

SMUGGLING OF MIGRANTS IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19



COVID-19 has impacted mobility in the region. Activities such as border closures, layoffs, people stranded in transit countries and the suspension of immigration procedures can lead to an increase in irregular migration as an alternative.

This report shows the general panorama of the characteristics of the Smuggling of Migrants (SoM) in Central America and Mexico and the potential impacts of the pandemic on this crime.

The methodology* includes:



Field observations with migrants and people with experience in the fight against the smuggling of migrants.



Interviews with personnel from international organizations and governments.



Documentary review on migrant smuggling in the region.

* It is a qualitative, descriptive and exploratory analysis, whose observations do not seek to be representative or generalizable.



Main findings



Changes in demand and prices

- ▶ Despite the prohibitions and restrictions on mobility due to the pandemic, the services provided by smugglers have been maintained.
- ▶ Border closures, the level of vigilance, combined with the lack of jobs and resources, impact the demand for services and prices.
- ▶ Not all migrants have the resources to pay the fees charged by the smugglers. Some receive financial support from relatives in the US. Others sell or they mortgage their properties to cover travel expenses.
- ▶ Extra-regional migratory flows in general have shown a decrease.



Organized crime modalities during the pandemic

- ▶ There is no evidence that the pandemic has provided an opportunity for the reorganization and strengthening of criminal groups in the region.
- ▶ The Smuggling of Migrants for subsistence prevails, given the precariousness generated by the pandemic, and does not seem to be under the control of organized crime groups.
- ▶ Smugglers could be participating in activities as varied as drug trafficking, smuggling of counterfeit medicines, transportation of substances for industry extractive, and even in the illicit trafficking of cultural property.



Challenges in the institutions

- ▶ Field and research activities that are used to generate information were reduced or canceled due to restrictions on mobility.
- ▶ The poor internet signal, the lack of adequate computer equipment and human resources have made access to information difficult.
- ▶ Exposure and contagion of personnel.
- ▶ Difficulty in accessing data and evidence that allows confirming or informing most of the assertions and assumptions that circulate about SoM in the region.
- ▶ Need for additional training at the judicial level.
- ▶ Limiting the functioning of the institutions that receive complaints and administer justice.



Some of the recommendations are:



Strengthen the institutions involved in the fight against SoM in their data collection and registration processes, including crimes related to SoM.



Support academic research to broaden the evidence base on SoM in the region, in order to develop well-informed prevention and response strategies.



Identify the different profiles of those involved in the SoM and the factors that lead to participation in these practices.



Create mechanisms that allow a better exchange of information and strategies among the instances that serve the SoM in the region.

