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Amplifying vulnerability: State policy and the consolidation of a migratory chokepoint on Mexico's southern border

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Emilio Alberto López Reyes (1983-2025).

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, Tapachula, a peripheral city located on Mexico's southern border, has emerged as one of the most significant territorial bottlenecks for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees traveling towards the United States. While officially framed as a humanitarian entry point to Mexico, the city functions as a site of bureaucratic containment where restrictive immigration policies and an overwhelmed asylum system render tens of thousands of migrants immobile. Drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted in Tapachula, this article examines how immigration control on Mexico's southern border is shaped by state policies that have constructed an extensive subnational infrastructure centered around documentation, surveillance, and spatial confinement, complementary strategies that have converted this urban space into a migratory chokepoint. There, a range of actors—public and private, national and local— have converged to capitalize on the migrant population's vulnerability, often in ways that exacerbate the widespread precarity in which migrants exist in this border city. Yet, we also find that migrants are not merely passive victims of this enforced immobility. Rather, they engage in chokepoint pragmatics, everyday strategies of adaptation, resistance, and negotiation, to navigate Tapachula's realities in the hopes of continuing their journeys northwards.

1. Introduction

Tapachula was once a forgotten city located roughly ten miles north of the Mexico-Guatemala border in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. This all changed in late 2018 when thousands of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees[1] hailing from Central America's Northern Triangle (Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala) collectively marched northwards seeking to relocate to the United States (Wurtz, 2020). Upon arriving in Mexico, thousands of these migrants were obligated by Mexican authorities to wait and be processed in Tapachula. Countless others found their way there by crossing the border illegally and reconvening their march northwards from this small city of roughly 353.000 inhabitants (Meyer & Isacson, 2019).

Since then, increased efforts by successive Mexican governments to stem incoming migrant flows heading predominantly towards the United States have converted Tapachula into what is arguably Mexico's largest 'migratory chokepoint',[2] a territorial bottleneck where physical, geographic, and institutional factors converge to concentrate substantial populations of migrants in one defined space for varying periods of time. Rather than serving as a mere transit point for their continued trek northwards, Tapachula has become a physical space where migrants first interact with the legal infrastructure of Mexico's immigration regime (Honig, 2023). There, migrants are not trapped in Tapachula by any human-made barriers or topographical obstacles. Rather, their mobility outside of the city is hindered by state authorities who demand proof of their regularized status in Mexico if they wish to travel further

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[1] While it is important to make distinctions between migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees when discussing transnational migration, the empirical analysis of this article spans different legal regimes and country-specific categories such as Mexico's complementary protection, making these distinctions difficult to sustain in practice. People often move between these different statuses and are often subjected to similar bureaucratic constraints regardless of their formal classification. For this reason, we decided to use "migrants" as an umbrella term and we only refer to more specific legal denominations when discussing measures that apply to particular categories.

[2] It is extremely difficult to accurately tally which Mexican city plays host to the highest percentage of migrants at any given time, yet it has been established that an overwhelming majority of terrestrial arrivals into the country enter via Tapachula and spend varying periods of time there as a result.

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north.

As a result of these restrictions, tens of thousands of migrants seeking to eventually relocate to the United States are detained at any given time in Tapachula for indeterminate periods of time. While stranded in this migratory chokepoint, migrants navigate a Byzantine policy regime designed to frustrate their migration aspirations, compelling them to decide how they will continue their journeys towards their intended destination and whether they will do so with or without the necessary documentation (Brewer et al., 2022). The transformation of Tapachula into the front line of border enforcement for migrants seeking to enter Mexico to eventually travel to the United States raises a couple of important research questions: How are immigration and border enforcement policies conceived at the national level implemented on the ground to contain significant migrant concentrations? And how do these policies affect the targeted population in these designated spaces?

