs and protection measures in San Marcos and Quetzaltenango

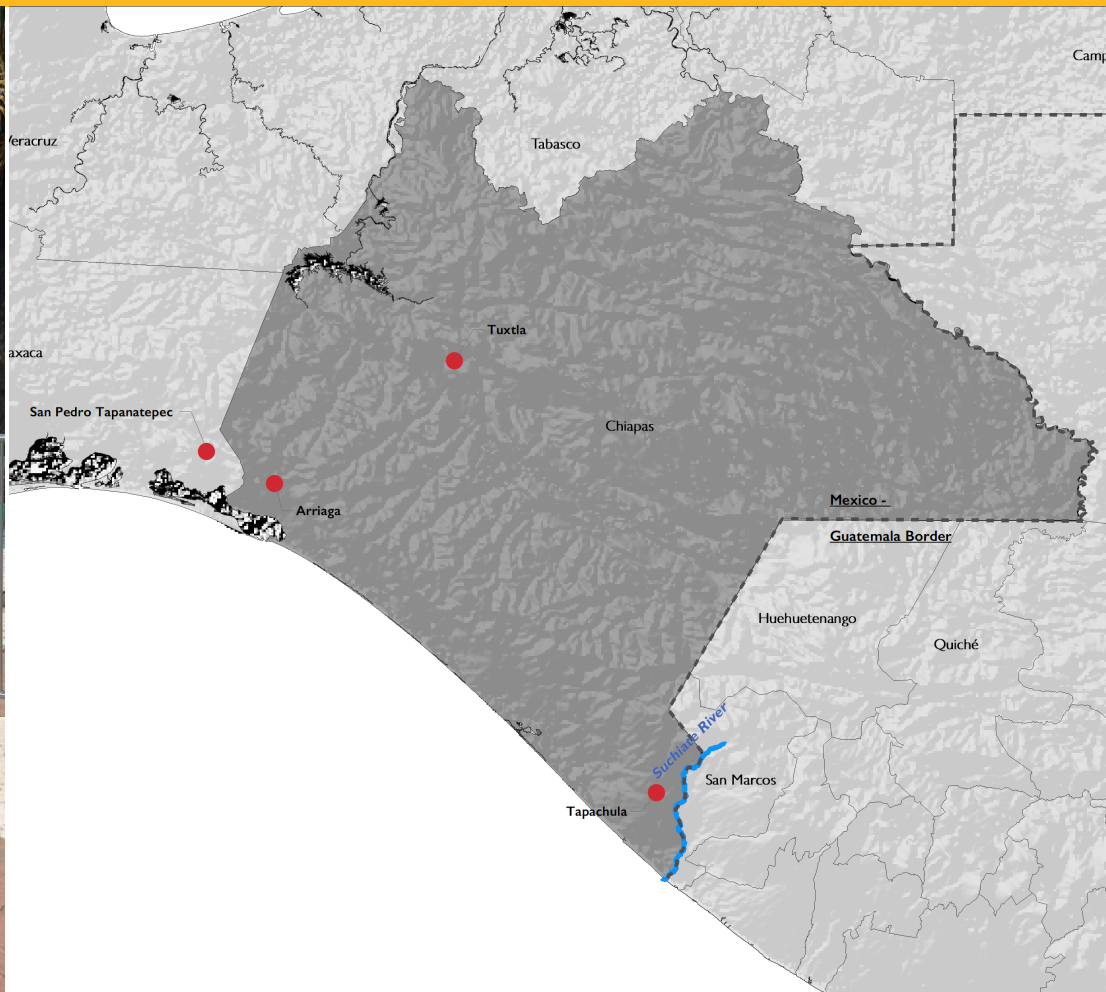
 DANGEROUS MEANS OF TRANSPORT	 POPULATIONS IN SITUATION OF VULNERABILITY	 MAIN PROTECTION NEEDS	 PROTECTION SERVICE GOOD PRACTICE
<p>In this zone, buses, non-powered boats and skiffs are the most dangerous means of transportation. They are vulnerable to accidents due to the poor condition of the units and they are the means most often used by SoM networks.</p>	<p>Extraregional migrants, children and adolescents, and LGBTIQ+ populations may face greater risks of extortion and abandonment by migrant smuggling groups.</p> <p>Children and adolescents, especially those unaccompanied, face greater risks of being captured and recruited by criminal networks. Families face extortion and separation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information on mechanisms for reporting abuses of authority and crimes committed by organized crime groups. • Food, including access to drinking water. • Access to information on migration procedures for transit through Mexico, as well as information on the dangers along the route. 	<p>Attention and Protection Centre for Migrants and Refugees (CAPMiR) in Tecún Umán: It provides protection services such as information (mainly about potential risks along the remaining of the route), facilities for making calls to countries of origin, charging mobile devices, basic health care, psychological care and food.</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

STATE OF CHIAPAS (MEXICO)



MIGRANTS OUTSIDE THE MEXICAN COMMISSION FOR REFUGEE ASSISTANCE. CHIAPAS, MEXICO. © IOM, 2021



Source: Base map prepared with resources from [United Nations World Map](#), [DIVA GIS](#) and [HDX](#).

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CONTEXT AND ROUTES

Chiapas is one of six Mexican states with maritime, air, and land points of entry,⁶ with routes along the coast and north of the state. Its strategic position bordering Guatemala makes it the main point of entry by land along Mexico's southern border and the main transit point to the interior of the country (UPMRIP, 2022b). Approximately 50 kilometers from Tapachula is the Suchiate River, which spans at least 75 kilometers of the border between the two countries and has about 300 irregular crossing points into Mexico (Sherman, 2019).

According to data from Mexico's Migration Policy, Registration and Identification of Persons Unit (UPMRIP for its acronym in Spanish), Chiapas is the state with the largest influx of irregular migration to the centre and north of the country. Its municipalities Tapachula and Tuxtla have the highest number of events of foreigners presented or channeled to migration authorities, and it is the state with the highest convergence of migrants of different nationalities, languages and cultures (IOM, 2022d, UPMRIP, 2022b).

In the Chiapas zone, two main routes taken by migrants entering through the southern border and heading towards northern Mexico were identified:

1. One route starts at the Suchiate or Talismán rivers (both in Chiapas) by boat and on foot. The route then continues to the municipalities of Huixtla, Pijijapan, Tonalá and exits through Arriaga to reach Tapanatepec, Oaxaca and head towards central Mexico (Gómez, 2023).
2. A second route starts at the border of Comalapa where people head towards Comitán and then to Palenque to reach Acayucan in Veracruz; this route is less frequent due to the danger of crossing territories disputed by organized crime groups (ibid.).

