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# In Their Own Words: Children and the Facilitation of Migrant Journeys on the U.S.-Mexico Border

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## ABSTRACT

This study follows a group of 18 young people living the US-Mexico border city of Juarez who participate in assisting migrants to cross into the US clandestinely. As young mobility facilitators, the children are quick to adapt to market conditions and connect their social resources and knowledge of the geography to eke out a living. However, their experiences are also reflective of a complex series of community building and self-fulfillment dynamics not documented in the literature of the practice known by the state as migrant smuggling. Relying on data collected by the children themselves, we argue that increased securitization and border hardening have brought about income-generating practices to people living along the U.S.-Mexico border. But that rather than these being solely tied to the activities of transnational organized crime (namely, drug trafficking organizations) said practices constitute community-based responses to the increasing marginalization and inequality afflicting Mexico's Northern border region. Findings in this study challenge mainstream perceptions concerning migrant smuggling dynamics, and open new possibilities in our understanding of the motivations and lives of the people behind migrant journeys.

## KEYWORDS

Ciudad Juarez; migrant Smuggling; children; organized crime; US-Mexico border

## Introduction

Ciudad Juarez, a city on the Mexican side on the U.S.-Mexico border, is often depicted as one of the most dangerous cities in the world, and as the stomping grounds of transnational organized crime. Both claims have been used by the U.S. and Mexican governments to justify repressive policing and surveillance measures in the city, disproportionately impacting those living in its most marginalized neighborhoods. Known locally as *colonias* (colonies), these neighborhoods tend to be in the immediate proximity of the border fence separating the U.S. from Mexico, what simultaneously makes them ideal locations for the performance of cross-border illicit activities, including drug trafficking and smuggling of migrants.

While many *colonia* residents often participate in these activities as an income-generating strategy, there has been a recent trend in U.S. – Mexico border academic, policy and media circles to focus on the experiences of children. Stories and studies describe them as victims of abject poverty, which makes them an easy target of drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) or *cartels*, who forcibly recruit and exploit them. The

children are also depicted as ridden by a vast range of pathologies, including an almost preternatural inclination to violence, and as ignored by their careless and ignorant parents.

We argue that the characterization of children as inherently violent and pathological recruits of organized crime fits a state-centric security narrative that justifies their criminalization, and that of their families and their communities. The widely accepted but contradictory claim in which children appear on the one hand as exploited, poor and desperate victims, but on the other as predators in the making, ultimately justifies their marginalization, and leaves the conditions that lead to their involvement in criminalized activities unexamined and unaddressed.

This essay documents a qualitative study of the perspectives of a group of children from the *colonias* with a history of involvement in the facilitation for profit of irregular migration across the U.S. -Mexico border (a practice legally known as migrant smuggling). Recognizing the children's ability to articulate their own decisions and perspectives, we challenge the narrow claims that simplistically frame them as victims of organized crime. Children participate in the facilitation of irregular migration encouraged by the potential of financial returns, but their roles also allow them to attain social status and to fulfill gendered expectations. Most remarkably, the tasks they carry out constitute intricate, often intimate forms of emotional labor performed to improve their lives, those of their friends and family members, and ultimately those of the people whose journeys they facilitate. This contribution problematizes the sensationalistic portrayals of children as natural criminals or victims in need of rescue present in mainstream academic and media discourses, by prioritizing the dynamics the children themselves articulate as important in their experiences as facilitators of mobility.

## Dismantling smuggling

Migrant smuggling – legally defined as the facilitation of the illicit entry of a person into a country different from his or her own – is virtually inherent to the contemporary global discourse on migration management and border security.<sup>1</sup> Said discourse has had a tendency to racialize smuggling facilitators as adult men of color from the global south (Sanchez, 2018), and to portray them as organized into transnational criminal networks which relying on complex business models take advantage of the desperation and vulnerability of migrants worldwide (Europol-Interpol, 2016).

Smugglers are also described as having connections to other members of the criminal pantheon, ranging from drug traffickers to weapon smugglers to terrorists, and to generate USD billion-size profits (Greenfield, Nunez-Neto, Mitch, Chang, & Rosas, 2019; International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2017; UNODC, 2018) that are recirculated to allow for the global expansion of their hierarchical, closed and secret mafias, whose domains are said to have reached gigantic dimensions (Naim, 2005; Shelley, 2010).

While these claims are commonplace, empirical evidence backing them up is scant at best (Aziz, Monzini, & Pastore, 2015; Zhang, Sanchez, & Achilli, 2018). While indeed, migrants' testimonies provide abundant evidence of violence and abuse, the facilitators of their journeys are hardly the only ones behind these acts, which often include law enforcement officials, immigration authorities and ordinary citizens (Isacson, Meyer, & Morales, 2014; Sanchez, 2016a; Zhang, 2007). Furthermore, the few empirical studies tracing the economics of migrant smuggling suggest earnings are in fact quite limited

(Achilli, 2018; Izcara Palacios, 2017; Koser, 2008), and that the connections smuggling facilitators have with other criminal groups appear to be the result, rather than of groups coming structurally together, of the fact that they often share similar territories, and that their actions are targeted by similar if not the same authorities (Sanchez & Zhang, 2018).