In this article, we find that the implementation and consolidation of restrictive immigration and border enforcement policies in Tapachula has effectively created a migratory chokepoint on Mexico's southern border. This represents a physical space where the principal flow of foreign migrants entering the country are temporarily detained on their journeys by considerable impediments that thwart their northward advance. However, unlike other notable migratory chokepoints found elsewhere in the Americas or the Mediterranean, the one found in Tapachula is not the product of physical fortifications or geographic features. Rather, it has formed as a result of the invisible infrastructure developed by different bureaucratic and institutional actors tasked with regulating all immigration into Mexico through its southern border. However, federal agencies that are assigned to enforce incoming migration do not receive the required resources to perform these functions adequately in Tapachula. Similarly, local bureaucracies lack the capacity to accommodate and protect this mass influx of foreign nationals. Migrants unable to work or travel northwards must remain in Tapachula to regularize their status to continue their journeys northwards with reduced risk of detention or deportation, even though they remain vulnerable to victimization by corrupt state officials, organized criminal actors, and even the civilian population in this border city. In response, many migrants, often with assistance from local civil society actors, resort to 'chokepoint pragmatics', or the adoption of novel strategies to mitigate the existing risk environment.

This article fills a notable gap in the academic literature on migratory chokepoints. Existing scholarship on this topic focuses largely on geographically produced bottlenecks in Europe, the Mediterranean, or more recently, the Darién Gap. However, few studies have analyzed the formation and consolidation of migratory chokepoints in the above referenced places. Additionally, even fewer authors have analyzed those migratory chokepoints created by state policies (instead of strictly topographical features) and how bureaucratic infrastructure can play a key role in constraining and concentrating migratory flows in one physical space. The analysis of Tapachula as a state-manufactured chokepoint allows a better understanding of how administrative procedures and dispersed enforcement practices function as operators of spatial governance that reconfigure mobility within a subnational territory. In doing so, the article engages the debates on state spatiality and border assemblages by illustrating how beyond mere physical barriers borders are reproduced and enforced through administrative and institutional measures. Our analysis of Tapachula complements existing theoretical frameworks on how states foster immobility, and by extension vulnerability, through a combination of policy innovations and institutional deficiencies that remain understudied in the Latin American context.

The remainder of this article is structured in four parts. We proceed with a methods section detailing our research design, fieldwork, and the criteria for case selection. Following this, we thoroughly explore the relevant literature to develop this concept of a migratory chokepoint and how this relates to the broader nexus between public policy and transnational migration. Then, we present extensive empirical support to trace the evolution of the existing immigration regime in Mexico, how this expansive infrastructure has created a migratory chokepoint in Tapachula, and how this ultimately impacts the migrant population and their potential for continued mobility. Finally, our article concludes by synthesizing our principal research findings and proposing potential avenues for future inquiry on this topic.

2. Research design, fieldwork, and case selection

This article follows in the lead of contemporary research that utilizes within case analysis to study human mobility and immigration enforcement in the Global South (Adugna et al., 2021; Fontana, 2020; Norman, 2024; Obinna, 2024; Procter, 2021; Yates, 2024). The value of case study research towards generating important observations and theoretical insights has long been recognized in the social sciences (Eckstein, 1975; George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007; Seawright & Gerring, 2008; Yin, 1984). While the replication of results or applicability to other potential cases can present a challenge to case study research, Flyvbjerg highlights the converse possibility whereby "the strategic choice of case may greatly add to the generalizability of a case study" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 226). Our case selection meets this criteria as the migratory chokepoint in Tapachula provides enormous comparative potential to analyze and draw conclusions about the emergence and consolidation of other bureaucratic and territorial bottlenecks that constrict migrants' mobility through well trodden routes found elsewhere in the world.