RISK FACTORS

Chiapas is the state with the fourth highest number of reported crimes against irregular migrants. Robbery, trafficking in persons, and other crimes associated with smuggling are the most recurrent (UPMRIP, 2022b). This is consistent with statements made by the migrants surveyed, who indicated that Chiapas is one of the most dangerous zones at the regional level, especially because of the high levels of violence, criminality and insecurity.

Migrant smuggling networks have taken advantage of the vulnerability of migrants entering by land through Chiapas, offering them irregular border crossing services, which exposes them to kidnappings. According to data from the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH for its acronym in Spanish), between 2017 and 2020, 11 people were rescued from kidnapping and 69 people were the object of migrant smuggling (Government of Mexico, n.d.a). The data collected indicates that organized crime groups deprive migrants of their freedom and demand payments ranging from 1,500 to 10,000 United States dollars for their release (Vision of Humanity, 2021); these payments are generally financed with the support of family members in destination countries (including Mexico).

"Between the border of Arriaga and Oaxaca is the Corazones Bridge, where at the top, the motorcycles of smugglers pass at excessive speeds. In recent months, we have seen at least seven cases of trauma and fractures for this very reason, and we have no way of treating these serious injuries because the available nearby services only offer basic medical care".

Excerpt from an interview with a civil society organization.

Migrants reported facing major dangers due to the presence of organized crime groups (mainly robberies and kidnappings) in San Pedro Tapanatepec (municipality located on the border between Chiapas and Oaxaca).⁷

⁶ According to the IOM, a point of entry is a "place authorized by the competent authorities to cross the border (for persons or goods), or a place officially designated by the legal framework of the State as an official entry to / exit from the State." (IOM, 2019).

⁷ According to the risk cartography analysis, Oaxaca is a high-danger zone. Therefore, the borders between Chiapas and Oaxaca are points of high danger for migrants in transit.

According to information provided by civil society and migration authorities, motorcycles, buses, and trailers are used to facilitate irregular crossings through Chiapas and are dangerous means of transportation; a high death rate has been reported due to transit through unofficial points at high speeds. In 2021, a truck accident left 55 migrants dead and 105 injured in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, prompting the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH for its acronym in Spanish) to offer recommendations for guaranteeing the human rights, life and personal integrity of migrants during their transit through this zone (Government of Mexico, 2022; Mandujano, 2023; Reina and Garcia, 2021).

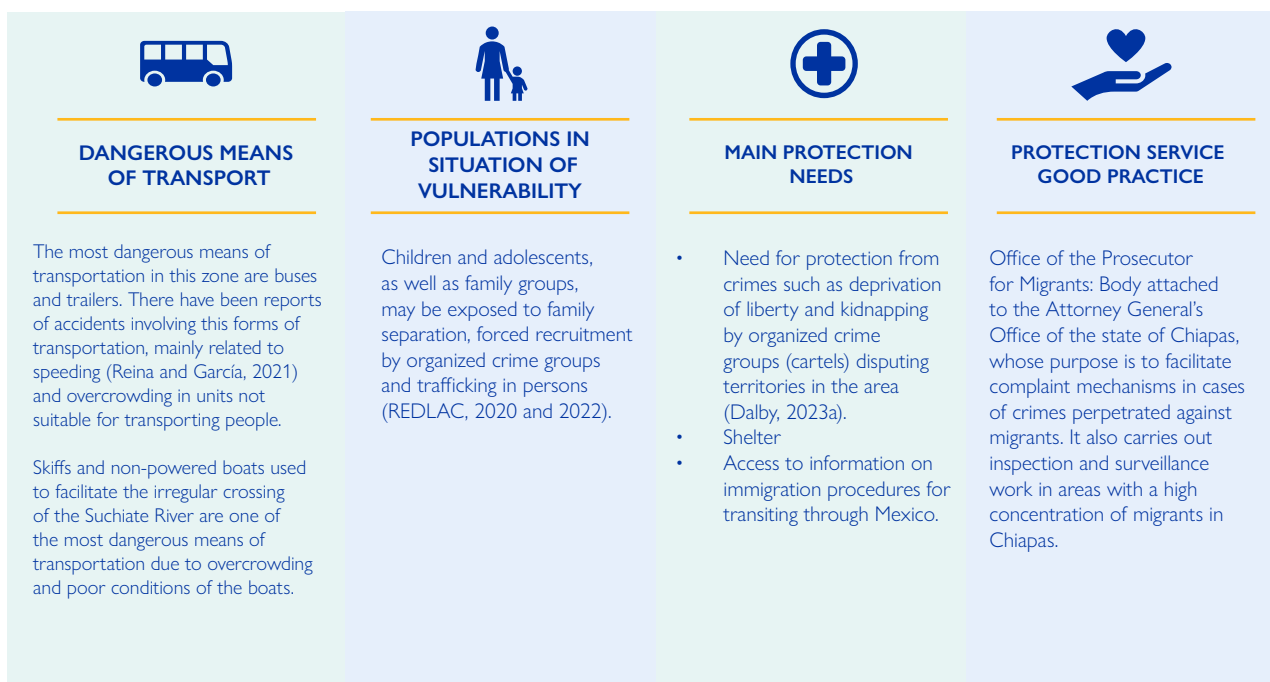
Skiffs and non-powered boats are also dangerous means of transportation used to facilitate irregular crossings through the Suchiate River, especially due to overcrowding and the poor condition of the vessels. Multiple accidents have been reported along this route, such as boats capsizing and even migrants drowning (IOM, 2022d; MMP, 2023). Most of these boats are built with truck tires and wood, making them unsuitable for transporting people (Red Cross, n.d.; Semple and Malkin, 2018; Sherman, 2019).

PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE SERVICES

The main factors of vulnerability include lack of knowledge of the means of transportation for crossing Mexico, difficulties in communicating in Spanish (especially in the case of French or English speakers), and the lack of timely information on migration regularization procedures (IOM, 2022e). With respect to the latter, crowds of people outside government institutions have been observed waiting for a resolution on their migration procedures, reporting multiple challenges such as discrimination when accessing basic services (Government of Mexico, 2021; Brewer et al., 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2022).

In addition, migrants arriving in this state often have significant needs or even have experienced multiple forms of violence, trauma and exploitation along their journey, particularly those who started from South America and have been in transit for several weeks. They carry a series of unmet needs that cannot always be addressed due to lack of institutional capacity or to the saturation of protection services, especially in Tapachula. The overcrowding of shelter services, for example, has resulted in migrants having to spend the night in public spaces.

