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Between Movement and Menace: Migrant Vulnerability, Predatory Crime, and Victimization in Tapachula

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ABSTRACT

Specific border environments in the Global South operate as common but dangerous thoroughfares for migrants traveling to resettle in other countries. In the southern Mexican border city of Tapachula, migrants encounter a precarious risk environment where opportunities for their victimization abound due a complex series of state policies, institutional idiosyncrasies, and the proliferation of motivated offenders. This study adopts Routine Activity Theory to understand this perilous security landscape for the migrant population in Tapachula. Our qualitative analysis of thirty-nine semi-structured interviews conducted in this Mexican city revealed that migrants are at high risk of predatory crime and victimization from both institutional and non-state actors in this border zone. Not only do state policies lead to enhanced vulnerability to predatory crime and victimization in this particular environment, but the line between capable guardians and motivated offenders is ostensibly blurred. This paper offers a starting point for highlighting migrant victimization experiences in the Global South and how state policies can shape risk for future groups seeking to restart their lives anew in foreign countries.

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Introduction

In late 2018, large-scale groups of foreign migrants began appearing at Mexico's southern border with Guatemala, eventually convening in the Mexican border city of Tapachula.1 The high visibility and considerable publicity given to these "migrant caravans" quickly transformed this hitherto unknown border city into a prominent symbol within U.S. political discourse. Then-President Donald Trump seized upon the episode to rationalize stricter enforcement measures along the 1,954-mile U.S.–Mexico border, simultaneously compelling the Mexican government to reinforce security along its own southern border (Béland 2019). Since then, this notable surge in transnational migration to Mexico has effectively converted Tapachula into a "migratory chokepoint," or a territorial bottleneck where different conditions converge to concentrate and contain substantial populations of migrants in one physical space for extended periods of time (Paradela-López and Larratt-Smith 2026). However, migrants in Tapachula quickly discovered that while they were not necessarily impeded from traveling beyond the city by any physical infrastructure or barriers. Rather, their continued mobility northwards to the United States was stymied by Mexico's expansive invisible infrastructure, or a series of highly restrictive immigration and border enforcement policies designed to stem the flow of migrants transiting through Mexico toward its northern neighbor (Brewer, Tejada, and Meyer 2022).

The systematic containment of foreign nationals in Tapachula has created a security environment whereby migrants are rendered highly vulnerable to pervasive predatory crime and victimization by criminal groups, state officials, and civilians in this border city.2 While the monetization of transnational migration in Mexico has been a growth industry for the

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country's numerous drug trafficking organizations (DTOs), this is arguably most prevalent in Tapachula. Indicative of this, a 2021 survey conducted with nearly one thousand migrants found that Mexico was perceived as the most dangerous country to transit through, with Tapachula being cited as the most dangerous Mexican city (Mixed Migration Centre 2022). Echoing this sentiment, another report published in 2024 by a senior policy advisor from the Women's Refugee Commission accurately describes the precarious security landscape for migrants in and around Tapachula in the following terms:

> The entire journey is perilous, but this stretch may be the most dangerous of all. Sexual violence in the area is common. Migrants are especially vulnerable to violence and extortion at the hands of gangs and cartels. One shelter worker estimated that 80 percent of migrants between the Guatemalan border and Tapachula are kidnapped, and forced to pay a ransom for safe passage. (Bruzzone 2024)

The conversion of Tapachula from a once forgotten, peripheral border city into a highly dangerous migratory chokepoint raises several interesting research questions that warrant further exploration. What are the factors that have created this strategic point of containment? And how do they amplify a risk environment for migrants whereby predatory crime, victimization, and the threat of violence is a constant feature in their daily lives? To better understand this dynamic, we adopt a Routine Activity Theory (RAT) framework and consider the convergence of suitable targets, guardianship, and motivated offenders, and apply it to the context provided by Tapachula (Cohen and Felson 1979; Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981; Hindelang 1978). Despite the prevalence of criminological literature applying this framework to the study of predatory crime and the victimization of migrants in the United States and other Global North countries (Hentig 1948; Negi, Cepeda, and Valdez 2013), there is virtually no scholarship that utilizes this theoretical framework to study migrant populations in the Global South. This represents a glaring gap in the existing literature given the preponderance of migration flows passing through middle and low-income countries (Awad and Natarajan 2018).

The deployment of RAT theory to analyze this context is not only novel, but it is also enormously useful as it emphasizes the role played by circumstances more than other available frameworks. This article argues that circumstances surrounding migrant victimization are not random and in practice, are driven by environmental factors that extend to state-level policy dynamics and individual-level interactions between actors (De La Maza Díaz and Leerkes 2024; Pratt and Turanovic 2016). Prior work suggests that migrants and their marginalization can be understood through an opportunity lens, especially as migrant experiences vary depending on their status or physical location (Menjívar 2006; Menjívar and Abrego 2012). RAT builds on these findings and provides a unique analytical advantage due to its capacity to assess how broader structural and specific factors come together to influence criminal opportunity, and to explore what makes migrants who cross this terrestrial corridor one of the most at-risk groups in the Global South. In doing so, this study helps to disentangle the distinct, or in some cases blurred, lines between what makes an environment risky and what actors or environmental features, theoretically, are supposed to enhance safety for migrants. 3 The remainder of this article is structured in six parts. First, we provide the historical context of the existing immigration infrastructure in Mexico and the manner in which this functions on the Mexican-Guatemala border, and more specifically, how this shapes the options available to migrants in transit. Pursuant to this, we explore the existing literature engaging Routine Activity Theory and assess its strengths and limitations in explaining the victimization of migrants in Global South contexts. We then proceed with a methodology section detailing our methods, data collection, and analytical strategy. Next, we utilize this theoretical framework to present our empirical findings from the field. The penultimate section subsequently assesses the applicability of this theoretical framework to the systematic victimization of migrants in Tapachula before we briefly synthesize our principal

research findings and propose potential avenues for future inquiry on this topic in our conclusions.

Fostering immobility and vulnerability: the evolution of the Mexican immigration regime

The current Mexican immigration regime has not emerged spontaneously from a vacuum. Rather, it is the culmination of three decades of policy formation carried out under six separate Mexican presidential administrations, often under considerable pressure from their U.S. counterparts who view the country as a "vertical border" between Central and North America (Varela-Huerta 2019). The current constellation of policies, laws, and practices that constitute Mexico's immigration infrastructure can thus be viewed as a product of endogenous policy preferences adopted by Mexican executives, albeit under the influence of externalization efforts by the U.S. government to extend border enforcement beyond their national territory to neighboring countries (Stock, Üstübici, and Schultz 2019). This process of externalization, or the outsourcing of migratory control from destination countries to transit and origin countries, has been extensively analyzed in the European context and demonstrates how the increasing securitization of migration control and the classification of neighboring states as "safe third countries" play a key role both as effective policy tools and discursive mechanisms (Boswell 2007; Lavenex 1999; Lavenex and Rausis 2024). The case of Mexico reflects a similar dynamic, one in which the United States has assumed a similar role to that played by the European Union in the Middle East and North Africa.