Our within case analysis builds on fieldwork conducted by the authors over three separate research trips to Tapachula between June and July 2023. There, we carried out semi-structured interviews with thirty-one migrants. Of the migrants interviewed, we maintained a gender parity by recruiting fifteen male participants and sixteen female participants, while three of these openly identified as belonging to the LGBTQ + community. In terms of nationality, twelve participants were from Honduras, six from El Salvador, four from Haiti, three from Guatemala, three from Venezuela, two from Cuba, and one from Nicaragua. These interviews were augmented by an additional eight expert interviews with individuals who work directly with the migrant community in Tapachula including two academics, three migrant shelter managers, two directors of locally based NGOs advocating for female and LGBTQ + migrants, a local civil servant, and a representative from an international organization that attends to the migrant population in Tapachula. Due to their vocations, these individuals possess extensive knowledge about local security and immigration dynamics. Although the temporal limitations that bound our fieldwork imply that our research constitutes a cross-sectional analysis of this particular location, we deploy a content analysis of other primary and secondary sources on Tapachula and the relevant statistical indicators dating from different periods to triangulate and confirm the observable findings derived from our field interviews.[3]

Prior to our first research trip to Tapachula, we established contact

[3] It remains to be seen whether our findings are affected by temporal limitations caused by abrupt recent changes in U.S. immigration policy and the impact of this shift on migration dynamics in Mexico. While we acknowledge these possible limitations of our research, the preliminary evidence from the first half of 2025 suggests that Tapachula continues to function as a migratory chokepoint in southern Mexico. The Mexican government maintains long-standing restrictive immigration and border enforcement policies throughout the country and tens of thousands of migrants have been effectively stranded in Tapachula due to the new U.S. government's policies (Díaz, 2025; Villegas, 2025). However, the broader regional migration dynamics are clearly in flux, as certain migrant groups are clearly not attempting to traverse Mexico in the same numbers as before (i.e., Venezuelans, Haitians, Cubans, etc.), while others are actually migrating south due to the paucity of options in North America (Gest, 2025). We address what this means for future research on the topic in our conclusions.

with aid workers from international organizations who worked in the city. These individuals placed us in contact with additional international and local activists and aid workers who assist the migrant population in this border region. From these contacts, we expanded our local network to a diverse assortment of local academics, activists, and civil servants upon arrival in Tapachula. This cross-sectional network enabled us to avoid a snowball sampling method of participant recruitment among the migrant population, a strategy that can be fraught with selection bias and other difficulties (Parker et al., 2019). However, we also understood the risk of selection bias by only recruiting participants from one location and therefore we aimed to conduct ten semi-structured interviews in three distinct locations where migrants congregated—a migrant shelter, a government agency, and a public space—in order to control for potential biases in data collection that may have occurred with a more myopic recruitment process (Arcury & Quandt, 1999). For the migrant shelter and government agency, we succeeded in obtaining permission from their management to carry out interviews in private offices in their physical locations after we explained the purpose of our study in detail to them. For the public space, we recruited visible members of the migrant population who were temporarily camped out in Bicentenario Park in downtown Tapachula. Upon approaching these individuals and presenting our formal credentials and explaining our project to them, those who wished to participate would then be invited for the interview in a quasi-private setting in one of the numerous cafes and restaurants located adjacent to the public plaza.

Conducting fieldwork as an outsider in a high-risk setting provides a unique set of challenges and risks (Wood, 2006). Furthermore, such field research generally creates a plethora of ethical considerations for outside researchers, particularly in instances where very clear power dynamics exist between the visiting scholar on one hand and a vulnerable demographic such as the migrant population on the other (Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018; Lekha Sriram et al., 2009). As Fujii (2017) notes, the logic of positionality manifests itself across time and space depending on the subject and the context they are in. While it was impossible to conceal our identities as Global North academic researchers then employed at a private Mexican university, we conducted the interviews in the most comfortable settings possible for participants and did so in the majority of their primary language.[4] In order to offset the potential for altered answers given the interview context, we strictly adhered to the standards outlined in the Belmont Report. Prior to each interview, we undertook an informed verbal consent process where we explained in intimate detail the purpose of the project, the confidentiality of the information they divulged, their right to not disclose anything they did not wish to, and their ability to terminate the interview anytime they wished.[5] For the sake of privacy and ethical concerns, we only collected select demographic information such as age and nationality. The structure of the questionnaire focused largely on questions related to their motives for migrating, their journey to Tapachula, and their experience accessing housing, healthcare, and employment in southern Mexico. Of equal importance, we sought to assess whether they had experienced any form of victimization or abuse during their migration experience. Given the precarious security dynamic in Chiapas, we did not ask any specific questions about criminal organizations and only included information about these groups that research participants volunteered without solicitation.