Figure 7. Risks, needs and protection measures in Chiapas

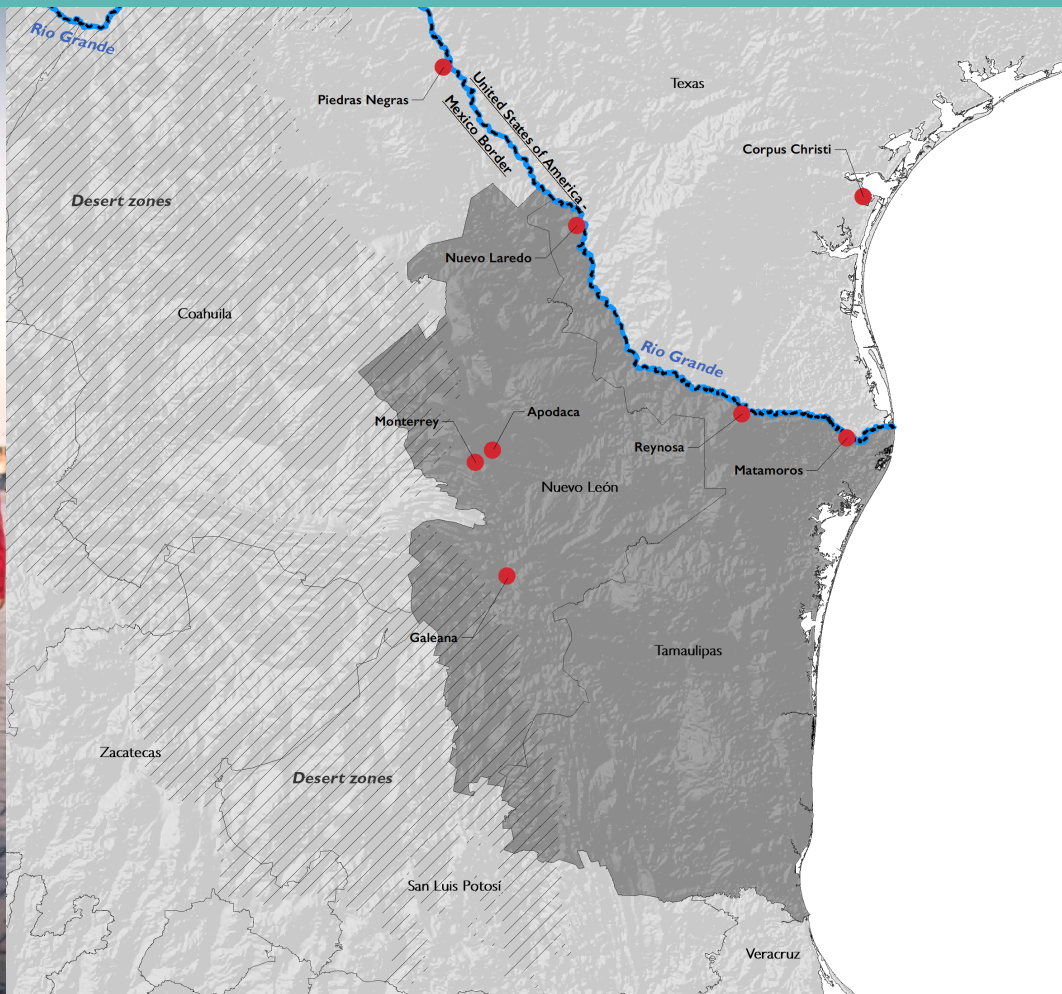


Source: Own elaboration.

STATES OF NUEVO LEÓN AND TAMAULIPAS (MÉXICO)



VENEZUELAN MIGRANTS FACING
BACKWARDS. REYNOSA, TAMAULIPAS,
MEXICO. © IOM 2023



Source: Base map prepared with resources from [United Nations World Map](#), [DIVA GIS](#) and [HDX](#).

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CONTEXT AND ROUTES

Nuevo León and Tamaulipas are two neighbouring states located in northern Mexico with migration dynamics marked by their proximity to the United States of America. In both cases, the territorial division is marked by the Rio Grande, which is the fifth largest river in North America (Hernández, 2020; Government of Mexico, n.d.b).

According to US Customs and Border Patrol data, from January through July 2023, 205,393 encounters of persons with irregular immigration status were recorded in the vicinity of the Rio Grande (Government of the United States of America, 2023). Between January and June 2023, the number of irregular migrants presented to immigration authorities in Mexico was reported to be 17,988 in Nuevo León and 19,157 in Tamaulipas. This places these two states in eighth and ninth place nationally in irregular transit of migrants (UPMRIP, 2023).

Most of the migration flows in this zone head towards the United States of America (UPMRIP, 2022c), with the cities of Reynosa, Matamoros, Nuevo Laredo (in Tamaulipas) and Monterrey, Galeana and Apodaca (in Nuevo León) being the main departure and crossing points. According to key informants, these migration dynamics are shaped by the arrival of migrants by air to Reynosa or by land to Monterrey. From there, they walk or travel in private vehicles to the banks of the Rio Grande, which they cross in canoes and even swimming (Gonzalez and Coronado, 2023). In addition, there is another maritime route running from Matamoros (Mexico) to Corpus Christi (United States of America).

RISK FACTORS

According to primary and secondary data collected, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas are some of the most dangerous zones for migrants in the region due to high levels of insecurity, the presence of organized crime networks (especially the Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas and the Jalisco Cartel - New Generation) (Dalby, 2023b), and the numerous accidents linked to the geography of the area.

Key stakeholders interviewed agreed that the San Fernando sector in Tamaulipas is a particularly high-risk spot due to violence by organized crime

“Getting to Matamoros is not easy. You have to go through many obstacles to get to this point, from walking along the roads, to hiding from the immigration authorities because they can deport you. Crossing from Monterrey to Matamoros is dangerous. I was afraid when a bus driver advised me not to leave at dawn because I could be kidnapped”.

José (pseudonym), Venezuelan migrant.

groups and reported abuses of authority. The National Human Rights Commission has expressed concern about the situation of insecurity in this municipality, where in 2011, 48 clandestine graves were found with 196 bodies of people of various nationalities, one year after the massacre of 72 migrants in the same municipality (Government of Mexico, 2021).

In terms of adverse geographical conditions, when crossing the Rio Grande irregularly, migrants may be exposed to multiple dangers. The currents and depth of this river, especially during the rainy season, make crossing difficult and has resulted in the loss of life and disappearance of migrants (Government of Mexico, 2022b.; Díaz, 2023; Brooks, 2019). In addition, other reported risk factors that migrants face when crossing the river are whirlpools, alligators and water pollution (Vázquez, 2022). According to MMP data, between January 2020 and May 2023, there were 123 deaths reported in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, of which 80 per cent were caused by drowning in the Rio Grande (MMP, 2023).

In addition, the people interviewed indicated that bus terminals are high-risk locations because of the high number of kidnappings by organized crime groups, violence such as beatings, use of firearms, and sexual violence directed mainly towards migrant women.

PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE SERVICES





Migrants arriving in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas show unsatisfied protection needs stemming from their journey through Central America and Mexico, including the need for protection from organized crime groups present along the entire transit route.

Likewise, in these states, an important need is access to information on migration processes to enter the United States of America, including the operation and

scope of the CBP One app.⁸ The SoM networks take advantage of this lack of understanding to misinform migrants about these processes and, in some cases,

to render them ineligible so that they are pressured to pay for an irregular crossing.

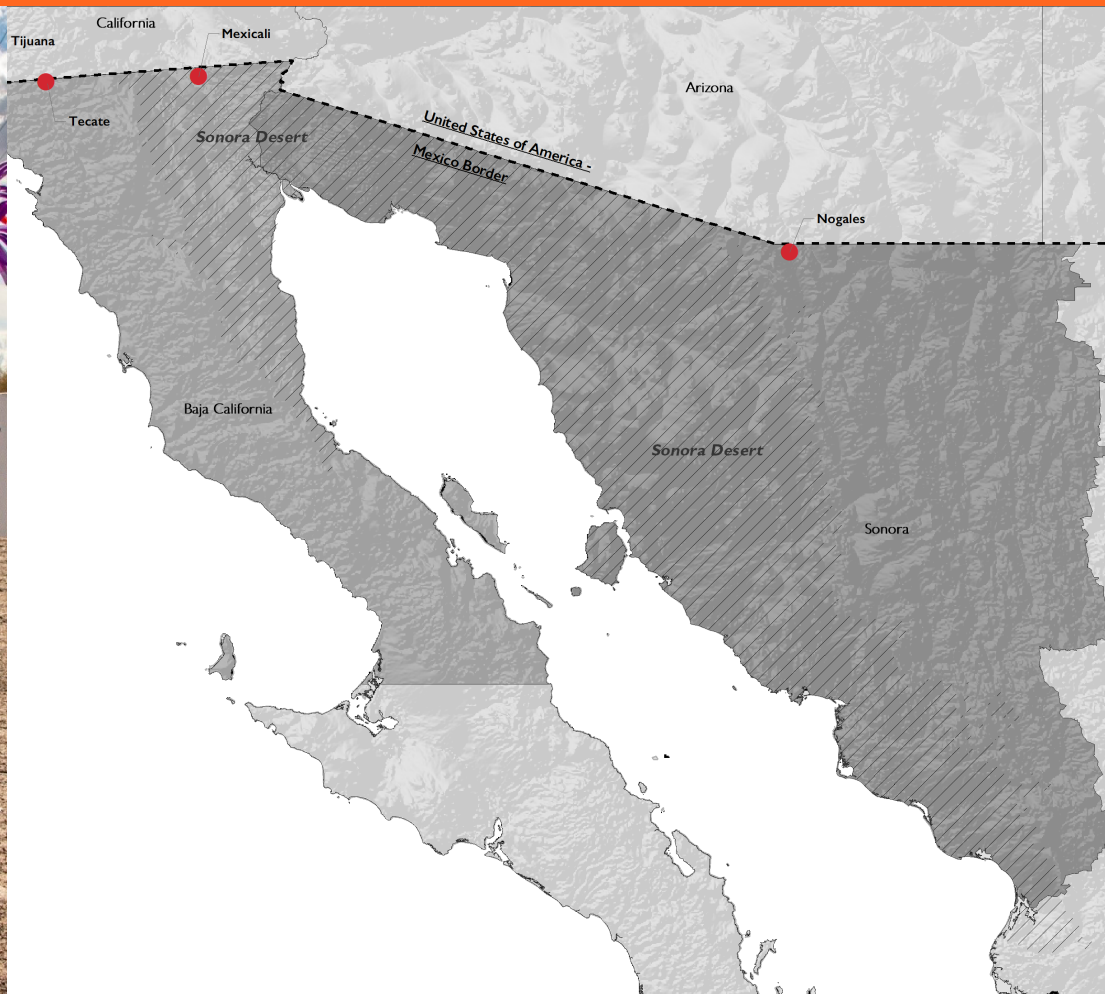
Figure 8. Risks, needs and protection measures in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas

			
DANGEROUS MEANS OF TRANSPORT	POPULATIONS IN SITUATION OF VULNERABILITY	MAIN PROTECTION NEEDS	PROTECTION SERVICE GOOD PRACTICE
<p>The most dangerous means of transportation in this zone are buses; migrants reported feeling unsafe and experiencing attacks by organized crime at the terminals.</p>	<p>Unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents are exposed to being intercepted and recruited by organized crime organizations. People travelling alone are at greater risk of being kidnapped in order to demand ransom from family members.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to information on immigration processes and the CBP One app. • Protection from kidnapping by organized crime groups. • Food and drinking water. 	<p>Route for the Protection of Persons Subject to SoM: Collaboration between state institutions and civil society organizations to elaborate a guiding document for the identification of smuggled migrants and refer them to the relevant authorities.</p>

Source: Own elaboration.

⁸ CBP ONE is a mobile application that serves as a single portal for a variety of services with Customs and Border Protection (CBP).

STATES OF BAJA CALIFORNIA AND SONORA (MEXICO)



Source: Base map prepared with resources from [United Nations World Map](#), [DIVA GIS](#) and [HDX](#).

Note: This map is for illustrative purposes only. The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

CONTEXT AND ROUTES

Baja California and Sonora are two neighbouring states to the north bordering the United States of America. Sonora covers 19 per cent of the border area and has desert geography due to its proximity to the Sonoran Desert (UPMRIP, 2022d). The desert covers approximately 160,000 square kilometers and records extreme temperatures, in addition to harboring wildlife that is potentially dangerous for people seeking to cross this area (Cataneo, 2021).

Due to its geographic position, it is one of the most transited areas by migrants heading towards the United States of America. According to US Customs and Border Patrol data, from January to July 2023, 406,649 and 329,735 encounters of irregular migrants were recorded in US territory in the vicinity of Baja California and Sonora,⁹ respectively (Government of the United States of America, 2023). In addition, during January and June 2023, the UPMRIP reported 13,518 encounters of undocumented migrants to Mexican authorities in Baja California and 12,196 in Sonora. This notable influx of migrants has positioned Baja California and Sonora in fifth and sixth place, respectively, among the Mexican states with the highest prevalence of irregular migrants in that period (UPMRIP, 2023).