The roots of Mexico's restrictive immigration regime lie in the surge of unauthorized migration to the United States following the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. This marked increase in migration prompted the U.S. to externalize border enforcement southward through initiatives such as Plan Sur (2001) and the Mérida Initiative (2008), embedding migration control within a broader binational security framework (Alba and Castillo 2012; Fernández-Kelly and Massey 2007). Although Mexico, already a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, expanded legal protections for asylum seekers through reforms enacted in Mexico under the Calderón administration in 2011, enforcement intensified under subsequent U.S. administrations. President Obama's Southern Border Program launched in 2014 strengthened enforcement measures in southern Mexico, particularly along rail infrastructure, while increasing deportations of Central American migrants (Leutert and Spalding 2019; Mountz and Loyd 2014). During his first term, President Trump's tariff threats compelled President López Obrador to expand and militarize migration enforcement, shifting governance from civilian to military authorities and raising concerns over transparency and human rights (Cárdenas Alaminos 2023; Gramlich 2022; Zubizarreta 2019). While the Biden administration discursively signaled a departure from Trump's immigration policies, it nevertheless preserved many core mechanisms such as reinforcing bilateral enforcement cooperation and maintaining externalization efforts in Mexico and Central America (Isacson 2023; Kaufman 2021).

The buildup of this vast restrictive immigration infrastructure in Mexico over the past three decades has greatly hindered migrants' mobility when entering and transiting the country. Most migrants traveling by land usually enter Mexico from Guatemala because of financial constraints or visa requirements, with the latter measure redirecting migrant flows to land routes replete with danger (FitzGerald 2019; González 2024; Tennis 2020). Tapachula, located roughly 10 miles from the Guatemalan border in the south of Chiapas state, has become Mexico's main terrestrial entry point, a city where between 50–70% of asylum claims have been filed and processed since 2015. At the present, the Mexican immigration regime is administered and enforced by three distinct government entities: the National Migration Institute (INM) which oversees immigration enforcement, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) which manages all asylum applications, and the National Guard (GN), a reconstituted version of the Federal Police which increasingly supports INM functions (Brewer, Tejada, and Meyer 2022).4

At the various official crossing points located along the Mexico-Guatemala border, reports abound of officers from the INM and the GN engaging in express deportations whereby individuals expressing a desire to apply for asylum in Mexico are summarily sent back to Guatemala in breach of international refugee protection standards (Colectivo de Monitoreo – Frontera Sur 2023). As a result, most land-bound migrants bypass these ports of entry and enter the country informally. Of these, a minority do so to apply for asylum directly at the nearest COMAR office in Tapachula in order to avoid potential deportation. The majority, on the other hand, have to obtain some form of official authorization from the country's immigration authorities, namely refugee status or the humanitarian visa (TVRH), if they wish to continue northwards toward the United States and minimize their exposure to detention or deportation (Doering-White 2019). However, the chronic underfunding of COMAR and INM has led to considerable delays for applicants, particularly those applying for refugee status. These individuals are thus forced to stay in the city while their claims are processed, where they have to navigate a precarious security landscape caused by restrictive policies, institutional deficiencies, and a myriad of predatory actors.

Routine activity theory and migrant victimization in the Global South

While the previous section documents the macro-level dynamics of how circumstances of migrant-related victimization risk has developed in Mexico, it is important to understand the more localized effects this has on migrants. To explore and assess this, we draw on a hybridized conception of the Routine Activity Theory framework with some influences from the Lifestyle Theory (Cohen and Felson 1979; Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981; Hindelang 1978). RAT stipulates that the commission of a crime generally requires three key elements: motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians. As Pratt and Turanovic note: "[O]ne gets victimized if the three key elements converge, if any of the three are missing victimization does not happen and probability has little or nothing to do with it" (2016:3; Cohen, Kluegel, and Land 1981). However, we embrace Pratt and Turanovic's assertion that risk is probabilistic and often attached to the lifestyles and routines of individuals and individual groups, an orientation taken to account for unique opportunities associated with victimization. Quite simply, the behaviors and choices made by victims affects their probability of being victimized. As Engström (2021:739) puts it, the "[d]ifferences in lifestyles account for variations in criminogenic exposure." It is important to first establish the conditions that enable and foster the commission of criminal acts against the migrant population, and then to assess what options are available for them upon entering Mexico and the associated risks that accompany these. Routine Activity Theory provides a baseline to further explore the systematic predatory crime and victimization against the migrant population in southern Mexico (Lemieux and Felson 2012; McNeeley 2015; Spano and Freilich 2009). The framework effectively argues that the commission of predatory violations, or illegal acts in which an individual intentionally takes or damages another person or their property, requires at a minimum "an offender with both criminal inclinations and the ability to carry out those inclinations, a person or object providing a suitable target for the offender, and absence of guardians capable of preventing violation" (Cohen and Felson 1979:590). As Maxfield (1987) details, however, even though people may ignore the risk or threat of crime, sometimes their choices are limited depending on existing personal and social conditions. For migrants transiting through Mexico, it is important to highlight that their journeys are arduous and thus the notion of "choice" is also constrained and narrowed. Though not applicable to their overall life course, the extensive period of time (years in some cases) requires that migrants adopt certain lifestyles or routine activities during their trek or in their daily lives if they wish to remain in Mexico. With this in mind, we can contextualize the decisions made by victims, victimizers, and those guardians tasked with protecting them are shaped and constrained by the surrounding institutional context that form these risk environments (Balkin 1979). Despite the prevalence of predatory crime and victimization in Global South countries, the use of RAT to explain micro-level events is virtually only applied to case studies in the Global North, namely the United States. Historically and presently, Mexico is a country

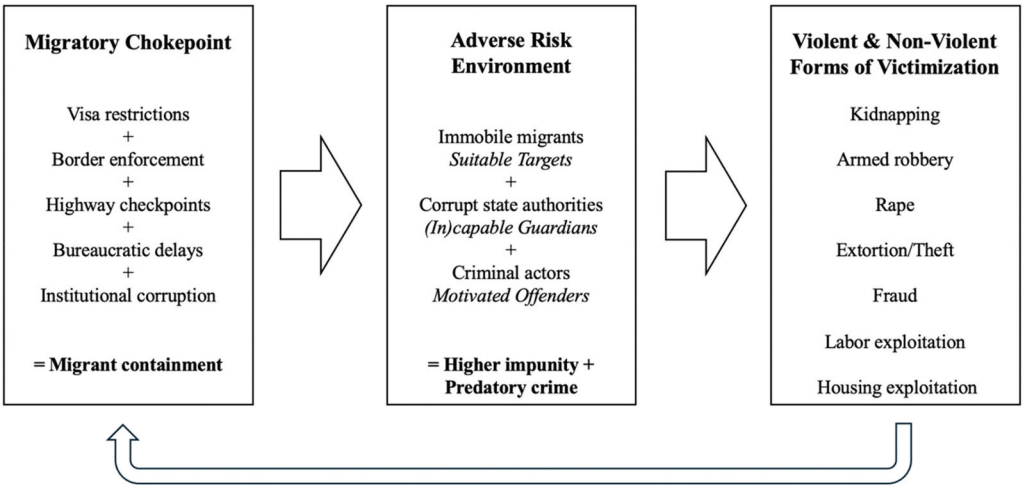


Figure 1. Migratory chokepoints, immobility, and victimization.

characterized by institutionalized corruption, official repression, and a symbiotic coexistence between the state and organized crime (Durán-Martínez 2015; Lessing 2017; Riding 1985). As Felson and Eckert (2018:28) argue: "With a guardian present, the offender avoids attempting to carry out an offense in the first place. The guardian differs from the offender and target, because the absence of a guardian is what counts." However, our research offers a contrasting view to this long held assumption. In Mexico, such guardians, or those institutions directly tasked with regulating all incoming immigration, are marred by systemic corruption which compromises their ability to properly fulfill their ascribed functions to protect the migrant population (Murray 2024). To the contrary, numerous authors have highlighted how Mexican immigration authorities maintain a facade of "compassionate repression" whereby they feign altruism yet in reality amplify the exposure of migrants to predatory crime and victimization (Frank-Vitale and Cordero 2019).