In addition, recent empirical work on the facilitation of migration has been critical of the over-reliance on criminological lenses in its analyses, as it reproduces state-centric concerns over the movement of people (Baird & van Liempt, 2016; Van Liempt & Sersli, 2013). Empirical evidence has in fact shown the facilitation of migration is comprised by community-based strategies of mobility that have become manufactured as criminal by migration regimes worldwide under the term migrant smuggling (Ayalew, Adugna, & Deshingkar, 2018; Brachet, 2018). In short, a growing body of critical scholarship has examined and problematized the discursive construction of migration facilitation as inherently criminal, highlighting its social embeddedness in an effort to go beyond the often simplistic and anecdotal characterizations present in academic, policy and media debates.

Despite these advances, many researchers continue to privilege criminological frameworks alone – that is, to frame the facilitation of irregular migration strictly as a crime, and to focus on its *modus operandi*, the profiles of their actors and the extent and nature of their ties. Research on smuggling often draws from official, secondary sources like wiretaps and court records (see for examples Campana, 2018; Sanchez, 2016a) or from the experiences of victimized migrants alone (see O’Leary, 2009). Furthermore, there are only a few ethnographic examples documenting the experiences of facilitators themselves (Baird & van Liempt, 2016), and those that exist have focused on the experiences of adult and male facilitators only, demonstrating the strong tendency to gender smuggling as male (Sanchez, 2018).

While research on the roles of women in the facilitation of migrant journeys is extremely scant (see Zhang, Chin, & Miller, 2007; Sanchez, 2016b for examples), the experiences of young people and children as facilitators of migrants’ journeys – including their own – have been easier to document. We now know children pilot migrant boats (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012; IOM 2016), serve as guides and decoys (Palmer & Missbach, 2017), and often recruit other children into the market (Derechos Humanos Integrales en Acción [DHIA], 2017). Some are known to carry out these tasks in exchange of wages or in-kind compensation, while many others do so to offset the costs of their own migratory journeys (IOM, 2016; UNICEF & IOM, 2017). Some may be migrants in transit, while others are residents of communities along the migration pathway who profit from their knowledge of the land (Achilli et al., 2017).

This body of research has been fundamental to identify the contexts and locations in which children participate in the facilitation of migrant journeys. However, there have been few efforts to incorporate children’s perspectives into the theoretical and/or empirical analyses of migration facilitation. This contribution seeks to reduce that gap.

## **The U.S. Mexico border and Ciudad Juarez**

For decades, Ciudad Juarez (or Juarez, as its residents know it) has been the site of attempts from both the U.S. and Mexico governments to contain the flow of narcotics, weapons and other forms of contraband, through increased policing, the construction of walls and fences, and more recently via widespread militarization and high-tech surveillance (Andreas, 2012; Campbell, 2010; Díaz, 2015).

Due to its strategic location and proximity to the U.S. city of El Paso, Juarez has a long history as a contraband hub. By the late 1800 Chinese migrants deported under the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 were traveling to Juarez to reenter the United States with the assistance of local smuggling facilitators (Chao-Romero, 2011; Hansen, 2006). During the U.S. Prohibition, Juarez also became an important destination for those seeking to circumvent the alcohol ban and acquire other illicit goods and services in the process. Scholars have argued that it was the expertise acquired in alcohol production, distribution and contraband what set the stage for Juarez-based criminal groups to eventually become prominent players in the contemporary, cross-border drug trafficking market (Astorga, 2005; Carey, 2008).

But Juarez's reputation is not based on its distant past alone. The systematic disappearances and murders of women in the city have generated energetic demands to address the decades-long predicament of gender-based violence (Staudt & Méndez, 2015; Cruz-Santiago, this issue). Juarez's location has also made the city the center of territorial disputes among competing DTOs, leading to countless waves of violence and bloodshed – Juarez has in fact been repeatedly listed among the most violent cities in the world (Newsweek, 2010). The launch of a nationwide counter-crime strategy during the administration of Mexican president Felipe Calderon – known widely as “Mexico's Drug War” (Lee, Renwick, & Cara-Labrador, 2019) – also marked a particularly violent period in the history of Juarez, characterized by battles between government forces and DTOs. Civil society has condemned the widespread harassment and human rights violations local residents systematically experience at the hands of state and federal authorities, and the high numbers of casualties and disappearances involving people caught in the crossfire (Payan, Staudt, & Kruszewski, 2013).

Under the Trump administration, the arrival of thousands of people to Juarez seeking to apply for humanitarian protection in the U.S. has been the source of much tension and confusion. By July of 2019, at least 12,000 people were waiting in Juarez for court hearings in front of U.S. immigration authorities.<sup>2</sup> The people's visibility and exposure have made them easy target of abuses at the hands of locals, con-artists, authorities and criminal actors alike. Criminal practices – from scams, theft, extortion to assaults and kidnappings – are commonplace (Leutert et al., 2018). Many of those waiting are known to connect with people who facilitate clandestine border crossings in an effort to expedite their entry into the United States, unable or unwilling to remain in an unwelcoming and dangerous city.

In sum, Juarez's long history of crime and violence cannot be denied. Yet none of the dynamics that have throughout history generated so much interest on the part of media, policy makers and scholars alike are inherent to the city, nor can be attributed to its criminal element alone. Juarez, as many other communities on both sides of the U.S. Mexico border, has endured decades of poverty and marginalization (Donelson & Esparza, 2016; Fragoso & Bejarano, 2010). Large sections of the city – particularly those in the immediacy of the fence separating Mexico from the U.S. – lack basic services like water, electricity and sewage. Unemployment and lack of access to educational and recreational activities in the *colonias* are also pervasive (Núñez & Heyman, 2007). Some *colonia* residents have often opted to join local underground or informal economies in an attempt to reduce their precarity. Some of these have over time become increasingly stigmatized, criminalized and targeted by authorities (Flores, 2013; Guerra, 2015). While participation in drug trafficking activities is perhaps the most known of them, the facilitation of

irregular migration is also a common activity in the *colonias*, one often performed by young people and children (DHIA, 2017).