RISK FACTORS

According to the migrants surveyed and secondary data, Baja California and Sonora are danger zones due to the presence of criminal networks, including drug cartels and SoM networks that facilitate irregular crossings through the desert. There are, at least, three groups fighting for control of the territory and dedicated to SoM and to trafficking of drugs and weapons: the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juárez Cartel, and the Jalisco Cartel - New Generation (UPMRIP, 2022d; Dittmar, 2022). Disputes between these criminal groups have led to an increase in violence and in missing and kidnapped persons in this zone. For example, during May 2023, at least 113 migrants were kidnapped and deprived of their liberty by criminal groups (EFE, 2023). Kidnappings and other crimes often occur on buses or at bus terminals.

“When we arrived in San Luis, Colorado, we were kidnapped by a group. We were kidnapped for five days until they were able to communicate with our family, who had to pay a ransom to free us. We were told that the way to free us would be to hand ourselves over to the authorities. My mom had to sell her house to pay the ransom.”

Miguel (pseudonym), Ecuadorian migrant.

This adds to the challenging geography of the area as the desertic zone and the elevated temperatures pose significant risks to the lives of migrants crossing the Sonoran Desert towards the United States of America. These factors lead to a high number of missing and deceased migrants (UPMRIP, 2022d; Dittmar, 2022). Between January 2020 and May 2023, the MMP documented the disappearance or death of at least 32 migrants, of which at least 41 per cent were linked to the environmental and climatic conditions and their associated ailments, such as sunstroke, starvation and dehydration. However, the real number is believed to be much higher because, according to forensic estimates, 80 per cent of the remains of people who die in the desert are never found, identified, or recovered due to adverse geographic conditions (Dell’Orto, 2022; UPMRIP, 2020d).

PROTECTION AND ASSISTANCE SERVICES

Violence and insecurity caused by organized crime have influenced the development of initiatives and activities aimed at the protection of migrants in this area. The zones in Tijuana and Mexicali (Baja California)¹⁰ have the largest number of shelters on the northern border and throughout Mexico (UPMRIP, 2022d); 81 per cent of these places are managed by civil society organizations operating under significant risk, also linked to the insecurity caused by criminal networks. From June 2022 to July 2023, there was an increase in reports of attacks with firearms, infiltrations, threats, and attempts to take control of some of these safe havens by organized crime groups in this area (Isacson and Verduzco, 2023).

⁹ This data corresponds to presentations to the authorities in the states of Arizona and California, bordering Baja California and Sonora.

¹⁰ These cities are key points in the flows of human mobility through Mexico as they are considered the end of the “Pacific route”. Additionally, Tijuana and Mexicali are the first and second most frequented municipalities in Baja California for the crossing of migrants heading to the United States of America (UPMRIP, 2022d).

Authorities from the United States of America and Mexico conduct assistance and rescue operations throughout northern border zones to provide protection to those crossing the Sonoran Desert. However, these operations face great difficulties due to the geography of the place. In the case of Mexico, the National Institute of Migration (INM for its acronym in Spanish) has created a special unit called the Beta

Groups for the protection of migrants (Bravo, 2021). In the United States of America, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) installed emergency rescue beacons throughout the desert of the states bordering Mexico, equipped with red buttons that, when pressed, send a signal with geolocation to the Border Patrol (Resendiz, 2021).

Figure 9. Risks, needs and protection measures in Baja California and Sonora



Source: Own elaboration.

REGIONAL CONTEXT AND SITUATIONS OF VULNERABILITY OF MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT

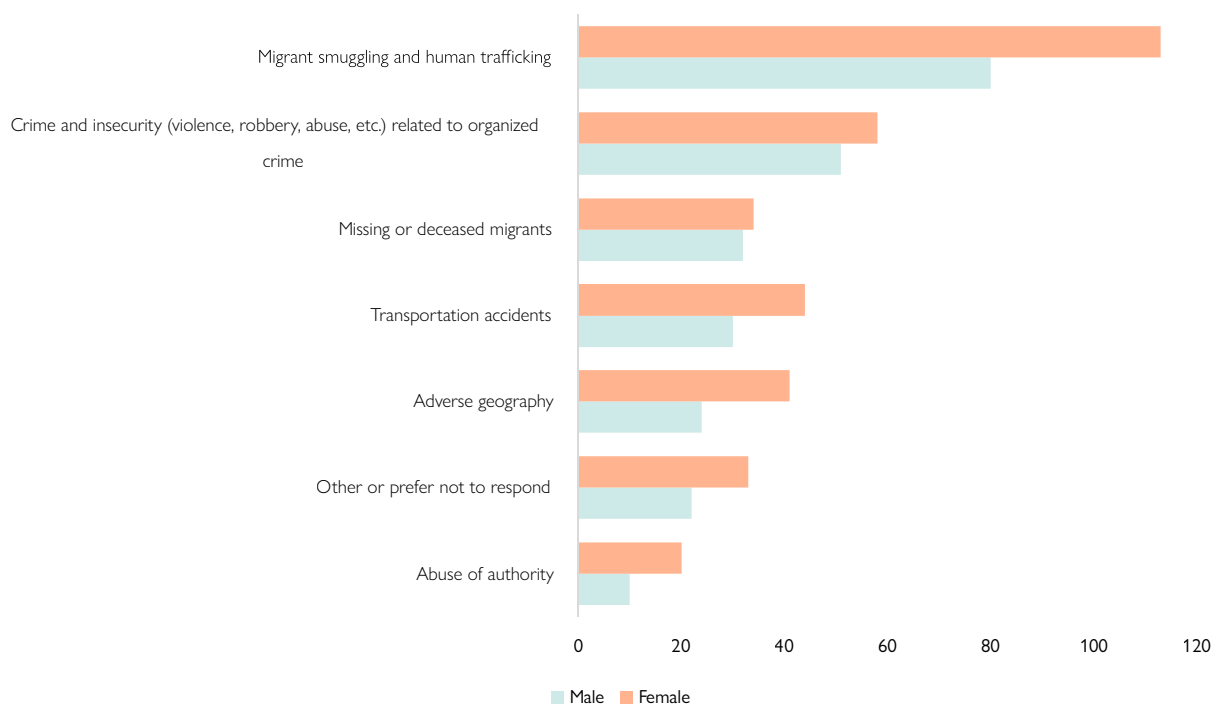


Migrants transiting through Central America and Mexico face a series of risks related to the political, economic, social, climatic, and geographic conditions of the countries and communities through which they transit. The interviews and surveys conducted during this study identified Mexico and Panama as the countries with the most dangerous zones for migrants in transit. According to the [Global Organized Crime Index](#), both are among the 10 countries with the largest criminal markets worldwide,¹¹ which includes the smuggling of migrants and trafficking in persons. This region also holds the highest scores in the Americas for both the criminality index (6.16) and the presence of criminal actors (6.61), according to the GI-TOC (2021).