As Figure 1 demonstrates, those foreign nationals seeking to normalize their status in Mexico in order to remain there, or those who wish to continue traveling northwards to the United States, are all placed in a state of extreme and heightened probabilistic risk of violent and nonviolent predatory crime by motivated offenders ranging from organized criminal groups to unscrupulous civilians (Leyva-Flores et al. 2019; Mixed Migration Centre 2022). Willers (2023:2) describes this state of precarious liminality concisely: "Traversing Mexico on clandestine routes is an extreme bodily experience as it is marked by physical and psychological stress, by different forms of violence and uncertainty that impact the bodies of migrants." Similar to other migratory contexts in Global North receiving countries (Delvino 2020; Delvino and González, 2021; Kittrie 2006), migrants in Mexico are similarly unable to denounce crimes and access protection from the official authorities because these remain "constrained by limited resources, lack of coordination, corruption and impunity, lack of official will, and Mexico's premium on migrant deterrence and deportation" (Galemba et al. 2019:63).

Methods and data

This research represents a qualitative case study of Tapachula, the largest Mexican city located along the 541-mile border shared with Guatemala and principal entry point for terrestrial migration flows into the country. This border city functions as a space of prolonged immobility and liminality for thousands of migrants attempting to continue their journey northwards, legally or otherwise, toward the United States. Adopting a within-case analytical approach allows for a detailed understanding of

how local political, social, and institutional configurations shape migrants' everyday experiences, as well as the risks and opportunities that emerge in such border environments (De La Maza Díaz and Leerkes 2024; Naranjo et al. 2023; Norman 2024; Yates 2024).

The study's focus on Tapachula is based on three important case study criteria. First, given its primacy as the first, and arguably the largest, migratory chokepoint in Mexico encountered by land-bound migrants traveling northwards from Central America and beyond, the forced immobility caused by these structural pressures can be expected to be more intensely felt here than elsewhere, thus making Tapachula an extreme case of analysis that may help to test the limits of an existing theory (Jahnukainen 2010). Second, as the vast majority of migrants entering Mexico transit through this city, the sample is more representative of their average experience in Mexico than other cities like Mexico City, Guadalajara, Ciudad Juárez, or Tijuana, given the high proportion of foreign nationals who choose or are forced to pass through Tapachula on their journeys (Brewer, Tejada, and Meyer 2022). Finally, Tapachula is located in the Soconusco region in Chiapas state, a territory marred by a historical lack of state presence, high levels of poverty and institutional corruption, and more recently, the violent proliferation of organized criminal groups, factors that amplify the risk environment for predatory crime and migrant victimization according to the RAT framework (Paradela López and Larratt-Smith 2026). 5 The empirical basis of this research consists of extensive qualitative fieldwork conducted in Tapachula during three separate visits between June and July 2023. During these research trips, the first two authors conducted thirty-one semi-structured interviews with migrants of multiple nationalities, maintaining a near equal gender distribution. Participants were recruited in three distinct locations: a migrant shelter, a local government agency, and a public park frequented by migrants. These recruitment locations were selected so as to ensure a diversity of profiles and experiences in order to avoid excessive reliance on any single recruitment network to minimize potential bias, as these three recruitment pools offered a greater heterogenous sample of participants (see Table 1). 6 Permission to carry out interviews in institutional settings was obtained from site administrators, while interviewees encountered in public spaces were invited to take part voluntarily and only when they had clearly consented. To complement these narratives, the research team also conducted eight expert interviews with individuals and professionals who interact closely with the migrant population in Tapachula, including academics, shelter managers, NGO directors working with female and LGBTQ+ migrants, civil servants, and a representative of the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These conversations provided critical contextual information about policy enforcement, local governance, and patterns of vulnerability affecting migrants in this

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of interviewed migrants, $N = 31$.

	Category	n	%
Nationality	Honduras	12	38,7
	El Salvador	6	19,4
	Haiti	4	12,9
	Guatemala	3	9,7
	Venezuela	3	9,7
	Cuba	2	6,5
	Nicaragua	1	3,2
Gender	Female	16	51,6
	Male	15	48,4
Age	20–30	6	19,4
	31–40	12	38,7
	41–50	9	29
	50+	4	12,9
Type of housing	Rental	13	41,9
	Shelter	12	38,7
	Unhoused	6	19,4
Immigration status	Regularized legal status	15	48,4
	Pending resolution	9	29
	Undocumented	7	22,6

border region. Qualitative research with vulnerable populations is always at risk of potential selection bias and generalizability issues due to the relatively limited number of sources, coupled with the fact that many participants often cannot or do not wish to share very traumatic experiences (Fujii 2018). Additionally, the interviews were conducted by two male researchers from Global North countries and positionality may have influenced participant responses as a result (Glas 2021). At the time of the fieldwork, the researchers were affiliated with a private Mexican university that did not require formal ethics committee approval for projects of this nature. Nonetheless, all interviews were conducted following the principles established in the Belmont Report. Before each interview, the researchers carried out a detailed verbal consent process, clearly explaining the objectives of the study, ensuring anonymity, and informing interviewees of their right to withhold information or end the interview at any point. Only basic demographic data such as age and nationality were recorded to preserve confidentiality. 7 Even though the interviewers did not encounter any overt animosity or reluctance – in many cases the interaction was largely the opposite – it is possible that some participants refrained from answering as fully or candidly out of a credible fear of potential intimidation or reprisals from predatory actors in the border zone. In order to mitigate this possibility, the researchers ensured the provision of safe, private, and secure spaces for the interviews to occur in, as well as constant reminders as to the academic purpose of the exercise, and the participant's right to either skip questions or end the interview if they so chose.

The collected data was analyzed using inductive thematic analysis which allows themes and patterns to emerge organically from participants' narratives rather than imposing preexisting theoretical expectations (Braun and Clarke 2006). Given the manageable size of the total interviews collected, manual coding was employed instead of computer-assisted qualitative analysis software. The authors analyzed the migrant transcripts repeatedly to identify patterns and common themes before applying open coding to verify the validity of previous observations. Pursuant to this, the identified themes were then cross-referenced and verified through triangulation with the expert transcripts obtained from the field work, as well as other relevant sources, including academic research, governmental and NGO reports, and media archives. This process strengthened the reliability of the findings by situating them within a broader empirical and temporal frame that extended beyond the fieldwork period (Natow 2019). Importantly, the inductive thematic analysis of the field transcripts and the identification of the preeminent themes of migrant vulnerability, predatory crime, and victimization, preceded the authors' decision to utilize RAT theory to develop this study. In particular, the consistent references made by migrants of different nationalities and widely varying personal characteristics regarding their vulnerability to predatory crime, and in many cases, their lived victimhood in these borderlands lended itself naturally to this criminological framework.

Finally, as the research was conducted over a limited period, it represents a cross-sectional rather than longitudinal analysis of migration dynamics and liminality in Tapachula. Consequently, the findings capture a specific moment during a period of heightened migratory activity rather than a continuous process over time. However, considerable migration scholarship has long emphasized how micro-level studies can reveal key regularities when interpreted comparatively and in conjunction with secondary sources (Castles and Miller 2009; de Haas 2021; Massey et al. 1993). For this reason, triangulation was central not only as a validation mechanism but also as a strategy to expand the analytical scope of the data and situate localized experiences within larger regional and historical patterns of human mobility.