### Children and their participation in criminalized activities

The involvement of children in criminalized informal practices in Juarez has not gone unnoticed. They are often portrayed in local and international media as lost boys, victims of parental neglect, inherently violent and addicted to alcohol and hard drugs (Lucero, 2018; Melesio & Holman, 2017). Depictions of them as forced recruits of organized crime who exploits them as child-age snipers, drug traffickers or migrant smugglers (Burnett, 2009; Guerrero, 2017; Slater, 2017) are also common.

Cases of children in conditions of marginalization exploited by criminal actors have been well documented. Yet this research has often faced criticism for the way it provides no room for children to articulate their own perspectives or to explain the complexities of their experiences beyond those that narrowly describe them as victims or offenders. Critical scholars have raised concerns over the ways children are portrayed as exploited, poor and desperate victims (Howard, 2014; Okyere, 2018), offspring to greedy, ignorant and backward parents (Heidbrink & Statz, 2017; Howard, 2012) but also as predators in the making, leaving the criminalization of their communities and their families unexamined. In the case of Juarez, the distorted and simplistic narrative of the child smuggler has also been reproduced by local authorities and academics, and has even been used to justify the surveillance and criminalization of local youth. Children and young people from the *colonias* report systematically enduring harassment and intimidation at the hands of local authorities (Chavez-Villegas, 2018; Chavez-Villegas this issue), who claim that by virtue of being from *colonias* the children can be no other than recruits of local DTOs or *cartels* operating in the city (Hernandez & Segura, 2018; Melesio & Holman, 2017).

As Heidbrink shows, a growing body of research highlights the ways “children are agents of transnational caregiving as their paid labor and unpaid care work circulates through geographic and virtual spaces and across generations” (2018, p. 31). These forms of labor, however, tend to be “often overlooked and undervalued” (Baldassar & Pyke, 2014, p. 129). In what follows we show how the social practices present in the facilitation of migrant journeys, carry multiple meanings for the children—including hope and resistance (Smith, 2013). Said meanings are manifested through labor, performed rather than on behalf of organized criminal entities alone, with the intention of improving the quality of life of the children themselves, their families, and those whose journeys they facilitate. We rely on the children’s perspectives to demonstrate how the dominant ways of thinking about the facilitation of migrant journeys as smuggling has privileged “systems with global reach” over “locally informed systems of knowledge production” (Engle-Merry, 2016, p. 3).

### Methods

This essay documents a qualitative study of the perspectives of a group of children from the *colonias* with a history of involvement in the facilitation for profit of irregular migration across the U.S. -Mexico border (a practice legally known as migrant smuggling). It was carried out in the summers of 2017 and 2018 alongside 18 teenage children from four *colonias* in the periphery of Ciudad Juarez. All 18 children – 2 girls and 16 boys – were

identified as “circuit children” by Mexican welfare authorities. The term is used officially to designate children who are systematically involved in the facilitation of migrant journeys and/or drug trafficking on the U.S.- Mexico border (Moreno Mena & Avedaño Millán, 2015; Peña & Garcia-Mendoza, 2019). Contact with the children was made through a partnership between the authors and a Juárez-based NGO working with children with a history of involvement in the facilitation of migrant journeys.

The 18 children who contributed to this article had received educational training and psychological treatment at the NGO for at least six months by the time they were invited to participate in the project. The children were preselected by the NGO’s staff by virtue of their level of engagement with their treatment, their attendance record, and their commitment to academic activities as evidenced by their academic performance. The children were informed they were being considered to participate as co-researchers in a study to learn about the experiences of children like themselves. Each one of them was also offered a USD \$150 stipend for their participation.

Once the children had accepted this preliminary invitation, NGO staff sought parental consent, given the children’s age. Once this was granted, the children were officially invited to participate and asked to sign a consent form (known as assent) outlining the tasks related to their participation, the project’s objectives, the voluntary nature of the study and the compensation they would receive.

The project involved two phases. The first phase took place in the months of July and August of 2017 and involved the participation of 9 children. A second phase took place in June and July of 2018, and included an additional 9 participants. During each phase the research team – comprised by the children, two senior social workers, one anthropologist, one education specialist, one journalist and one social work undergraduate student – received training on how to develop research questions, how to conduct face-to-face interviews and focus groups, how to take fieldnotes and analyze them, and on research ethics. The entire team also attended workshops on the use of photography, journalistic writing and hip hop as dissemination strategies.

Aware of the stigma and criminalization that *colonia* children face, the project was participatory and grounded in nature. It “focus[ed] on a process of sequential reflection and action, carried out with and by local people rather than on them” (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995), while developing knowledge through the collection and analysis of research data that “remained closely tied to real-world social processes (...) resisting, enhancing or adding greater depth” (Hesse-Biber & Flowers, 2019, p. 498) to mainstream discourses on the facilitation of migration. Drawing from the work of Achilli (2018), Zhang (2007) and Sanchez (2016a) with facilitators of irregular migration, and acknowledging the practice of facilitation as socially embedded (Ayalew et al., 2018; Brachet, 2018), the project sought to privilege how children themselves perceived the impact of control and regulatory structures on the U.S. Mexico border on their lives, as well as the relations that emerged between them and the people whose journeys they facilitated.