Mexico provides an ideal case study to analyze the subnational implementation of restrictive immigration and border enforcement policies because the country "has historically served as a strategic partner in US efforts to externalize its border enforcement strategy by curbing the arrival of unauthorized Central American and Caribbean asylum seekers and migrants crossing its territory" (Vogt, 2020, pp. 50–51). Similar to other federal countries, Mexico demonstrates notable subnational variation in policy implementation due to the greater autonomy bestowed upon states to interpret these policies according to local institutional dynamics and elite preferences (Ward et al., 2010; Grayson, 2013; Giraudy, 2010; Magaloni et al., 2020). Within Mexico, Tapachula serves as an ideal case to explore how the implementation of various national-level policies, including legal mechanisms, mobility restrictions, and enhanced enforcement efforts have converted this border city into a migratory chokepoint. In contrast to northern border cities hosting large numbers of migrants such as Tijuana or Ciudad Juárez, Tapachula is located in the periphery of Mexico's poorest state, and therefore has less institutional capacity and resources to devote towards border enforcement and migrant incorporation (Krauze, 2021). Additionally, this stretch of the Mexico-Guatemala border has recently become a hotly contested battleground between Mexico's two largest drug trafficking organizations (DTOs)—the Sinaloa Cartel (CDS) and the New Generation Jalisco Cartel (CJNG)—leading to additional challenges with local governance and service provision (González, 2024).

3. Chokepoints, transnational migration, and (Im)mobility

The conceptualization of chokepoints has been developed extensively in a variety of disciplines to analyze transnational flows of goods and the frictions these encounter at different locations across the globe (Bailey & Wellesley, 2017). More precisely defined, a chokepoint represents a place where such flows are decelerated, obstructed, or dispersed entirely, causing enormous restrictions over their continued mobility (Carse et al., 2023). As Middleton (2020: 11) notes: "What makes a chokepoint a chokepoint is not simply its form, but rather the volume and vectors of movement passing through a tight space. In a word, constriction." Even though chokepoints are usually associated with the movement of material goods, these flows can also include people and information, turning highways, ports, canals, maritime and territorial straits, undersea cables, and firewalls into potential blockage points (Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020). Although the concept is often framed in strictly topographical terms, particularly those involving physical obstacles such as maritime straits or terrestrial corridors, many scholars analyze them as social constructions shaped by state policies. According to Starosielski (2018), chokepoints can form independent of geographical or topographical factors as a response to regulatory frameworks, labor relations, or ownership structures. Söderberg echoes this sentiment, claiming that "chokepoints are both 'things' in and of themselves and relations that (dis)connect things and people" (2024: 8). While geographical bottlenecks can create potential obstacles to the transnational flow of goods, the actions and interactions between different actors in these spaces ultimately determines whether it functions as a chokepoint or not.

Despite the enormous relevance of chokepoints on transnational human mobility, it remains a relatively understudied phenomenon in the social sciences (Carse et al., 2023; Murton & Narins, 2024; Runde & Bryja, 2024). Building on this burgeoning literature, we define migratory chokepoints as physical locations along migrant routes where substantial flows of people in transit are concentrated and detained for indeterminate periods of time through a combination of factors including, but not limited to, topographical constraints, transportation infrastructure (or lack thereof), regulatory mechanisms, and local power dynamics. Importantly, Murton and Narins highlight the "relationality of chokepoints and how they can also be strategically created by a variety of agentive actors" (2024: 453). Although state officials may play a key role in establishing and asserting control over territory where chokepoints are established, there are often multiple other actors involved in the creation and consolidation of these blockage points who seek to control, constrain, and disrupt migration flows for their own

[4] Spanish was the primary language for all of the research participants except for the Haitians interviewed. The Haitians we interviewed spoke fluent Spanish.