Empirical findings: identifying patterns of victimization in Tapachula

Upon engaging in an inductive thematic analysis of the field interviews, a clear pattern rapidly emerged. From both the first-hand accounts of migrants themselves and from local notables who interact with this population in varying capacities, it became evident that rather than regulating incoming migration and providing protections to foreign nationals entering the country afforded

by Mexico's domestic and international legal commitments, the existing immigration regime fostered an adverse risk environment whereby state authorities, criminals, and civilians systematically victimized the migrant population. Based on this observable pattern of behavior, we opted to utilize existing criminological theories, namely Routine Activity Theory, to analyze this widespread victimization due to limitations demonstrated by explanatory frameworks from other disciplines in the social sciences. The remainder of this section presents key testimonies from our interviews that reflect: (i) how migrants in Tapachula represent suitable targets; (ii) the prevalence of motivated offenders in this particular environment; and (iii) the virtual absence of capable guardians in this border zone.

Inescapable victimhood: migrants as a suitable target

From the moment they cross the border and set foot on Mexican soil, migrants become suitable targets for exploitation and potential victimization by locally based actors (Vogt 2018). Due to the liminal character of the border zone, migrants automatically become vulnerable to victimization due to their lack of knowledge of existing Mexican laws, as well as local customs and security dynamics. A Tapachula-based academic who conducts research on migration dynamics in the southern borderlands highlights this tendency bluntly: "[T]here's a question of legal vulnerability. Meaning that [migrants] aren't necessarily aware that they have rights." Apart from their previous lack of exposure to Mexico, let alone its legal and security complexities, many migrants are forced to flee their countries on short notice with minimal time to investigate the formal processes and procedures for arriving to and entering the country. A Salvadoran small business owner who fled her home with her husband and family due to relentless gang extortion recalls the urgency with which they escaped their country after being threatened with extreme violence for noncompliance with their victimizers' demands:

> We left El Salvador without a plan. Without any direction. My husband just said to me, 'Let's go,' he said, 'We can't stay here.' We didn't know that there were organizations here that could help people. We didn't know anything. We just left, I don't know. We just wanted to get out of there already, we wanted to escape, to flee. And so we came, we came by bus, and then we arrived here in Tapachula.

Upon arrival at Mexico's southern border with Guatemala, which is demarcated by the Suchiate river, migrants face a crucial choice whether to cross through official checkpoints located on bridges at Ciudad Hidalgo or Talismán, or to enter informally on makeshift rafts operated by smugglers devoted to transporting people between the two countries. A majority of those who travel to Tapachula from Guatemala choose the latter option due to fear of deportation, distrust of authorities, or lack of awareness about their rights (Brewer, Tejada, and Meyer 2022). While the average fare paid by most migrants interviewed ranged between $1 to $6 USD per person for a one-way river crossing to Mexico, others who lacked local information – or the linguistic skills to negotiate adequately in the case of many migrants from non-Spanish speaking countries – were charged exorbitantly inflated fees for a quick passage across the river. Another Salvadoran man escaping gang extortion recalled how he paid $120 USD, a considerable percentage of the total money he fled his country with, when he arrived at the Mexico-Guatemala border, as he was charged more than 20 times the normal fare by an untrustworthy raft operator due to his lack of knowledge about local practices.

Regardless of the varying distances they have traveled to reach Tapachula, most migrants arrive in the border city with extremely limited finances because of the rapacious predation of state authorities, unscrupulous transportation operators, and common criminals found along the principal route through Guatemala (Doctors Without Borders 2024). Those with access to financial resources may choose to rent private lodging in one of the numerous hotels or makeshift apartments located throughout the city. Conversely, migrants who are unable to afford such accommodations are left with limited alternatives, namely the migrant shelter system – consisting of three overcrowded

shelters – or on the streets of Tapachula where they establish temporary encampments (International Organization for Migration 2021).

Despite the benevolent intentions of many shelters and the staff which administer them, these spaces similarly generate their own security concerns for the migrant population. It is a shockingly common experience, particularly for many Central American migrants, to run into those who previously victimized them in their countries of origin in these shelters, as they too have been driven from their homes under similar circumstances. The concentration of at-risk groups in sizable numbers similarly attracts locally-based criminals who wait outside of these spaces to rob or forcibly abduct vulnerable foreigners when the opportunity presents itself. Of equal concern, not all shelters operate under the same humanitarian framework as one in particular has developed a reputation for its systematic exploitation of migrants. One Honduran woman who fled the threat of gang extortion with her husband and children recalls her experience while staying in this infamous shelter:

Interviewee: At [name of shelter] it's very hard in terms of food. In everything, in everything, in everything. You have to have money in order to buy your own food.

Interviewer: Did they make you work?

Interviewee: Yes, there you make tortillas, do cleaning, and help in the kitchen as well.

Deprived of economic resources and lacking formal authorization to work, many migrants are compelled to seek informal employment in the agricultural, construction, and service sectors, while others engage in small-scale commerce within Tapachula's public spaces. These survival strategies, however, often entail long working hours, precarious conditions, and minimal remuneration. A Salvadoran woman who fled her country with her family succinctly describes employment opportunities in Tapachula for those without authorization: "Sometimes there is work, but it's very poorly paid. Yes, they really exploit you. For example, I worked at a taco stand, but I had to be there from noon to midnight, and they only paid me 150 pesos [$8 USD]." Another Guatemalan woman echoes this, stating that local employers "take advantage of you and want to have you like a slave." A young Honduran man who left because of attempted gang recruitment in his country, recalls the poor working conditions he encountered the only time he managed to find an opportunity:

> [The job] didn't meet basic health and safety standards. We were sent to work in a garbage dump, and for that kind of work, you're supposed to be given protective gear, right? Gloves, masks, but they didn't give us anything. There wasn't even water, not for drinking or for washing.

Motivated offenders: the Criminal Leviathan on Mexico's southern border

In recent years, human smuggling and trafficking have thrived in Mexico due to the country's conversion into a major transit corridor for migrants traveling northwards. Ironically, these illicit industries have consolidated over time due to the implementation of stricter border control measures coupled with their co-optation by DTOs during this period (Soto et al. 2025). Compared to other regions of Mexico, the emergence of DTOs in Chiapas is a recent phenomenon. In the early 2010s, Los Zetas expanded into the binational zone to control cross-border trafficking routes (López 2010). Following their fragmentation, different factions of the Sinaloa Cartel (CDS) and Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) have established a formidable presence in the state, competing for control of contraband, narcotics, and perhaps most importantly, human trafficking along the Mexico–Guatemala border (Dalby 2023). Most inhabitants of Tapachula, locals and migrants alike, recognize the existence of these criminal organizations in and around the border city, yet do so indirectly for fear of potential reprisals. According to one Honduran migrant interviewed in a shelter:

> We have many people here who are more respected than the police. For example, certain organizations. Because honestly, here and everywhere, the police don't carry much authority anymore. There are basically two kinds of authorities here.

One of the key factors drawing Mexico's largest DTOs to Tapachula and the border region is the prevalence of lucrative opportunities provided by widescale transnational migration. As a local activist who works on behalf of the female migrant population observes: "For organized crime, they are victims, whether willingly or unwillingly, because there's money involved." Most notably, the incursion of the CDS and CJNG factions into the border region has dramatically altered the previous autonomous networks of human smugglers known as "coyotes," with organized crime assuming control of these by way of extreme violence. One employee at a not-for-profit center that provides free legal advice and other support for migrants in Tapachula emphasizes this shift:

> Organized crime is all connected, especially regarding smuggling, right? The [coyotes] are linked, so all of this organized crime is interconnected because only those who can pay these excessive amounts can move in, and I say this in quotes, a 'safer' way.