The research process involved visiting multiple locations in the city of Juárez, and the analysis of naturalistic interactions among the children and their friends, family members and acquaintances, as well as with the general public. Together the team attended parties, religious ceremonies, community gatherings held in the colonias; visited museums, parks and historical sites frequented by locals; carried out field visits to isolated or remote areas



of the colonias, to the fence that separates the U.S. from Mexico, and to three border bridges connecting Juarez with the City of El Paso.

The fieldwork generated three kinds of data: audio files from interviews with interlocutors identified during exchanges in public places, individually prepared fieldwork notes taken during field visits to the colonias, the border fence and the border bridges, and video and photographs taken during all fieldwork activities.

Interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the respondents and later transcribed. Notes from fieldwork activities were written into field memoranda for analysis. Photographs taken during fieldwork sessions were also discussed during photo-elicitation research meetings, generating conversations among members and yielding additional data and knowledge. Data were then coded into thematic categories selected collectively and under the guidance of the children. The categories were then used to trace the meanings children ascribe to their experiences in the facilitation of migration.

All activities were conducted in Spanish, during daytime hours. No deception was used. To protect the identity and the privacy of the children all names used in this article are pseudonyms, and the names of their specific *colonias* are not named.

## Findings

### *Who are the children who facilitate migrant journeys?*

The children whose experiences are included in this essay were 18 adolescents (two of them girls) between the ages of 14 and 17; they were residents of four *colonias* in the western part of Ciudad Juarez located in the immediate vicinity of the U.S.-Mexico border fence. They were all born in Juarez, and lived primarily with their nuclear families (i.e., parents and siblings). Two lived in single-parent households, and one lived with an older sister and her family. It was also common for the children to live close to other relatives – older siblings, uncles, aunts and grandparents.

The children were in many instances caregivers themselves, for they were responsible for their younger siblings during their parents' work hours. During phase two, two of them had families of their own. One boy had two infant children, and one of the girls had a son who often accompanied her during the research project.

All children had dropped out of school by age 11. They had an average of 6 years of basic, formal education. By the time of their referral to the NGO none were enrolled in school, and often claimed this was the reason they had become involved in the facilitation of migrant journeys. Some of the children presented learning disabilities. One of the girls (a 17-year old) was unable to read or write, while a 15 year-old boy had difficulty reading.

The girls did not report prior experiences with drugs or alcohol to the adults in the group; 14 of the boys disclosed drinking alcohol occasionally, and smoking marijuana recreationally. The use of *agua celeste* – a low-cost solvent – was also reported during the research sessions. One of the boys was receiving drug treatment at the time of the project.

### *"My colonia is chida<sup>3</sup>": children and the borderscape*

While *colonias* are perceived or depicted as high risk, off-limits areas by most of Juarez's residents, the children did not consider them threatening or frightening. By virtue of being



born and raised in them, children were quite familiar with their layout, and described them as welcoming, for their friends and family members also lived there.

Most children enjoyed describing the ways in which they would spend afternoons among friends, visiting relatives or meeting people, attending social gatherings or merely interacting with locals. *Colonias* were repeatedly articulated as important places for recreation and community building, but most importantly, as safe spaces, despite the kinds of activities that often took place in them. Jenny, a 17-year old girl described:

“When I see pictures of my *colonia*, it feels nice. I think, “see? That’s where I’m from. [Pointing at a picture of the neighborhood taken earlier that day]: there is my aunt’s house, my mom’s house, the street where I play with my friends. There are poor people, and yes, there are also bad people. But it is where I live, you see? We get together, party together, go to school together. I really like my *colonia*, it is *chida* (cool). I miss it when I’m gone. I really do.”

The children become knowledgeable and aware of the space and the people who live in their *colonias* from an early age, given the remoteness of their communities, the limited availability of public transportation, and the lack of formal streets or roads. They walk to get to most sections of their neighborhoods, devising new paths or shortcuts in the process.

The very fact that *colonias* tend to be in the immediate proximity of the border fence also means the children grow on its shadow and on that of the multiple surveillance and monitoring structures set up by U.S. authorities to prevent irregular or undetected crossings. Towers, motion detectors and high-power lighting set up for this purpose on the U.S.-side of the border often become important landmarks, along with bodies of water or geological formations like dunes or hills.

Gerardo, a 16 year old boy, narrated the importance of one of the region’s geographic markers, the Cross Hill (*El Cerro de la Cruz*) in his understanding of the border landscape and its risks. Along with its scarped terrain and extreme temperatures (which in the summer time easily exceed 40 degrees Celsius), the hill is known for the constant presence of U.S. immigration authorities, as portions of it are within U.S. territory consistently monitored for illegal activity:

“[Pointing at the Cross Hill during fieldwork] Well of course I know *el cerro*, we played there all the time! I live like three blocks away from it. I played there as a kid, so I knew where the good hiding places were. I just had to do what I always did: go up the hill, hide, as us kids do! But what happened was that one day my friends and I were bored and they said, hey, let’s try to go up and off we went but we didn’t considered the weather. It was really hot. I didn’t think about that. And so after two hours of walking I was like forget this, I can’t do this. And so we just sat by a little shrine that was up there and waited. [We knew that U.S.] immigration would come by really fast.”

