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FOREWORD



## Victimization and Offending in Mexico: The Three-pronged Security Challenges of Trafficking, Kidnapping, and Smuggling

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**KEYWORDS** Organized crime; gender; immigrants/immigration; trafficking; policing/law enforcement

This special issue of *Victims and Offenders* empirically interrogates the scholarship that in the name of security has been mobilized in contemporary Mexico. That is, the kind that has relied on the notion of organized crime as in the hands of networked and highly structured groups and of inherently violent and immoral criminals to frame and justify official policy and enforcement responses. These, rather than improving collective safety, have generated concerning levels of insecurity impacting all – including those constructed or labeled as criminal and their communities.

The contributions constitute a selection of those presented at an international conference on Gender and Organized Crime sponsored by the Education for Justice (E4J) Initiative of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which was held at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy in July of 2018. All but one of the contributors to the special issue are women, and together they comprise a group of researchers whose primary interests involve the empirical study of Mexico and/or US-Mexico security dimensions.

The contributions were selected for they constitute empirically-informed and grounded work that challenge mainstream understandings and discourses concerning organized crime in Mexico. We deliberately selected contributions that relied on primary sources, that were based on or were supplemented by extensive fieldwork, and which research strategies revealed the researchers' awareness of their positionality vis-à-vis those of their interlocutors (that is, their respondents and/or contributors). We did this aware of the fact that much research into criminalized and marginalized practices has systematically involved the exploitation of its actors as objects of knowledge. We were also aware of how by virtue of researching organized criminal practices in Mexico we were “entering a field rich in hyper-representations,” (Fonow & Cook, 2005, p. 2222) which demanded further awareness of the discursive (and therefore, political) elements that shaped said representations. Not doing so would have unnecessarily led to reinscribe the dominant power relations embedded in traditional research (Fonow & Cook, 2005; Wilson, 2004) and which have characterized the treatment and depictions of those represented in the organized crime literature on Mexico and around the world.

Our contributors spent significant amounts of time in regions in Mexico often labeled as off-limits or overtly dangerous for research in the security literature. They did so not in

an attempt to demonstrate a preternatural ability to navigate dangerous terrains. They were instead aware that not witnessing the contexts faced by those targeted by criminalization implied privileging the narratives of the state, engaging in a form of epistemological violence. The proximity of the researchers to the communities where they conducted research is also palpable through their contributions, which nuance and detail demonstrate it is possible to reduce the existing gaps in the collective, grounded understanding on criminalized activities in Mexico by enlisting the support and contribution of those often labeled as dangerous or “hard-to-reach populations.”

Simultaneously, it is also important to underscore that these contributions do not attempt to constitute the preeminent publication concerning Mexico’s security landscape. Neither we suggest that the experiences they document are representative of all of those with close, personal experiences with or involvement in crime. If at all, the contributions reveal the need and the desire for nuanced, informed, grounded research into a hyper-visible, mediatized, stigmatized, commercially and politically exploited series of practices that despite our collective fixation, to this day continues to be poorly understood. Mexico’s security dynamics are complex and will require continued efforts on the part of critical researchers to be effectively mapped, analyzed and addressed.

### **The contributions**

Already renowned for their extensive policy work grounded on extensive field research, Caitlyn Yates and Stephanie Leutert open the special issue with an essay on the roles of women in migrant kidnapping. While frequently reported by the news media, kidnapping has not been the target of academic studies that examine its links to the migration industry. Furthermore, migration-related crimes like human trafficking and migrant smuggling having been gendered as inherently male occupations, have often led women’s roles and experiences to be reduced to stereotypical portraits of desperate girlfriends, jealous wives and despondent lovers of violent and predatory men. This is the first paper in the English-language literature where the authors, identifying the research biases often present in organized crime research on Mexico privileging men as main characters and “cartel” kingpins as archetypes, examine women’s participation in migration-related crimes as an outcome of long-standing structural and gendered inequalities. The authors compiled an original dataset of 388 kidnapping cases from official and journalistic sources, supplemented through fieldwork observations. Thirty percent of the cases identified by Yates and Leutert involve women. Although it would be amiss to deny the important role men play in migrant kidnapping, to continue obscuring the roles of women in the market would be equally biased and misguided.

Vanessa Maldonado examines the lived experiences of migrant women who are employed as sex workers along the Mexico-Guatemala border, and the ways in which the women themselves challenge the claim that conflates sex work with human trafficking. First, Maldonado describes the counter-trafficking discourse the Mexican state has developed in response to the demands by international bodies to contain sexual exploitation, to then introduce a vivid-ethnographic account of the ways such responses materialize into intimidatory, harassing and criminalizing activity targeting migrant female sex workers. Maldonado’s work unveils the tensions and contradictions present in the global efforts to curtail the spread of human trafficking, and demonstrates how they have been used to militarize border regions at the expense of migrant women’s safety.

Based on surveys and in-depth face-to-face interviews carried out with 360 young people in custody in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua – labeled as one of the most dangerous cities in the world – Cirenía Chavez-Villegas examines how material aspirations play a role in young people's entry into illicit enterprising activities, yet far from constitute the only motivation to remain involved in them. The study finds that although youths share similar definitions of what constitutes a “good life” that are based on material possessions, they are simultaneously reluctant to define their experience on material terms alone. Instead, involvement is often conceptualized as the means to mobilize care and protection, often from behind bars, for younger siblings, unemployed or underemployed sisters, mothers, grandmothers or other female relatives.

Arely Cruz-Santiago writes about the ways in which the families of disappeared and missing people in Mexico, amid the lack of political will on the part of the authorities and long-standing feuds among NGOs and international organizations, have developed their own tools for forensic inquiry. Many of these tools emerged as individual, even impromptu attempts to locate and identify disappeared and missing loved ones. Yet by allowing for systematic data collection – and given the importance of data as legitimate mechanisms for analysis and awareness-raising – the tools allowed to show that cases involving missing and disappeared people did not constitute isolated incidents, but rather a widespread security challenge. As Mexico's criminal justice system continues to colossally fail at investigating and providing answers to these cases, the production of citizen-led forensic knowledge has begun to tip the scales on behalf of many families looking for answers. Cruz-Santiago focuses on how from the onset women – in particular the mothers of the missing and disappeared – have been at the forefront of the movement to demand responses from Mexican justice agencies while redefining and claiming scientific forms of forensic knowledge.

Finally, relying on collaborative, participatory research carried out with teenagers who worked as facilitators of migrant journeys on the US-Mexico border city of Ciudad Juarez, Gabriella Sanchez and Sheldon Zhang challenge the widespread claims that drug trafficking operators dominate the migrant smuggling market, forcibly enlisting teenagers into their ranks. The claims, often mobilized as evidence of the spread of human trafficking on the US Mexico border, are not supported by the data collected by the teenagers themselves. Recruited instead by friends and family members, although certainly motivated by the potential for financial returns, the teenagers work in the facilitation of border crossings, developing keen understandings of the experiences of migrants, perceptions tied to gender, protection and responsibility. Furthermore, as also shown in the contribution by Chavez in this issue, by generating an income in a context where employment and education options are scant, teenagers achieve social status, as well as increased family recognition. Participation in the smuggling market, not unlike any other in the licit sphere, constitutes for the teenagers a legitimate form of labor and is far from being the result of pressures exerted by local organized crime alone.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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