Along the same lines, there are areas where the levels of danger for migrants in transit have increased. Such is the case of the provinces of Puntarenas and Alajuela in Costa Rica. Although the danger factors in each of these zones are different, they both share an increasing presence of networks dedicated to SoM and related crimes (EFE, 2022b).

The predominance of SoM and human trafficking as the main danger factors in the region is consistent with what migrants stated, where 74 per cent pointed to events associated with such criminal dynamics as the most frequent risks encountered during their transit. They also indicated that organized crime insecurity is the second most recurrent danger factor.

Graph 1. Danger factors identified by respondents, according to gender



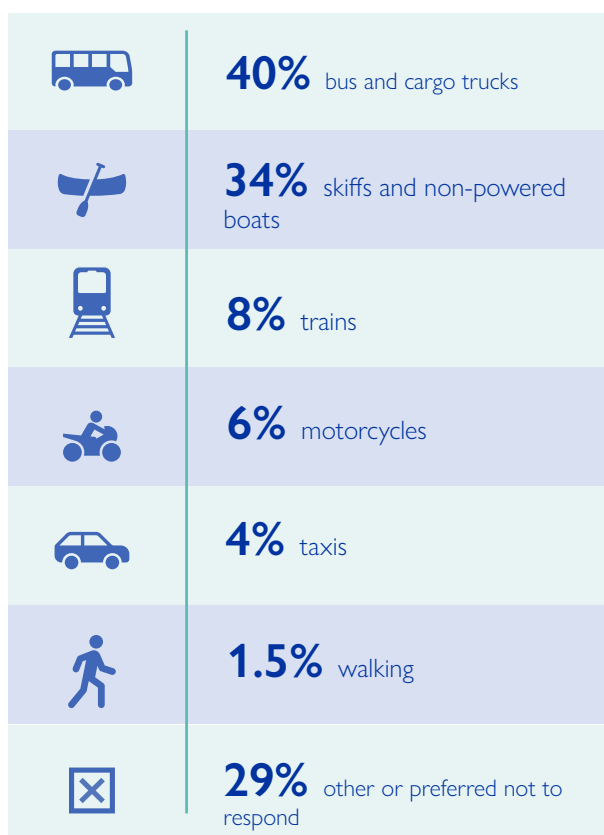
Source: Own elaboration based on surveys with migrants.

Notes: Respondents could choose more than one option. Of the 262 migrants surveyed, one person did not identify with binary gender categories; since this is a small sample, it is not possible to visualize it in the graph.

¹¹ According to the Global Organized Crime Index, there are four types of criminal markets: human markets (which includes trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling), trade markets (mainly focused on arms trafficking), environmental markets (which include crimes against flora, fauna and non-renewable resources) and the drug market (GI-TOC, 2021).

At the regional level, the most dangerous means of transport, according to 40 per cent of the migrants surveyed, are buses and cargo trucks, followed by 34 per cent who pointed to skiffs and non-powered boats. Accidents along the entire migration route occur mainly due to speeding and poor conditions of the vehicles. In some of the most dangerous zones, organized crime groups detain or board buses with migrants to extort them, kidnap them, or forcibly recruit them to join their groups. In addition, the migrants surveyed reported that crimes such as robberies, physical violence, kidnappings, among others, take place at bus terminals.

Figure 10. Danger of the means of transport used by migrants



Source: Own elaboration based on surveys with migrants.

Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option.

All these risk factors interact with protective factors that may have an effect on the vulnerable situations experienced by migrants in transit. The main factors identified through the surveys and interviews are presented and analysed below according to IOM's Determinants of Migrant Vulnerability model. This model offers "(...) an operational methodology for gaining a thorough understanding of the risk factors that contribute to migrant vulnerability and the protective factors that enhance migrant resilience." (IOM, 2023d).

It should be noted that the analysis of risk and protective factors is neither exhaustive nor representative of transit flows in Central America and Mexico. Therefore, there may be factors or profiles that were not identified in the framework of the study but that still require international protection and assistance. The analysis has a practical significance that allows for the identification of the vulnerabilities to which many migrants are exposed, contributing to the development of comprehensive protection and assistance responses.

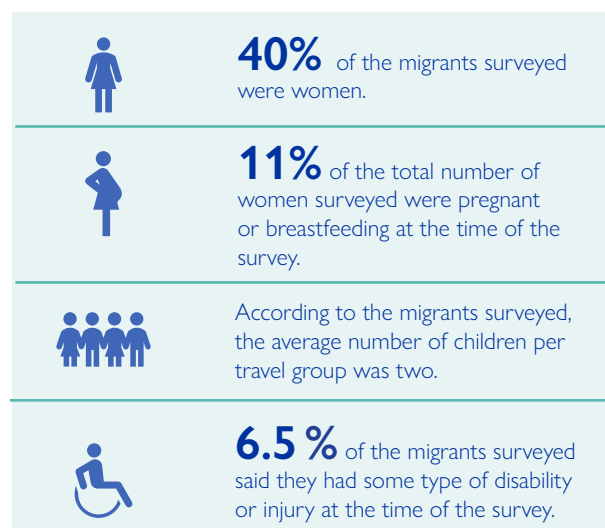
The identified risk factors affect migrants in transit in a differentiated way, which may exacerbate or reduce their vulnerability to violence, exploitation and abuse. In other words, the degree of vulnerability of migrants and the ability to resist, cope with or recover from situations of violence and abuse is the overall result of the interaction between risk factors and the insufficient presence of protective factors.

The risk and protective factors identified here are classified according to individual, family or household, community and structural levels:

INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Factors at the individual level refer to characteristics such as gender, age, life history, personal experiences, beliefs and attitudes, immigration status, and a series of individual qualities that, depending on the context, may become risk or protective factors (IOM, 2023d). The primary data collection process made it possible to identify that, in the context of dangerous zones, the degree of the danger experienced varies according to characteristics such as age, gender and the presence of a disability.

Figure 11. Individual factors reported at dangerous zones



Source: Own elaboration based on surveys with migrants.

In these zones, people who identify as women (40% of the 262 people surveyed) may be more frequently exposed to gender-based violence and human trafficking because of their gender. This risk factor is accentuated in dangerous zones where criminal organizations operate, as they use gender-based violence as a mechanism of control and extortion (UNODC, 2022). In the process of collecting primary data, there were reports of migrant women who, before starting their migration journey, began using contraceptives in the face of the imminent danger of suffering sexual violence.

“The worst thing I’ve ever had to live through happened there, in the jungle (...) A puma heard my baby crying, was attracted by it and started to follow us. At one point, it attacked my husband, and I ran as fast as I could, I don’t know how, but we got rid of it.”