While the children had extensive knowledge of the geography of their neighborhoods, their awareness of other parts of the city was limited, which pointed to the *colonias*’ remote location and difficult access. It also attested to the high level of policing exerted on the children by themselves and others. Few ventured outside the *colonias*, fearful of being pointed as outsiders or troublemakers, or of being arrested by police. They were aware that the parts of the city they called home generated fear among the people of Juarez. The widespread criminalization of youth in the city also made them the ideal targets of harassment and abuse by the public at large. The children reported having been followed

by security guards at stores, or being asked to leave public places like malls or supermarkets. Some of the children were in fact reluctant to carry out field observations, fearing that local residents could question their presence or even attack them. Angelo, a 16 year-old, refused to stay with his team during a fieldtrip to the city market and asked to join a different group:

Angelo: No, I don't want to go to the market. I rather go to the bridge.

Lead: Why? What happened?

Angelo: I worked there a while ago but I had to cover my tattoos because people thought I was one of those kids who get in trouble and so my boss just let me go one day. I don't want trouble.

As a team, we eventually realized that the children's body language and demeanor were indeed interpreted as dangerous and threatening whenever outside the *colonias*. On one occasion while visiting a family restaurant, the arrival of the children generated a strong reaction from the waiters, who were reluctant to approach the table to take their order. The head waiter eventually made contact not without making a remark about the children: "They look hard core, your kids."

In sum, the children felt safe and welcome in their neighborhoods despite the latter's infrastructure lags. Yet venturing into other neighborhoods or parts of the city made them uncomfortable, for they were well aware of their profiling as inherently dangerous and prone to cause trouble. This considerably limited their ability to interact with larger society or access public spaces.

### ***Crossing the border: forced labor or independent work?***

Local and international media often report on border youth as passive and naive soldiers of transnational criminal groups. Stories of children being forcibly recruited by DTOs who exploit them are common in the narratives mobilized by law enforcement on both sides of the border and are often used to justify children's detention beyond what is established by U.S. and Mexican law.<sup>4</sup>

None of the children selected for either phase of this project reported having been recruited by force. Their records showed no indication of involvement with DTOs or local gangs. Most importantly, our goal was not to identify the children's membership to specific groups, but to allow them to provide a more nuanced explanation of the circumstances that led them to participate in informal forms of labor – including the facilitation of migrant journeys.

For most children, their entry into the practice was the result of happenstance. They had not necessarily looked for an opportunity to join, but the very fact that they spent considerable amounts of time in the streets as a result of having dropped out of school or being unemployed made them visible to those seeking assistance with their own efforts to facilitate migrant journeys (often their own friends or family members). Alberto explained how at age 11 and having dropped out of school, he was offered work as a lookout:

"I had stopped going to school, I used to get bored there. And so my friend invited me to work as an *halcón* (hawk) for those times when the older kids crossed people. I had nothing

else to do, and my friend and I would just go, sit by the place where we usually hung out anyway and help them out. I [remember thinking], who cares, at least I am making some money, right? So I stuck around and worked with them for a while.”

Another important reason the children accepted or sought opportunities to facilitate migrant journeys was the level of precarity experienced by themselves or their families. Boys in particular pointed out how their mothers were often worried or concerned about making ends meet, or of how their sisters often lacked the means to cover basic expenses like food or diapers for their infants. The sister of one of the project’s participants spoke about the conditions her family faced at the time her brother started to work in the facilitation of migrant journeys:

“Both my parents passed on and I was already married, so I brought my little brother and sister to live with us. But my brother realized pretty fast that we were struggling financially; he was not dumb. My husband did not earn much and I could not get a job because there was nobody who could help me watch my children. One day my brother just came home and gave me money and said, “here, so that you can buy us food.” I got scared because he was only 13 and I wondered, where [did he get] all this money from? I asked him, and he wouldn’t tell me. “What do you care,” he said, “I am just tired of seeing you guys struggle. Just take it.” I didn’t like that he was [involved in the facilitation of migrant journeys] but I was like, what else is there for him to do? [My husband and I] would sit down with him, tell him we wanted him to go back to school. But my brother also knew we couldn’t afford that, and so he just kept working with this other boy his age.”

Children who were parents themselves also mentioned that since due to their age they could not become legally employed, their employment options were quite limited. Carlos, 16, explained how conducting border crossings allowed him to provide for his girlfriend and daughter:

“My girl got pregnant, and there was no way I could earn the money I needed anywhere else. Businesses don’t hire you because you are too young, and when you tell them you are from the *colonias* they say, no way, you guys are trouble. And I needed to provide for my girl. So I started to get people across to make money. And I was good at it. I was able to rent us a place. I could take my girlfriend to the doctor. And when my baby girl was born I could buy her diapers, formula.”

While guiding migrants across the border does in fact generate significant returns – children reported a successful crossing could generate anywhere between USD\$60 to USD\$100 per person – most of these high-profit opportunities were not available to all children. Most were simply paid nominal amounts for walking groups of migrants to meeting points, running errands, serving as lookouts, or distracting law enforcement officers. Many children also reported that as a result of working with friends or family, they were often not paid, and lacked the ability or status to demand payment whenever this was denied. Despite these challenges, children did benefit financially – if not systematically – from their occasional participation in amounts that often exceeded the minimum wage.

### ***“The good things that can happen to you”: social recognition and empowerment***

While income generation was important, it was only one of several aspects the children considered important or valuable as part of their experiences. Working in the facilitation of migrant journeys was seen as a path toward social recognition and acceptance. In the case of

boys – who constitute the vast majority of those apprehended for the facilitation of migrant journeys (DHIA, 2017) – being employed often allowed them to assume household roles restricted to adult men, like being able to discipline younger siblings or making decisions regarding purchases. Girls reported sharing their income with their mothers to cover household expenses, or to purchase basic necessities for their own children and/or younger siblings.