[5] During this fieldwork, both authors were formally employed at a private Mexican university which did not mandate or require faculty to submit a protocol to receive authorization from a research ethics board prior to performing such research activities.

benefit (Middleton, 2020; Söderberg, 2024). Additionally, migratory chokepoints frequently form in places of geostrategic importance such as key entry and exit points in international borderlands. In these binational zones, chokepoints emerge in spaces where "overlapping and competing systems of rule, regulation, and territorial authority" impede state efforts "to make populations and territories more easily legible and governable, and unsettle the smooth flow of goods" (Meehan and Dan, 2024, p. 564–565).

Migratory chokepoints form and consolidate according to the logic of prohibition. Those states that adopt restrictive immigration and border enforcement policies to combat migrant flows create the conditions for human traffickers and organized crime to thrive. As Jeffery Miron notes: "Prohibitions often give rise to black markets, and in black markets participants cannot easily use the courts to resolve commercial disputes […] and anecdotal evidence suggests that black market participants often use violence to resolve disputes" (1999, p. 1). Due to their propensity to form in borderlands, migratory chokepoints may evolve in physical spaces or land corridors where flows of illicit goods converge, adding further complexity to relations between different actors pursuing their own licit or illicit ends (Mancuso & Maldi, 2022; Yates, 2021). Foreign nationals impeded from further travel due to physical and bureaucratic infrastructure are stranded in these precarious spaces and rendered susceptible to potential commodification and victimization at the hands of disparate actors (Cruz-Piñeiro et al., 2024; Vogt, 2013, 2018; Crawley & Jones, 2021). However, migrants trapped in these spaces are not inevitably destined for victimhood. To the contrary, they possess both agency and the capacity to organize and resist predation by adopting 'chokepoint pragmatics', novel protection strategies forged in tandem with in-group and out-group allies to mitigate their exposure to risks in an uncertain and volatile environment (Liberona Concha et al., 2025; Middleton, 2020; Arriola & Coraza, 2020Arriola Vega and Coraza de los Santos, 2020; Skleparis, 2017).

Despite the prevalence of migratory chokepoints found along different routes in regions greatly affected by transnational migration, scant research is devoted to understanding how these concentration points emerge, how they function and are sustained, and perhaps most importantly, how they impact migrants and shape the options available to them. Additionally, the majority of existing scholarship on migratory chokepoints focuses on those spaces that become major migration transit points due to geographical features. Notably, several migrant chokepoints have formed on European islands located close to North Africa and the Middle East that have experienced large-scale incoming migration, most notably the Canary Islands, Lampedusa, and Lesbos (Dines et al., 2015; Godenau, 2014; Tunaboylu & van Liempt, 2021). Other migratory chokepoints have consolidated in geostrategic peninsulas and land bridges such as Ceuta, Melilla, and Necoclí, locations where substantial migrant flows converge en route to their intended destinations in the Global North (Ruiz Ramos, 2025; Runde & Bryja, 2024).

The case study provided by Tapachula is different insofar as it became a migratory chokepoint because of state policy more than by any notable topographical features. The existing immigration infrastructure grafts enforcement practices and bureaucratic procedures onto a local institutional context marred with deficiencies, resulting in what Brewer et al. characterize as a 'system to wear people down' (*la política de desgaste*) where "a combination of norms, arbitrary actions, inefficiencies, and lack of capacity […] traps people in a prolonged limbo of uncertainty, risk, and precarious conditions" (2022: 27). As a result, the Mexican government's immigration and border enforcement policies in Tapachula has converted the peripheral city into one of the principal migratory chokepoints worldwide, or a "multi-modal pivot point of prolonged waiting, settlement, and return as migrants now determine whether to continue north, return, or pursue alternatives in Mexico" (Galemba et al., 2021, p. 27).