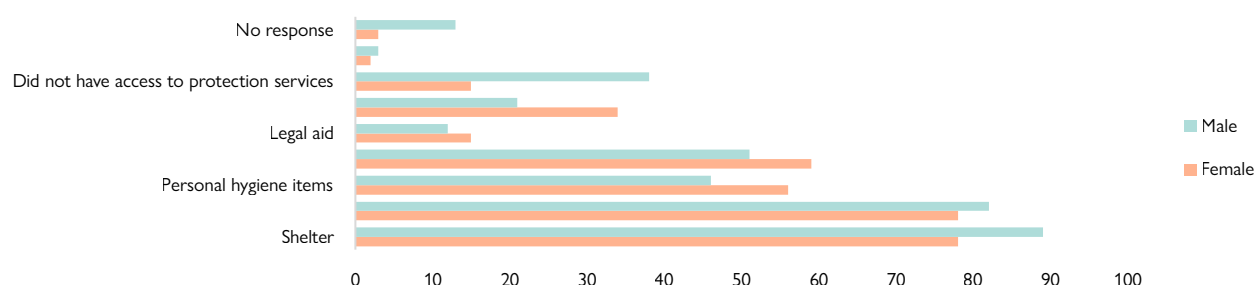
Source: Aguirre, 2023.

In addition, the lack of protective services in these hazardous areas operates together with individual factors. Thus, pregnant or breastfeeding women who do not have regular access to regular prenatal medical care are

in a vulnerable situation. Of the total number of pregnant or nursing mothers, only 33 per cent had access to health-care services. For example, the data collected show cases of migrant women who gave birth in the Darién National Park or travelled this route with newborns; for them, the geographic risks and lack of protection services increase the possibility of illness or even death during the trip (Aguirre, 2023).

Similarly, people with disabilities or injuries may face risks during their transit. In this regard, of the total number of migrants with disabilities who needed medical attention, only 35 per cent had access to medical services.

Graph 2. Migrant access to protection services, according to gender



Source: Own elaboration based on primary data from the survey of migrants.

Note: Of the 262 migrants surveyed, one person did not identify with binary gender categories; since this is a small sample, it is not possible to visualize it in the graph.

The main individual protective factor identified was that most of the people surveyed (72%) travel in groups with family members, friends and people they met along the way. This protection measure is more recurrent in the case of women. From the women surveyed, eight out of ten stated that they travel in groups as a measure to mitigate the risks they may face in dangerous zones. According to the surveys, joining a group allows migrants to have a support network in emergency situations.

FAMILY FACTORS

These factors include family size, household structure, socioeconomic status, migration background, employment, livelihoods, degree of participation in family and other social networks, among others (IOM, 2021).



Of the 262 people surveyed, 57 per cent reported travelling with family groups. Of these families, 4 out of 5 said they were travelling with a child or adolescent. Additionally, 15 per cent of the people surveyed travelled in groups made up of people outside their family group; of these, 28 per cent included unaccompanied migrant children or adolescents. Considering and identifying profiles of unaccompanied or separated children and adolescents is of utmost importance for activating appropriate child protection mechanisms.



In addition, of the total sample, 5 per cent received support from family members in destination countries to finance their migration journey. This indicates that migration background of family nucleus and support networks are protective factors for migrants in transit.

COMMUNITY FACTORS

Communities are defined as groups that share interests and ties. In addition, these groups may allow migrants greater access to resources and bring them closer to other beliefs, values, attitudes, institutions, ties and relationships (IOM, 2021). Factors associated with greater community vulnerability include cultural acceptance of hiring services related to SoM, lack of health and education services, discrimination and xenophobia experienced during migration, among others (ibid.).



The most recurrent risk factor at the community level is the existence of people working in the SoM and seeking to facilitate transit and border crossings through the dangerous zones in the region. In total, 36 per cent of the people surveyed said they had hired services of this type.¹² Among the main risks identified by those who travelled in this type of group, family separation and extortion were the most frequent.



SoM networks often spread false information about the protection services available in communities and even commit acts of intimidation and violence against shelters or clinics for migrants in transit. This behaviour is a strategy used by organized crime groups seeking to maintain control over migrants. This risk factor may be exacerbated in cases where migrants do not know the language of the host communities, as smugglers take advantage of this to hinder their social interactions (IOM, 2023e) and be their only source of information. These information gaps make migrants more vulnerable to being abandoned, scammed or having to make additional payments.



Some of the danger zones are located in communities lacking economic and livelihood opportunities. In many cases, the provision of SoM services arises as a response to the limited job options available in these areas.



The main protective factor identified at the community level is the existence of local initiatives and projects that provide assistance services to migrants in transit. In some of the identified dangerous zones, such as Alajuela in Costa Rica, protection needs such as access to food are addressed with the support of initiatives from community residents.

¹² This figure may be an under-representation of reality given the illicit nature of this activity.

STRUCTURALS FACTORS

Structural factors of vulnerability include discriminatory and xenophobic behaviours in countries of destination and transit, conflict and instability, gaps in migration governance, and the absence of regular migration mechanisms, among others (IOM, 2021).



The main identified factor of structural vulnerability is the limited presence of authorities, including government security and protection services in the study zones. When transiting danger zones, migrants are exposed to little or no support from government institutions; in addition, discrimination and abuses of authority in these places add to the structural risk factors deepening their vulnerable conditions.



There are risks linked to misinformation on existing immigration procedures, including limited access to regularization processes. Particularly, in dangerous zones such as Baja California, Chiapas, Nuevo León, Sonora and Tamaulipas, different sources pointed out the importance of assisting migrants in understanding how the CBP One app works.



In terms of protective factors, the main entities providing services in danger zones are civil society organizations; 53 per cent of the migrants surveyed identified these institutions as providers of these services, followed by United Nations agencies with 24 per cent. The participation of these institutions is key to ensuring migrants' access to available protection services and their empowerment (IOM, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS



CONCLUSIONS ON RISKS IN THE MOST HAZARDOUS AREAS

- The countries with the highest number of dangerous zones for migrants in transit are Panama and Mexico. In places such as the Darién National Park (Panama), Chiapas, Baja California, Nuevo León, Sonora and Tamaulipas (Mexico), multiple risk factors converge, including the presence of organized crime groups and challenging geography.
- High and very-high danger zones in northern Central America are primarily located at unofficial border crossing points where irregular crossings and SoM networks are common, exposing migrants to multiple crimes and risks such as robbery, extortion, gender-based violence, abandonment and scams.
- There are zones with increasing danger levels due to newer criminality conditions. The canton of Los Chiles in Costa Rica is an example of this, especially because of the prevalence of SoM criminal groups.
- The migration route converges with the SoM and the drug and arms trafficking routes. As a result, migrants who are object of SoM may be subjected to related crimes such as intimidation for drug trafficking and even become victims of trafficking in persons in its various forms.
- The disappearance and death of migrants in transit was reported mainly in the zones of Darién National Park and the Mexican states of Baja California, Nuevo León, Sonora and Tamaulipas. Most are linked to challenging geography and irregular border crossings attempted to avoid detection by authorities.
- Challenges persist for the collection, centralization and systematization of data on missing and deceased migrants. The Missing Migrants Project (MMP) is a pioneering initiative in this process; however, it can be strengthened via government registries on migrant deaths and with assistance to search and recovery committees for missing and deceased persons.