Income allowed the children to articulate and mobilize specific gendered behaviors, but also to provide forms of care and support that had been until then restricted or unavailable to them. Marco, a teenage boy who started working as a guide at age 12, described how his involvement in the facilitation of migrant journeys suddenly led him to become his family's main provider – a role that had been vacant from the time his father had abandoned his mother. Through work, Marco had the opportunity to fulfil “gendered social hierarchies and expectations” but also a chance to “reproduce and reinforce them” (Miller & Carbone-Lopez, 2015, p. 693). Marco's earnings impacted his family life, but also his level of social recognition:

“I was able to buy pizza for everyone. You know, the one with ham and pineapple – that was my favorite. I was only 12 but I knew what it meant to be able to buy that with my money, for my little siblings. *Se siente bonito* (it feels good) to be able to buy shoes and clothes for everyone, to tell my mom not to worry, that I can take care of things. It's [one of] the good things that can happen to you. I also realized that my little siblings [started to] look up to me, more as a father than as a brother. They called me *papá*. And my boss liked me because I was a good worker. That also made me feel good, that I could be of service, that what I did meant something.”

The ability to contribute with a significant source of income to their households provided much personal satisfaction to the children, for this also granted them social status that they then solidified through consumer practices (see also Chavez-Villegas, this issue). Having spending money granted access to what they considered were age-appropriate experiences and that could have been off-limits to them due to the lack of resources (“like having a nice cell phone, going to the movies, eating out, things like those, things people my age do” German, a 15 year-old said). Income also allowed the children to improve the way they felt about themselves. The day after the first half of the project stipend was paid out, most children arrived with new outfits and fresh haircuts. Ramiro, 14, commented he had not been able to buy new clothes or go to a real barber in months, something he was able to do regularly with the income derived from facilitating migrant journeys. “I want to look good, and you can't do that without money.” Nando, 17, also spent his stipend on clothes, hoping these could make him “feel more confident, maybe this way people won't think I am from the *colonias*.” Nazareth, one of the two girls, confided she would give half of her earnings to her mother, since “she also deserved to buy something nice for herself” and had given her permission to join the project.

### ***The facilitation of migration as care work***

While the facilitation of migration is traditionally depicted as criminal and profit-driven, the children's testimonies reflect how most tasks performed in the process constitute a form of care work, aiming to improve the lives of their families, but also those of migrants, who are not seen as clients or objects alone, but often as peers. The children reported participating in the facilitation of migrant journeys had given them an improved understanding of the challenges related to irregular migration, and often compared the

experiences of the migrants they assisted with their own. Conversations on how migrants' families reminded them of their own were common. In her work as a decoy Michelle, 17, often witnessed how the fear and the anxiety migrants experienced during their crossing turned into relief and excitement when reunited with their families:

"It is very sad that you can't be with your family because of what is going on at the border. I always felt bad about the people we crossed. Why? Because we are poor but we have always been together [as a family]. If it is not my mom the one who cares for my boy and my little siblings it is me, so I understand that it is only natural for people wanting to be with their families. So I believe there is nothing wrong with migrants wanting that too, and if we can help them, even better. It felt good dropping people off and watching them reunite with their families, holding each other, crying. That always made me cry."

The children also spoke of moments of closeness and intimacy arising from everyday interactions between them and migrants. They often reported caring for the people they crossed, becoming concerned about the conditions they faced while in their company, creating friendships with other young boys or girls, encouraging those who had become injured or too tired to continue. Documenting these interactions pointed at the ways, as Vogt argues, in which "care, trust and profit could not be separated [on] the migration route" (2018, p. 16).

Ramiro—a 16 year old who began facilitating migrant journeys at age 11 driving groups of migrants – explained how women and girls reminded him of his own mother and sisters, and how thinking about the gendered risks they could face if traveling clandestinely often led him to get them out of safe houses (the places where migrants wait in preparation of their journeys) first:

"I always looked for the women at the safe houses. Don't ask me why, I just did. I guess they reminded me of my mom and my sisters. I would walk in, find them, wake them up if they were asleep and tell them, "wake up, I am here to drive you, let's go, you don't have to stay here." I had heard really bad stories of what happens to women when they cross the border and I didn't want anything to happen to them. And then we would get in the car and we would be all quiet, but then I will try to put them at ease by telling jokes and they would ask me how old I was and whenever I told them they would laugh because I was so young and that would break the ice. I wanted them to feel safe, that they could trust me. Sometimes we would exchange [cell phone] numbers and they would text me when they arrived at their destination. It felt nice to be part of what they went through, that I could help."

Ronald – a 14 year-old who also worked as a guide – shared an incident with a man who became discouraged by the harshness of the crossing and who was reluctant to continue the journey:

"I got to cross this older guy, but we had a difficult crossing, it had been really hard; we climbed the fence and then had to walk for a while without shoes and our feet were all covered with thorns. And he then began to cry, and I felt bad, poor old man, I thought, and he looked at me and said, encourage me my son, tell me something that will make me keep going because I am ready to give up. And I told him, hey mister, don't get sad, can't you see how close we are? Come on, let's keep walking, we are almost there. And I encouraged him and he got happy again and we got to the safe house and his family was already there waiting for him. Everyone cried. Man, I felt so happy, I thought I was going to cry too, because I knew how hard it had been for him and I was able to give him hope. It was nice."