4. The consolidation of a migratory chokepoint in Tapachula

Tapachula's emergence as a focal point to stem incoming terrestrial migration in Mexico's southern borderlands owes much to the city's socio-historic status as a crossroads between Mexico and Central America. Located in the Soconusco region of southwestern Chiapas state, the peripheral territory's sovereignty was disputed between Mexico and Guatemala during the 19th century. Belatedly, the Mexican government began to enforce weak border control over the region following the signing of the Herrera-Mariscal Treaty in 1882 (Zepeda, 2021). The region's history helps explain not only its heterogeneous character in economic, cultural, and ethnic terms, but also the close ties between local communities on both sides of the border that persist to the present day. In geographic terms, Tapachula currently represents the key migrant portal into Mexico, a major transit point for massive human flows traveling northwards to the United States from Central America and beyond. As one local migrant rights activist describes the city: "[Tapachula] is an inflection point between North America and Central America" (Author's interview 23/06/23).

Over the past decade, the Mexican government has placed additional requirements on international air travelers arriving to the country in order to regulate the arrival of those foreign nationals perceived most likely to try to continue traveling onwards to the United States. These restrictions on air travel have directly led to a dramatic increase in the number of people who enter the country via land crossings from Guatemala. Even though there are multiple formal and informal border crossings located along the Mexico-Guatemala border, Tapachula receives the majority of migrants entering into Mexico by land due to its proximity to the Pan-American Highway, the principal transportation infrastructure connecting North, Central, and South America. Tapachula also enjoys the distinction as the closest city to Mexico's southern border that has both the population and infrastructure to potentially accommodate these new arrivals (Brewer et al., 2022; Bruce & Santiago, 2024). For example, the Mexican town of Ciudad Hidalgo is situated adjacent to the border across the Suchiate river from the Guatemalan border towns of Tecún Umán and El Carmen. However, any migrant seeking to formally request asylum in Mexico must travel the short distance to Tapachula, as it is the only city in the border region where Mexican immigration authorities process such requests apart from Palenque and Tenosique, two other border cities that receive a fraction of the asylum applications submitted in Tapachula.

The remainder of this section is broken down into three sub-sections examining: (a) how migratory chokepoints form and function according to the rational-legal governing logics that create them, (b) how their prohibitory character creates enormous opportunities for black market entrepreneurs, bureaucrats, and civilians to victimize migrants for their own benefit, and (c) how migrants adopt chokepoint pragmatics to resist and survive these constant pressures.

4.1. *The funnel, the snare, and the shackle: creating the blockage point*

Throughout most of its history, Mexico experienced higher outgoing emigration than incoming immigration. This dynamic has changed over the past decade with the mass influx of migrants seeking to transit through the country in route to the United States (Yankelevich, 2021). In order to accommodate this unprecedented migration and respond to U. S. efforts to establish "transnational migration deterrence" outside of its own borders,[6] successive Mexican administrations have bolstered the

[6] For further analysis about the migratory externalization process see (Godenau, 2014; Greenhill, 2016; Ostrand, 2015; Ostrand, 2022; Pijnenburg, 2024; Rosina & Fontana, 2024; UNHCR, 2024). Additionally, for further analysis of Mexico's response and agency in the interaction with the US see Capps et al. (2019); Eichensehr (2022); Sánchez-Montijano & Ortega (2022); Vogt (2020).

country's legal infrastructure with the dual purpose of strengthening protections for migrants requesting asylum while simultaneously fortifying migration controls (Castañeda et al., 2023; Fernández-Kelly & Massey, 2007).[7] The cumulative effect of these policies has arguably been most strongly felt in Mexico's southern borderlands, a geographical bottleneck spanning across the states of Chiapas, Campeche and Quintana Roo. In these borderlands, three key policy measures have produced a regulatory chokepoint: greater visa restrictions against in-bound travel into Mexico, stricter migration enforcement efforts on the ground, and systemic delays in the processes available for migrants to regularize their status in Mexico.