- Abuses of authority by government agents, who in many cases have a protection mandate, were identified as a risk factor in several zones along the migration route, including cases of unofficial payments or arbitrary detention.
- Buses, cargo trucks, skiffs or non-powered boats were identified as the most dangerous means of transportation due to speeding, overcrowding or poor conditions.

CONCLUSIONS ON PROTECTION SERVICES AND NEEDS IN DANGER ZONES

- In each of the very high-risk zones identified, there is at least one protection service available for migrants in transit, mostly shelters. They frequently operate beyond their occupancy capacity and, faced with limited access, many migrants spend the night in public spaces.
- In some cases, host communities, civil organizations, educational institutions and churches allow migrants to stay in their premises due to the lack of shelter services. Many of these groups provide services such as transportation, food and information on immigration procedures.
- The presence of organized crime groups influences access to available protection services as they sometimes spread false information or extort money to maintain control over migrants in transit. Such cases of intimidation were reported in Baja California and Sonora.
- Civil society organizations and United Nations agencies are the main entities identified as providers of protection services.

CONCLUSIONS ON MIGRANTS IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS IN THE MOST DANGEROUS ZONES

- Migrant women, especially those who are pregnant or breastfeeding, are more vulnerable in these zones. They are more frequently exposed to risks such as sexual and gender-based violence, human trafficking, and have more unmet needs for medical care and maternal and child assistance.
- Children and adolescents, especially those unaccompanied, are exposed to serious dangers such as forced recruitment by organized crime groups, sexual violence, human trafficking, among others.
- Extraregional migrants may be exposed to risks such as fraud and abandonment by organized crime groups, increasing their vulnerability and the language barriers they may face.
- People travelling alone are exposed to greater risks of extortion, robbery, theft and physical violence by organized crime networks.
- Migrants often travel in groups and seek support from family members in destination countries as protective factors for risk mitigation.
- Unsatisfied protection needs interact with the dangerous nature of the transit zones, which can exacerbate the vulnerability of the profiles identified.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MITIGATING RISKS IN THE MOST DANGEROUS ZONES

- Strengthen and simplify existing processes and increase regular migration pathways.
- Provide accurate, timely and accessible information to migrants on the risks of irregular migration and on migration regularization processes in line with objective three of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration.
- Strengthen processes for the exchange and sharing of information and intelligence on organized crime networks and activities.
- Encourage public–private partnerships in border communities and employment generation to prevent the development of criminal groups in these zones.
- Encourage the involvement of communities and local governments in the fight against organized crime operating in these zones.
- Develop binational and multilateral efforts for the search and identification of missing and deceased migrants during the journey, paying special attention to the role of family search committees in countries of origin and transit to facilitate this process.
- Strengthen and promote the development of research and data collection on missing and deceased migrants, with emphasis on the generation of interoperable databases.
- Raise awareness among government personnel of the psychological, physical and economic consequences that the death or disappearance of a migrant has on the life and health of the remaining members of a travel group to facilitate timely and effective attention to these cases.
- Establish anonymous channels for filing complaints about abuses of authority experienced by migrants in transit.

- Strengthen inspection processes at migration checkpoints to guarantee the incorporation of a human rights and gender approach in the assistance provided by government personnel to migrants in transit, including the possibility of implementing random and unannounced inspections at these points.
- Strengthen the presence of security personnel at high-risk points such as bus terminals where migrants reported having experienced violence by organized crime.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON PROTECTION SERVICES IN DANGEROUS ZONES

- Incorporate specific provisions on the assistance to migrants in transit in national emergency prevention and response systems and plans.
- Establish and disseminate assistance routes for migrants in transit at the national and community levels.
- Train government personnel on existing international and regional instruments for the identification of situations of vulnerability such as the [IOM Handbook on Protection and Assistance to Migrants Vulnerable to Violence, Exploitation and Abuse](#) under the auspices of the [Global Action to Prevent and Address Trafficking in Persons and the Smuggling of Migrants](#) and the [Regional Guidelines for the Preliminary Identification and Referral Mechanisms of Migrant Populations in Vulnerable Situations](#).
- Create or strengthen protection services promoted by local governments, especially shelter services in those communities where overcrowding or lack of such services forces people to stay in publicly accessible spaces.
- Develop protocols to guarantee free access to health care services for migrants, paying special attention to ailments originated during travel, such as injuries, trauma due to violence, among others.
- Deepen existing efforts aimed at providing mental health care to migrants, prioritizing services for trauma and grief generated during the migration process.

- Mainstream intercultural, human rights and gender approaches in the development and implementation of initiatives and projects for guaranteeing the protection of migrants.
- Continue and strengthen international cooperation for the establishment of resting areas for migrants in transit, especially in zones that stand out for their challenging geography, such as Baja California, Sonora and the Darién National Park.
- Consider the establishment of strategies and lines of support, assistance and complaint filing for the people in charge of protection services available in dangerous zones, mainly in the face of the risks they may face, especially in relation to organized crime groups.
- Intensify efforts aimed at understanding the best interests of children in the care provided by protection services in dangerous areas.
- Establish inter-institutional communication mechanisms to expedite the care and legal representation of migrant children and adolescents.
- Provide protection services and psychosocial assistance to persons who have experienced violence and discrimination based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and other sexual characteristics.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CARE OF PEOPLE IN VULNERABLE SITUATIONS

- Promote the empowerment of migrants in vulnerable situations, especially in the decision-making process on the assistance they receive.
- Collect, analyse and use data properly disaggregated by gender and age group on the needs of migrants transiting through Central America and Mexico.
- Address the recommendations and objectives established in regional documents such as the [Operational Guide for the Implementation of the Best Interests of the Child in Contexts of Human Mobility](#) and the [Guidelines on Assistance and Protection of Women in Context of Migration](#).
- Raise awareness among front-line personnel in charge of assisting migrants in transit about the routes for providing assistance to people who have been the object of SoM or who are survivors of human trafficking.
- Strengthen and expedite the judicial approach to cases of smuggled migrants or survivors of trafficking, free of discrimination and stigmatization.
- Strengthen access to health care for migrant women and girls, especially those who are pregnant or breastfeeding and survivors of sexual violence.

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