The co-optation of human smuggling networks by organized criminal groups along the Mexico–Guatemala border has resulted in a significant increase not only in the fees demanded by local coyotes, but also in the risks faced by migrants, including kidnapping for ransom and coercion into forced prostitution or drug trafficking. For foreign nationals, these dynamics have shaped both their entry into and transit through Mexico from the moment they cross the border. Payment of the fee required by the raftsmen offers no assurance of safe passage across the Suchiate River, as even those who comply with payment are frequently exposed to predation by the raft operators themselves or by assailants waiting on the opposite bank (Verza 2024).

Upon arrival in Tapachula, migrants encounter a similar risk environment due to the prevalence of motivated offenders in the border city. Those unable to secure private housing or shelter accommodation are particularly exposed to theft and assault in public spaces where they sleep. One Salvadoran man interviewed described being robbed at knifepoint in a downtown park for both his phone and official identification. Migrants seeking employment also face the omnipresent threat of extortion and fraud. A Haitian woman recounted that after her husband advertised his metalworking services online in order to try to find local work, he received a series of phone calls threatening to kidnap his family unless he paid the anonymous extortionists an exorbitant amount of money. Female migrants and children are especially susceptible to exploitation and abuse within this context of pervasive insecurity (Bruzzone 2024; Mixed Migration Centre 2022). One young woman who had been raped in El Salvador by a gang member and was forced to flee the country after he found out about her attempts to report him to the police, offered a brutally honest recollection about a terrifying ordeal she subsequently endured in Tapachula:

> Last year I was kidnapped for two months. They kept raping me for I don't know how many days, and they had me under different kinds of drugs. [In the end] I had to set the house on fire. You know? To get away and I don't know if the guy died or not, but it was my life or his. Obviously, I chose mine. Yeah, he was part of a cartel, I suppose, because I used to work at a bar called [name of business]. So, every night around one in the morning, when I finished work, I would always stop by the Oxxo for a coffee, because I love their coffee. I had seen that guy several times before, and that day they caught up with me in a car and took me away. They brought me to a house, and it seemed like they were going to sell me to someone else. They showed me around and told me to behave, not to make a scene, not to cause trouble, not to scream, and if I didn't do as they said, they started showing me a series of photos, telling me I'd end up like those women. I got scared because I recognized one of the girls in the photos, she used to come drink there at the bar with her boyfriend. She was Venezuelan and she didn't have breasts anymore, and her face was cut here in this area [motioning to face]. The guy asked me if I knew her, and I didn't say anything. He told me, 'If you behave, you won't end up like her.' So, I started talking one of the guys into getting me out of there. I told him, 'Look, I'll stay with you, just get me out of here.' And he did get me out, but he didn't let me go free. He just took me somewhere else, to a cabin up in the mountains in [a distant state in central Mexico]. And that's the guy whose house I set on fire.

Beyond criminal actors, migrants also have to contend with segments of the civilian population in Tapachula who have developed mechanisms to economically benefit from their precarity. While many local residents discriminate against renting to non-Mexican tenants, others have converted portions of their homes into rental spaces for foreigners. As one Honduran woman observed: "There are people who say: 'I don't rent to migrants.' And there are others who say that migrants are a great business. They make two to three times more than they used to from renting [to them]." However, in numerous cases, this practice serves as a means of defrauding and robbing prospective migrant tenants, whether through the theft of their possessions, premature evictions, or abrupt rent increases after they have moved in. A Salvadoran single mother of three who was forced into sex work in order to survive in Tapachula recalled such how a former landlady increased the rent by 50 percent due to the outbreak of migrant protests in the city:

> We reached an agreement with the lady that we would pay $2,000 [Mexican] pesos, with water and electricity included. There was just one bed, but we had to buy mats to be able to sleep comfortably. It was a room of approximately five by five meters, and since the place was full of migrants, when the protests and all that started, she came and raised the price. Rooms that used to cost $2,000 [Mexican] pesos were now $3,000.

Migrants frequently experience labor exploitation from employers, as they often fear that filing a complaint, reporting abuses, or seeking legal protection for their labor rights could expose them to immigration enforcement and potential deportation (Fussell 2011). Female migrants are especially susceptible to sexual harassment and exploitation, both during job interviews and within the workplace (Correa-Cabrera and Clark 2016). Similar to numerous other migrant transit points in Mexico, countless foreign women find themselves ensnared in forced prostitution rings operated by criminal groups in Tapachula (Derechos Humanos y Litigio Estratégico Mexicano (DLM) and Cyrus R. Vance Center for International Justice 2023; Izcara Palacios and Pedro 2022). A local academic researcher echoes this unfortunate structural dynamic: "Many times the only option left to them is sex work, so to speak. It's not really an option. In a certain sense, it's not voluntary, but rather the only possibility remaining in the face of their inability to access the formal labor market."

Lack of capable guardians: pay-as-you-go bureaucracy in Tapachula

Although Mexico possesses relatively strong state capacity compared to other countries in the region, its institutions have long been plagued by state abuse and entrenched corruption (Amnesty International 2017). This deficiency is particularly evident in peripheral, subnational regions such as Chiapas and Tapachula, where multiple federal agencies responsible for migration enforcement operate alongside state and municipal bureaucrats and police. An LGBTQ+ activist in Tapachula describes how this dynamic affects all levels of government institutions succinctly:

> We are currently in a context where the justice and security institutions are very worn out, [they] show little creativity. We believe there is a crisis of credibility affecting security institutions at all levels: municipal, state, and federal.

One cause and effect of this breakdown in institutional credibility is the culture of inefficiency and impunity that pervades Mexican institutions at every level (Suárez Enriquez et al. 2016). In Mexico, close to 90% of crimes are not reported, and of those that are reported a third of these go uninvestigated, while only 16% of those that are reported and investigated are actually "resolved" in court, mediation, or some other form of compensation. Tellingly, Mexican authorities resolved slightly more than 1% of all crimes committed in the country in 2021 (Human Rights Watch 2023). Indicative of this environment, one Nicaraguan man living on the streets of Tapachula recounted how he was robbed for his shoes in downtown Tapachula. When asked about whether he reported this to the police, he simply replied: "The police themselves will rob you. Who protects you from thieves? The police are the same but worse." As a result of such systemic misconduct, the migrant community harbors a deep mistrust toward the Mexican police in the border zone.

As mentioned prior, the overwhelming majority of migrants opt to enter Mexico via raft due to fears of what may happen to them if they attempt to cross a formal port of entry manned by INM officials, even though the former option exposes them to potential robbery or worse at the hands of motivated offenders. However, the victimization of migrants as they arrive in Mexico often occurs directly in front of formal crossings and the state authorities who operate them, yet their presence does little to deter predatory crime. Instead, they frequently are direct or indirect participants in these activities. One single mother from Honduras who arrived to Mexico via an informal raft with her two small children describes how they were accosted by a group of armed men in plain view of local police who did nothing to assist in her time of need:

> Among all of us who crossed that day, we managed to gather a little money and gave it to the guy, but he said it wasn't enough. I was really scared because there were some men with big machetes, I was very afraid. But I told everyone, 'I'll go talk to them; I'll see what we can do.' So, they took the little money we had and the guy with the machete told me to go talk to the police. I told the police, I said to them, 'Can't you let us pass? We don't have money, and I have two children.' He told me, 'No, that's your problem with them' in a rude way, trying to scare us, saying we'd be deported. And they were just two young guys wearing those uniforms, saying things like, 'Oh no, here come the immigration police!' and so on, just trying to scare us.