A considerable number of migrants arrive in Mexico by land from Guatemala because they simply lack the resources to travel by plane. However, others are compelled to arrive via land crossing from Guatemala due to visa requirements recently adopted by the Mexican government against nationals from Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Ecuador, and Venezuela (Gobierno de México, 2024; Galemba et al., 2019). A notable example of this occurred when the Mexican government reintroduced visa requirements for Ecuadorians in 2021 and for Venezuelans in 2022 due to the large number of people arriving from these countries by air with the intention of continuing onwards to the United States. As a result of these renewed requirements, Ecuadorian and Venezuelan migrants began entering Mexico by land routes from Guatemala instead (González, 2024; Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2024). Apart from the cost of airfare and the visa application itself, many migrants lack the time to facilitate this process as they are abruptly forced to flee their countries due to violence or extreme economic hardship (Rabasa Jofre, 2021). Tellingly, twenty-seven of the thirty-one interviews we conducted with migrants cited violence as the catalyst for them abandoning their country, ranging from the threat of extortion and forced recruitment by criminal gangs, state repression, sexual abuse or harassment, and domestic violence.[8]

Constrained by visa requirements and a lack of resources (and often time), migrants forced to enter Mexico by land from Guatemala encounter a robust system of immigration control mechanisms that has expanded over previous decades. During the Fox administration (2000–2006), the Mexican government inaugurated the Southern Plan (*Plan Sur*), a policy program designed to contain Central American migration into Mexico by fortifying existing border infrastructure and improving cooperation between the relevant agencies tasked with regulating immigration (Leutert, 2019, p. 8). Towards this end, the Century XXI Migratory Station (*Estación Migratoria Siglo XXI*) was established in Tapachula in 2006, representing the largest detention center for undocumented migrants in Latin America (Ramírez, 2024). Under the Peña Nieto administration (2012–2018), Mexican officials launched the South Border Program (*Programa Frontera Sur*) in mid-2014, a policy initiative that led to increased enforcement measures along the Mexico-Guatemala border and mass deportations of mostly Central American migrants (Capps et al., 2019; Castillo, 2016; Dominguez-Villegas & Rietig, 2015). Following large-scale and highly publicized migrant caravans originating in Tapachula in 2018 and 2019, the López Obrador administration temporarily deployed close to 30,000 National Guard (*Guardia Nacional* - GN) personnel in the Soconusco region to establish seven terrestrial checkpoints. Similarly, an additional detention center in Tapachula was established to be administered by the National Institute of Immigration (*Instituto Nacional de Migración* - INM), the country's main bureaucratic organ devoted to enforcing migration control, deportation functions, and informing potential applicants of the asylum process (Cruz Piñeiro et al., 2024; Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2012; art. 16).[9]

For migrants entering Mexico through the principal route to Tapachula, they generally travel through Guatemala and arrive at one of two border towns—El Carmen and Tecún Umán—located on the Suchiate River, which demarcates the official border between Mexico and Guatemala (Anguiano and Trejo Peña, 2007, p. 54). There, they must decide whether to enter Mexico through formal border crossings controlled by Mexican immigration authorities, located on the international bridges in the border towns of Talismán and Ciudad Hidalgo, or to cross into the country informally on rafts and then take ground transportation to nearby Tapachula to avoid the immigration checkpoints deployed along the highways. Unsurprisingly, many opt for the latter due to their limited knowledge of their rights, fear of deportation, distrust of Mexican immigration authorities, or concerns about jeopardizing their chances of receiving asylum in the United States (Brewer et al., 2022, pp. 10–12). These concerns are not unfounded. The INM and GN systematically engage in a practice known as 'hot returns' (*devoluciones en caliente*) whereby agents compel migrants to return to Guatemala even when they have signaled their intention to seek asylum, violating international refugee conventions in the process (Colectivo de Monitoreo - Frontera Sur, 2023).