### *When things go wrong*

The experiences shared by the children were also packed with reminders that their participation in facilitating migrant journeys was far from safe. There were two specific kinds of events the children considered dangerous: incidents involving the security infrastructure or the physical and virtual barriers separating the U.S. from Mexico, and acts of physical and emotional violence experienced at the hands of other people, including their peers and family members, but in particular, U.S. immigration authorities.

Most children sustained injuries while guiding groups through inaccessible or rugged corridors at night, when operating tools or heavy equipment, or running away from the authorities. Scratches, cuts, bone dislocations and fractures; bites by dogs, insects or desert fauna were common. Ricardo spoke about the time he had almost drowned while crossing a canal:

“One night we were out working; we were not expecting it but the floodgates were unlocked and [when I went into the canal] the current dragged me; I would not touch the bottom of the canal. The good thing is that we were working [in pairs] and my partner here [patting his friend on the shoulder] pulled me out by the collar of my shirt. If it hadn’t been for him I think I would have died that night.”

Contrary to media and official reports that trace the participation and the forms of violence the children endure to organized crime alone, children reported experiencing emotional and physical abuse at the hands of a vast range of actors. Other children, friends and family members, members of other criminal groups and law enforcement were the most common perpetrators of acts of violence against them. For example, Carlos, who was 17 at the time of the project, explained how at age 14 he decided he no longer wanted to participate in the facilitation of migrant journeys. He wanted “a normal life, not having to get up so early or work on Saturdays.” When he communicated his decision to the older teenager who had originally recruited him, this one beat him, blindfolded and tied him to a tree, and threatened to unleash a fight dog against him if he quit.

Children also felt extreme pressure to remain in the market given their families’ financial expectations and needs. Manolo for example, decided to quit the job at age 13 to be with his girlfriend and daughter, and started to pack groceries instead. Unable to make ends meet, he re-joined the small facilitation crew he had worked from the time he was 11, and remained working with them until his apprehension by U.S. authorities. A child known to the group opted to turn himself to U.S. authorities after his father had refused to let him quit his job as a guide, given how much the child’s family had come to rely on his earnings.

While the children did disclose having to report to a boss or group leader, there was no indication that these commanded large groups or gangs, or that they were affiliated to larger groups (that is, DTOs). The children pointed out that becoming involved with DTOs posed much risk for themselves and their families, so they avoided interacting with them as much as possible. Involvement in drug trafficking activities also carried more stigma than the facilitation of migrant journeys, and the children describe it as a risk that was not manageable by “a person our age.”

This does not suggest that children did not have encounters with people involved in other criminalized activities, including drug trafficking. As mentioned earlier, by virtue of sharing a strategic location for contraband activity, interactions were quite common, and not always pleasant. Children reported having endured threats, intimidation, or on



occasion, being beaten or chased for using or entering into a location or path designated off-limits by another group. During a focus group, one of the children indicated he had become so scared following one of such incidents, he moved temporarily to another state fearing retaliation. The rest of the children acknowledged it was important to avoid specific routes and to work in pairs whenever possible to prevent incidents of this nature.

While admittedly, the interactions described above posed serious threats to the children's wellbeing, encounters with law enforcement officers – and in particular, with those ascribed to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (U.S. CBP) – were consistently described as the most dangerous of all.<sup>5</sup> Children reported U.S. authorities often retained them for long periods of time, and gave them no food or water as a form of punishment. The children also reported CBP agents interrogated them in plain sight without legal counsel or parental consent, threatening them with detention unless they provided intelligence related to their activities. There were also reports of agents forcing children to sign forms in English admitting to their involvement in smuggling. On occasion, these tense moments escalated, leading the children to become violent or verbally abusive, or to provide self-incriminatory statements, as happened to Jon (age 17):

“The CBP agent asked me how many times I had [crossed migrants] and I said, what do you care, idiot. Twenty, thirty, forty, I don't know. And the agent wrote it down as if that was true. I was mad. I was angry. I had gotten caught. He wrote it all down and then they just let me go. And then when they caught me again they sent me to court, and the [attorney for the government] said that I had [admitted to be a smuggler] to CBP agents in the past. [Laughs in frustration]. Damn it. What was I supposed to say? I didn't know.”

## Analysis and conclusions

Relying on grounded and participatory research, we find that the claim that frames children who participate in the facilitation of irregular migration on the U.S. Mexico border as forced recruits of organized crime is not only incomplete. It decontextualizes and homogenizes the local, social and subjective practices of children, stripping them of agency and narrowly depicting them as either victims of transnational organized crime or offenders in the making. In the process, these claims exempt the state from its responsibility at creating the very conditions that put both those seeking to improve their life through migration and those who facilitate their journeys at risk. Furthermore, contrary to the widely held perception that organized criminal groups dominate the facilitation of irregular migration, data show independent facilitators – in this case, children – also participate in the market, most often in an attempt to reduce their financial precarity. Facilitators as young as 11 partner with friends and family members to perform tasks necessary to enable migrant mobility, in the process generating returns to improve their personal finances as well as their social status.

Participation in the facilitation of migrant journeys, however, also constitutes a form of self-improvement and discovery to many young people. Contrary to the official and media discourse that tends to pathologize them as inherently criminal, and their parents as unfit, ignorant or backward, children make the decision to participate in the facilitation of migrant journeys, in the process also uncovering the “intimate, embodied and affective dimensions” (Vogt, 2018) present in irregular mobility processes. In other words, the sensationalistic stories of crime and vice that prevail in migration facilitation narratives



obscure the experiences of their actors – most notably, children – who through their roles fulfill important social obligations (see Heidbrink, 2018) while performing forms of emotional and intimate labor essential to their own wellbeing and survival.