Migrants who succeed in avoiding deportation or being robbed immediately upon their arrival into Mexico continue to face a series of threats from motivated offenders and state authorities alike as they transit between the Suchiate river and Tapachula. Whereby INM and GN officials operate numerous migration checkpoints along the highway system to ensnare those in the country without authorization, criminal groups frequently wait in their peripheries in order to take advantage of any migrants attempting to circumvent these official road blocks. It is not uncommon for both of these actors to collude in order to victimize migrants in transit. According to one Honduran woman interviewed, "When you are on a bus, they [police officers] stop you so that you can subsequently be robbed or harmed by [DTOs]." Echoing this, a Salvadoran migrant who had spent three years trapped in Tapachula touches upon how state authorities more often emulate their criminal counterparts than fulfill their ascribed functions:

Interviewee: Remember that this journey is tough, especially for people like us, because [the authorities] try not to help you, but to profit from you. To them, you're like a gold mine that's coming their way. They say, "Here comes at least our week's [salary] or even month's salary." And among themselves, they warn each other, "Hey, on such-and-such bus, number whatever, there are two or three '*pollos*' [migrants]" and that way, their own coworkers can profit too. That's how they operate here.

Interviewer: I see. And the people who didn't pay, were they mistreated?

Interviewee: Yes. Well, not always beaten, but mostly they threaten you. They threaten to throw you back: "You'll have to start all over again, spend money again, and you're already so close. Just give me what you have. You'll make it back working in the banana plantations or something. If not, we'll throw you back and you'll have to start again." And then there are others who are aggressive, they start kicking you to see if that'll make you loosen up more money. But that's it, mostly it's psychological, the way they treat you, because they know that's where the money for them comes from, easy money.

Despite the heightened presence of state authorities and other potential witnesses who may serve as a deterrent to the predatory crimes of motivated offenders, the risk environment found in Tapachula is hardly more favorable for migrants forced to stay there for indeterminate periods of time. Rather than expediting the waiting periods for applicants, migrants often encounter requests for unofficial fees from a range of actors including immigration officers and private legal consultants who offer to hasten the obligatory process to regularize their status (Carabaña 2023; Clemente and Verza 2022; Colectivo

de Monitoreo – Frontera Sur 2023). For those without financial resources to pay for these illicit fees, particularly female migrants, they are forced to resort to sex work or granting sexual favors to immigration officials for preferable treatment. A local migrant activist describes this dynamic:

> Even to be able to access administrative procedures or to avoid detention, [female migrants] have had to engage in sexual exchange favors with municipal police officers or migration agents, with public officials, driven by the fear of being deported or sent back.

Of equal concern, migrants who become victims of crimes, whether perpetrated by motivated offenders or by individuals occupying positions of authority, possess little to no recourse for reporting such violations in Tapachula. In a similar vein, there have been numerous reports from migrants that officials from the Attorney General's Office (FGR) in Tapachula frequently solicit bribes as a condition for processing their criminal complaints. Even those who successfully navigate the complex immigration system in Tapachula and obtain the requisite documentation to continue traveling northwards toward the United States similarly find that legal authorization does not necessarily grant them free passage from being harassed by immigration authorities and law enforcement agents further along the route. One Cuban woman explains how this functions on the ground in Chiapas and beyond:

> There's a document they give you for one year so that you can remain in the country, you understand? Apparently without any problems. But when you start traveling to other places, even within the same region, there's a lot of corruption, even among the authorities here. The same officers, the same soldiers you encounter on the road, migration agents and so on, they ask you for money. If you don't have it, they tear up your document, and then you're undocumented again. So it's really complicated here, very complicated.

Results: analysis of the findings using routine activity theory

Rather than analyzing the countless incidences of victimization against migrants in Tapachula and the Mexico-Guatemala border zone based on the unique micro-level conditions that enabled their commission, our analysis views the systematic victimization of migrants in Tapachula as the product of overlapping policy impacts that amplify an already precarious risk environment for this extremely vulnerable demographic. While similar conditions are found in countless other locations throughout Mexico, the deficiencies of the existing Mexican immigration regime and those policies deliberately designed to stem and detain the massive flow of people arriving on Mexico's southern border, coupled with the country's beleaguered security apparatus is acutely felt in Tapachula, as evidenced by the constant predation against the migrant population. The remainder of this section assesses the implication of our findings in relation to Routine Activity Theory and other scholarship on immigration and security dynamics from across the Social Sciences.

Suitable targets as product of immigration policy

In virtually every country worldwide, immigration policy is crafted by the executive or national-level legislatures and then implemented at the sub-national level. However, the implementation of national level policies in subnational spaces with enormously varying governance dynamics often yields homogeneous and discordant outcomes. As Eaton (2017:7) notes, "Subnational governments can and do articulate challenges in a whole range of policy fields." This is particularly true in federal countries such as Mexico, where policy implementation can be a complex exercise involving international, national, and subnational actors, and whereby the translation of state policy into local practice is far from uniform (Snyder 2001). The implementation of immigration policy in Mexico thus occurs in vastly divergent subnational contexts where key structural and agential dynamics are constantly evolving, particularly in what Vogt (2018) terms the country's "arterial border" in the south, a flexible frontier whose enforcement intensity shifts with political priorities and social contexts. In regions like Tapachula, such variability has systematically undermined migrants' safety (Martínez et al. 2020).

As illustrated in the preceding sections, the culmination of restrictive immigration and border enforcement policies implemented in southern Mexico over the past two decades has led to the creation of a migratory chokepoint in Tapachula where migrants are rendered immobile by the expansive invisible infrastructure that impedes their northward advance. This dynamic is articulated concisely by a local LGBTQ+ migrants' rights advocate:

> Mexico's current migration policy, rather than providing a response or a solution, seems to be a policy of containment and denial in the face of the crisis. So, as part of these containment dynamics meant to prevent people from moving toward the north of the country, what they do is militarize the border or increase security along the routes. And as a result, the crisis, or the concentration of migrants in the south, here in Tapachula, keeps growing, because you can't move forward without migration regularization. But the regularization processes can take three, four, five, even six months, right?

However, rather than merely serving as a containment point where state officials could properly process the claims of those migrants seeking asylum and protection in Mexico, the existing system in Tapachula is designed to exhaust and frustrate both those seeking to remain in the country and those who merely wish to transit northwards to the United States. According to a local academic:

> Before, movement or transit occurred because control was distributed throughout the entire country. So people could sort of move by navigating around the controls. Not anymore, now the main concentration of control is in the south. That means the south has become a kind of compressed area, where there is constant tension between the existence of control and permissiveness. Well, we are seeing this mainly with the issue of voluntary return, which here in Mexico we are seeing mostly as a way to pressure people to go back [to their countries] and not continue moving forward.

Echoing this assertion, another migrant activist in the border city highlights how the asymmetrical funding for the INM and COMAR reflects the Mexican government's prioritization of containment over protection: "You can see that there's more investment going to the INM and not to COMAR, right? There's more funding for the INM because its goal, its mandate, is to maintain border control, to contain, detain, and deport people."

For migrants stranded in Tapachula, the effects of these policies are concrete and often devastating. Measures framed as cooperation or deterrence have produced a landscape of insecurity and exploitation. The restrictive immigration infrastructure adopted by the Mexican government in recent years raises the risk that migrants will face physical and psychological threats while waiting in limbo in one fixed location (Mercado et al. 2021; Wurtz 2022). Brewer, Tejada, and Meyer (2022:1) aptly describe this policy regime as "a series of government actions and omissions that leave people struggling to survive and vulnerable to abuse and arbitrary treatment as they navigate multiple backlogged legal processes." Whether intentional or unintentional, the impact of the "open air prison" that Mexican policymakers have created in Tapachula takes a considerable toll on the migrant population, leaving most, if not all, desperate to leave the border city either because they feel at risk, or because they are unable to secure any form of housing or employment (Human Rights Watch 2022; Penney 2021).

While the role of state policies on shaping risk environments is understudied in criminological literature, this case study analysis of migrant victimization in Tapachula demonstrates the need to take these factors seriously. Notably, the theoretical underpinnings of RAT suggest that the presence of suitable targets contribute to risk environments and amplify potential dangers to people found in these spaces (Cohen and Felson 1979; Felson and Eckert 2018). This is particularly true for migrants with status stranded in foreign countries, as they face increased risk of marginalization and possible victimization (De La Maza et al. 2024). In the context of Mexico's southern borderlands, migrants are subject to victimhood from the moment they enter the country. Robbery and exploitation are common, especially if they coincide with agents of authority, transportation operators, informal employers, and sometimes even shelter workers. In Tapachula and the surrounding border zone, migrants exist in such an acute state of hyper vulnerability caused by their containment that they exceed the most traditional interpretations of suitable targets. While they appear similar to Christie's (1986) "ideal victim" due to their inherent weakness relative to motivated offenders, migrants in

southern Mexico differ from his classic interpretation and more resemble "optimal victims" due to their structurally conditioned exposure to motivated offenders that is routine and pervasive, an adverse risk environment that generates scant sympathy or attention for the constant victimization it generates. As such, for migrants crossing through Tapachula on their journey north, their targeting as victims of crime is not a matter of suitability, they are the default preference for criminal opportunity.

Solely focusing on victimization, however, obscures the importance of migrants' agency. Despite their exposure to the constant risks found in this migratory chokepoint, migrants are not merely passive actors, but are constantly developing new ways to circumvent restrictions and continue moving northwards (Broeders and Engbersen 2007; Dekker et al. 2018). Similar to other sites in Mexico, migrants trapped in Tapachula demonstrate different adaptive strategies, from sharing information on social networks about how to strategically manage or avoid interactions with Mexican immigration authorities, to engaging collective action practices designed to protest existing conditions or to mobilize mass exit from Tapachula in migrant caravans (Arriola Vega and Coraza de los Santos 2024; Candiz and Basok 2025; Díaz de León and Doering-White 2024). Although the RAT framework offers a better understanding of how structural factors turned Tapachula into a hostile environment for the migrant population, its core assumptions are more limited when applied to the study of migrant agency and resistance.

One and the same? motivated offenders and incapable guardians in Tapachula

Existing scholarship highlights how migrants encounter an elevated susceptibility to victimization due to their tenuous status in foreign countries, their perceived likelihood to possess hard currency, and their unwillingness to report any crimes for fear of potential deportation (Fussell 2011; Kittrie 2006; Negi, Cepeda, and Valdez 2013). Beyond being constantly exposed to robberies, migrants are also placed at enormous risk of other forms of physical and psychological harm, particularly in Mexico (Vogt 2018; Willers 2023; Weiss 2021). By Latin American standards, Mexico has a robust level of state capacity. However, this relative institutional strength does not translate into a higher quality of capable guardians providing security on the ground for the country's citizens, let alone those seeking to resettle or merely transit through its national territory. Rather, as Schedler (2014:11) deftly notes: "Countless pieces of evidence point to a syndrome of state abuse, state collusion with crime, and state indifference toward its victims." Illicit revenues derived by the massive growth of migrants entering and transiting the country have attracted these criminal organizations to previously tranquil regions of the country located along the principal transit routes such as Tapachula (Graham 2024).

Much of the blame for the decline in security in Mexico over the last two decades lies squarely with the impact of aggressive policies adopted by successive presidential administrations which have militarized key functions related to the provision of law and order throughout the country. Recent research by Flores-Macias and Zarkin (2023:388) bluntly assesses the efficacy and adverse effects of this questionable strategy that has claimed over 300,000 lives and 73,000 disappearances, identifying various "consequences of militarization" as "greater levels of violence, obstacles to police reform, and lower tax collection." Rather than improving the provision of security, the Mexican government's gamble on channeling more resources to federal entities to combat organized crime has produced the opposite effect. Herrera and Martínez-Alvarez (2022:2) highlight how this militarized approach against DTOs has inadvertently intensified organizational fragmentation and greater conflict with the Mexican military and law enforcement, while "the incentives for criminal organizations to diversify away from drug trafficking have only become stronger." The delegation of powers under Mexico's federal system adds further complexity as states possess enormous powers to oversee the administration of justice and law enforcement in their subnational jurisdictions, generating enormous opportunities for graft and corruption (Durán-Martínez 2015; Trejo and Ley 2017).

In such a precarious security environment, it is unsurprising that Mexican immigration policies enhance an already adverse risk environment for non-citizens arriving to the country

with little to no knowledge of national laws or local power dynamics. The southern border zone was predominantly dominated by the CDS until 2021 when the CJNG made a bold incursion into Chiapas to dispute territorial control of the state, largely driven by the profits to be made from the human trafficking, kidnapping, forced prostitution, and extortion of migrants (Dalby 2023; Muñoz et al. 2020). During this period, cartel operatives have engaged in express kidnappings of susceptible migrants in Tapachula by offering implausibly cheap transportation fares northwards and then forcibly confining them until they pay "exit fees" in order to be released (Dahl 2024). Despite the increased presence of GN and other Mexican security forces deployed to the zone, violence has skyrocketed in spite of the Mexican state's reinforced presence, largely due to deficiencies seen elsewhere in Mexico. As one Honduran woman interviewed frankly confessed: "[Here] the cartels are allied with the police." When asked about whether she reported her prolonged episode of forced confinement and sexual enslavement to law enforcement upon her escape from cartel members, the Salvadoran woman quoted previously responded in the following manner:

> No, what for? The police are on their side anyway, and besides, I'm not even from here. If they don't listen to Mexicans, they'll listen even less to a migrant like me. Why would you waste your time, your peace of mind?

The extremely blurred lines between law enforcement and organized crime in Mexico challenges the core assumptions in RAT theory about the roles and agency of motivated offenders and capable guardians. While the theoretical framework suggests the lack of capable guardianship increases the risk of victimization, the presence of legal authority usually signals capable guardianship. Since the state lacks institutional credibility to protect those under its jurisdictions, the competency behind guardianship in this context is tenuous. Unlike the Global North countries where this criminological framework was developed and applied to analyze, Pereda (2022:621) observes that in Mexico "criminal organizations and police agencies are so intertwined that it is impossible to distinguish them from each other." As such, the results shown provide insight into the applicability of RAT depending on the nation and focus. For example, Vilalta and Fonedvila (2021) demonstrated that RAT has explanatory power in explaining crime in Mexico. However, victimization in more micro-level instances would suggest the interaction behind all three elements should be examined within the context of state-level policies and the unique vulnerability characteristics of people themselves. If the circumscribed capable guardians (broadly defined) become theoretically blurred with motivated offenders, then the probability of risk heightens exponentially.