It is simultaneously important not to romanticize the children's experiences. The *colonias*, while depicted by the children as safe and welcoming, present a multitude of challenges ranging from the lack of services to that of education and employment opportunities. The *colonias* are also an isolating environment that few can truly escape. The children's attempts to integrate to the larger society are often rejected by ordinary citizens and law enforcement who read them as outsiders, or troubled youth.

In sum, while *colonias* are home, they can also become what Núñez and Heyman (2007) refer to as forms of entrapment, as reduced alternatives and limited occupational activities foster the long-term marginalization of the children and reduce their ability to attain alternative forms of instruction and employment, but also to become integrated to the larger Juarez community, which perceives them as victims from afar, but as criminals when close.

The discourse that ties the experiences of the children to the actions of organized crime alone (for example, by narrowly defining them as forced recruits) is not only a simplistic explanation of their experiences. It limits the ability to think of alternatives for youth, allowing for their continued pathologization, marginalization and othering. The repertoire of images and narratives of *colonia* youth as members of organized crime are recirculated and reproduced by law enforcement to justify the often violent treatment given to children, as well as their institutionalization (Lucero, 2018; Observatorio Nacional, 2019). There was no shortage of reports concerning incidents of verbal abuse, physical assault and intimidation at the hands of law enforcement (primarily U.S. Customs and Border Protection personnel). One of the consequences of constructing the children as working for organized crime is the way it further facilitates their mistreatment and abuse, while giving the impression these responses are deserved.

There is one finding that from our perspective deserves special analysis. None of the children in either phase reported having direct ties to DTOs or other organized criminal groups. Granted, this may be a limitation tied to the size of the sample, the locations where the children lived, or simply a decision on the part of the children not to reveal these ties. However, we believe that there is a much more nuanced explanation for this, especially given the multiple references to encounters with other criminalized groups mentioned by the children. We argue that the barriers that once could have limited membership to illicit or illegalized markets and/or activities have become increasingly weakened as a result of the intense crackdown by the state against organized criminal groups. This reveals not only the limited effectiveness of the anti-crime strategy, but the rampant precarization of growing sectors of society amid stepped up border and migration enforcement and control.

The presence of children in this market does not suggest an increase in their targeting or forced recruitment, but to the growing marginalization and inequality faced by the people in the *colonias*. We again acknowledge the fact that the scant references to ties with DTOs on the part of the children may be related to the characteristics of the sample. Yet we also argue that this points to the existence of a more complex relationship between children and actors from other criminalized groups which is in urgent need to be critically and empirically examined.

We also base this claim on the way children speak about their participation in the facilitation of migrant journeys as part of a caregiving and survival strategy that reflect clear notions of care, social status and gender (see Heidbrink, 2018; Vogt, 2018). For example, while the parents of the children are portrayed in the media as disengaged, ignorant or weak, data indicate children often seek to pay back for the care and protection adults (parents, siblings or other relatives) provide for them. The children in fact often hid details concerning their participation in the facilitation of migrant journeys so not to worry their parents, who they described as overworked, depressed or tired. Being able to contribute, and at times to even become the main provider of their households was described consistently as a way to show love and respect for parents and siblings alike.

We also consider important to again highlight the forms of care and support provided among children themselves. As suggested by the testimonies above, children spend significant amounts of time together, looking out for each other and in some instances, performing actions that prevent them from becoming hurt or injured. The acts of support and encouragement they perform on behalf of the people whose journeys they facilitate further reveal how the provision of care constitutes an important element of their experience, and an opportunity to develop, but also to demonstrate, maturity and responsibility.

This project demonstrates how “little is known about how children in the context of migration care for each other as they navigate contradictory, complex and changeable immigration (...) systems” (Crafter, 2019). It also shows how children are also impacted by efforts to criminalize the facilitation of mobility worldwide. The presence of children in this market is not a mere manifestation of the spread of the Mexican organized crime groups (namely DTOs), but instead, an indicator of the increasing levels of inequality and marginalization they face and that emerge from the enactment of neoliberal economic practices in the country – a trend that converges with the decreased availability of paths for legal, safe and dignified mobility worldwide.

## Notes

1. Throughout this essay we use the term “facilitation of migrant journeys” rather than “smuggling” in an attempt to highlight the latter’s state-centric nature and the way it has come to criminalize mobility practices which are not inherently criminal. Along the same lines, while aware of the existence of local terms that are used to designate the children who participate in the facilitation of migration (“polleritos” or “coyotitos”) we opted not to use them for 1. the children do not use them and 2. the terms reproduce the criminal notions tied to the facilitation of migrant journeys and ascribe them onto children.
2. By November of 2019 an estimated 40.000 people were in waiting lists in multiple cities on the Mexican side of the U.S.- Mexico border.
3. “Cool” or “fun.”
4. Most “circuit children” are returned to Mexico a few hours after their apprehension by U.S. authorities; on occasion, given the time of the day, they may be kept overnight before being released to Mexico’s welfare agency.
5. At least six children have died after being shot by U.S. CBP agents. Two of them, Jose Antonio Elena Rodriguez and Sergio Hernandez Guereca, were accused of being involved in migrant smuggling.

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