In contexts such as that found in Tapachula, criminal victimization becomes probabilistic as dimensions of RAT converge almost inherently for migrants. Theoretically speaking, if a guardian is not capable, effective, or outright lacks the willingness to provide safety for the most at-risk demographics such as the migrant population in southern Mexico, then these individuals in turn will find themselves in a precarious situation comprised entirely of all risk and no reprieve. This study suggests that the routines and lifestyles of migrants, or at least the ones interviewed, are dangerous but seen as necessary components of a common journey. The behaviors taken by migrants themselves are incredibly important toward informing risk of victimization (Pratt and Turanovic 2016). However, in this context and amalgam of policy and situational conditions, migrant behaviors appear to be overridden by immensely powerful forces that frequently lead to some form of victimization or another.

Conclusions

This article makes a valuable contribution to the study of transnational migration and victimization by documenting how long periods of forced immobility, dependence on precarious informal economies, and repeated interactions with poorly supervised state actors consolidated the ideal conditions for the victimization of migrants in Tapachula as articulated by Routine Activity Theory. In this context, they are systematically positioned as suitable targets due to their legal precarity and limited resources, while

motivated offenders, not only those from organized criminal groups, but also corrupt officials and civilians who similarly take advantage of their structurally induced vulnerability. Importantly, our work demonstrates how the absence of capable guardians, themselves undermined by institutional fragmentation, pervasive corruption, and a lack of sufficient resources, intensifies migrants' exposure to victimization.

Although our study's focus is limited to a single border city in southern Mexico – a qualitative sample that cannot capture the full diversity of migrant experiences in Mexico let alone the remainder of the Global South – the patterns identified suggest broader structural dynamics that should be tested and explored when analyzing this phenomenon. This article opens the door for future research, whether a comparative analysis of distinct transit corridors or a statistical analysis of quantitative victimization measures, to further test the applicability of Routine Activity Theory to contexts of liminality and forced immobility such as that exemplified by Tapachula. Overall, the evidence indicates that without substantial reforms to enhance institutional protection and reduce the presence of criminal organizations, migrants in Tapachula – and other similar contexts – will continue to endure severely adverse risk environments, predatory crime, and victimization.

Notes

1. Although a majority of foreign nationals who enter southern Mexico from Guatemala do so in an unauthorized or irregular manner, the legal status of different migrants found in Tapachula varies enormously across time and space. Therefore, we hitherto utilize "migrants" in this article as a general term to refer to all foreign nationals seeking to enter, transit through, or resettle in Mexico, regardless of their reasons for leaving their country of origin or their formal status (or lack thereof) in this country unless otherwise specifically indicated in the text. While recognizing the importance of categorical distinctions between migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees for the existing international and domestic legal regimes that regulate transnational migration, we adopt this term for the sake of analytical parsimony.
2. For the purpose of conceptual and theoretical clarity, our interpretation of predatory crime (and the victimization it entails) adheres to Cohen and Felson's (1979) use of "predatory violations" that itself approximates Glaser's definition of predatory crime as an occurrence when "someone definitely and intentionally takes or damages the person or property of another" (1971:4). While the type of predatory crime analyzed here varies from the violent (rape, kidnapping, armed robbery, extortion, etc.) to the nonviolent (theft, fraud, and labor and housing exploitation), these practices all constitute illegal acts under existing Mexican law.
3. The application of Routine Activity Theory (RAT) offers a valuable lens through which to interpret our fieldwork, although other frameworks should be considered in future research. For example, other scholarship has highlighted that Developmental and Life Course (DLC) perspectives provide useful theoretical avenues for understanding the dynamic nature of migrants' lives as they occupy vulnerable positions during their journeys or once settling into receiving countries (Garcia 2019). However, RAT is particularly well suited to this analysis because its central focus is on the convergence of motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardianship within specific spatial and temporal contexts. This emphasis aligns closely with the realities of migrant transit through Mexico – especially in the southern borderlands – where various predatory actors exploit the highly visible migrant population which is rendered vulnerable by the country's migration regime due to their precarious legal and social status coupled with extremely limited state protection. In contrast to DLC theories, which primarily explain how victimization occurs over time, RAT directs attention to the situational and environmental conditions that facilitate repeated predatory victimization. Importantly, this framework accounts for how ostensibly non-criminal actors such as law enforcement, immigration officials, and civilians are enticed to engage in predatory crime against the migrant population due to the prevailing opportunity structure generated by "migratory chokepoints" such as Tapachula. As such, it provides a more appropriate framework for examining the systematic, opportunity-driven nature of violent and nonviolent victimization of migrants in transit, while also highlighting how deficiencies in formal and informal guardianship create environments in which exploitation becomes routine rather than exceptional.
4. Although migration enforcement in Mexico falls under federal purview as per the constitution, state and municipal governments have occasionally sought to influence migration governance within their jurisdictions. In Chiapas state, this involvement has depended on both the intensity of federal enforcement and the political orientation of the state government. As conservative PAN presidential administrations expanded border enforcement through initiatives such as Plan Sur and the Mérida Initiative in the 2000s, the leftwing PRD-led government in Chiapas adopted a more migrant-oriented agenda between 2006 and 2012, creating the Migrant Attention Unit (UAM), a specialized prosecutor's office for migrants' rights, and facilitating the

establishment of Central American consulates, among other measures. However, these initiatives were constrained by federal authority over migration, limited resources, and were largely dismantled following a change in state government. As a result, while subnational authorities have periodically played complementary roles, effective border enforcement has remained overwhelmingly under federal control (Aguilar, Del Carmen, and Villafuerte Solís 2014; Córdova et al. 2007; Torre-Cantalapiedra and Schiavon 2016).

5. Located in southern Chiapas on the Mexico–Guatemala border, the Soconusco region has long occupied an ambiguous political and territorial position between Mexico and Central America. Although today it is firmly part of Mexico, its sovereignty remained contested until the 1882 border treaty with Guatemala, reflecting a history in which political boundaries were far less settled than contemporary maps suggest. In practice, the region has functioned as a binational space for over two centuries. Centered around the region's largest city of Tapachula, Soconusco's economy has long depended on cross-border trade and the seasonal movement of Guatemalan workers since the advent of export agriculture in the late nineteenth century, creating deep social, economic, and familial ties that have made temporary migration a defining feature of these borderlands for more than 150 years (Téllez and Eugenia 2008
6. While the authors observed that certain demographics (e.g., women, children, and LGBTQ+) faced enhanced risks of specific forms of victimization, we did not identify distinct patterns of victimization according to nationality, nor was this the focus of our study. Although other studies have explored how intersectional factors such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation affect migrants' exposure to predation while in transit, the focus of this study is agnostic in this regard as we assess this phenomenon and how and why it so persistently affects the general migrant population. As a result, we do not make any conclusive generalizations about the intersectional effects of nationality, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation due to: (a) the limited number of interviews we collected which may be insufficient to capture any such potential effect, and (b) the possibility that any one of these attributes may intersect with another in the causation of predatory crime. Finally, the category "Regularized legal status" in Figure 1 includes those migrants who were granted refugee status or who obtained a Humanitarian Visa. Although the latter is only valid for one year, it allows holders to obtain a CURP, to move across the country, and to access formal employment, thus providing some degree of stability.
7. The interviews with migrants were guided by a questionnaire which included questions related to: (i) the motives underscoring migrants' decision to leave their country when and where they did, (ii) their experiences arriving and settling in Tapachula, (iii) their attempts to regularize their status in Mexico, and (iv) their access to housing, healthcare, employment, and security in Tapachula.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Charles Larratt-Smith:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Miguel Paradela López:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Chris Guerra:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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