Once migrants cross the river and enter Mexico, they must decide whether they are going to regularize their legal status in Mexico, or if they will attempt to traverse Mexico to the U.S. southern border without the required documentation. However, Mexican immigration authorities have established formal and informal mechanisms to deter the latter practice and encourage migrants to regularize their legal status regardless of their migration plans. One such initiative has been the proliferation of immigration checkpoints in Tapachula and Chiapas overseen by the GN with support from the Mexican Army whereby officials aim to verify the legal status of migrants and arrest those lacking official documentation (Ramírez, 2024). One immigration expert in Tapachula interviewed recalled the regional expansion of these checkpoints during this period: "Controls have clearly increased. Just recently, a colleague and I took a trip to Oaxaca, and over the course of 350 km, we went through 21 immigration checkpoints" (Author's interview 07/06/23). The massive increase in checkpoints is reflected in the available data on the number of undocumented migrants apprehended by Mexican immigration authorities. Whereas Chiapas accounted for 29.45 % of total apprehensions nationwide in 2023–229,379 out of 778,907— the state's share increased to 32.57 % in 2024, or some 402,148 out of 1,234,698 apprehensions nationwide (Gobierno de México, 2023c, 2024b).

Unlike other areas of Mexico, informal rail travel is not a viable option in southern Chiapas due to permanent damage caused by

[7] It is imperative to examine the creation and consolidation of a migratory chokepoint in Tapachula in the context of recent bilateral relations between Mexico and the United States. In response to the substantial increase in unauthorized migration from Mexico to the United States following the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, successive U.S. administrations have embraced the wholesale adoption of externalization practices designed to push border enforcement further south of the U.S. southern border into Mexico and Central America (Ardalan, 2020; Miller, 2019; Zaiotti, 2016). These measures have included conditioning foreign aid on the adoption of stricter immigration controls, the negotiation of formal agreements to repatriate unauthorized migrants to third party countries, and the reactivation of detention camps for migrants on foreign soil (Sinha, 2022, p. 1303). As a result, different authors have defined Mexico a 'vertical border' between the US and Central America (Varela-Huerta, 2019) or as the "Fortress North America" (Castañeda et al., 2023).

[8] Three other participants pointed to economic collapse as the main motive for their exit from their countries.

[9] The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 placed further constraints on migratory flows along the border between Mexico and Guatemala with migrants facing greater difficulties entering and crossing the country using formal and informal means (Horwood & Frouws, 2021).

Hurricane Stan to the regional railway infrastructure in 2005. Thus, the only other alternatives available to migrants seeking to continue their journeys northwards are varied terrestrial or maritime modes of transportation.[10] However, migrants in Tapachula without the required documentation and resources to continue their travel outside of the border city are effectively stranded there due to the spectre of this invisible infrastructure awaiting them. One Cuban woman highlights this reality: "Since I arrived here I wanted to continue, but I could not. I did not have the chance […] I did not have money […] No one could drive me there. And I was told it was very dangerous. Do you understand? Migration stops you on the highway, asks for your papers, and then sends you back" (Author's interview 05/07/23). It is well documented that Mexican immigration authorities frequently engage in illegal displacements and deportations of migrants lacking the proper documentation detained at these ubiquitous checkpoints on Mexican highways. In 2024, an average of 10,000 migrants were arrested every month in northern Mexican states and relocated to the south, even when they already had scheduled appointments with the United States Customs and Border Patrol to be conducted in formal ports of entry on the U. S. southern border (Human Rights Watch, 2025). While those detained north of Mexico City are internally displaced back to southern cities such as Tapachula, Tabasco, and Villahermosa, migrants apprehended south of the capital are generally deported back to Guatemala (Janetsky & Márquez, 2024; Ramírez, 2024).

Forced to enter Mexico by land due to cumbersome visa requirements and constrained from further movement by the expansive immigration infrastructure found in and around Tapachula, many migrants opt to try to regularize their legal status in some shape or form in order to leave the city. Indicative of its status as the main migrant portal into Mexico, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (*Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* - COMAR) office in Tapachula received and processed between 50 % and 70 % of the national total of asylum requests filed annually since 2015 (see Fig. 1).[12] Tellingly, when migration flows subsided in 2024 and the total number of asylum requests in Mexico decreased by 56.1 % from the 2023 tally, Tapachula's percentage of the national total rose from the previous year to 64.2 % of total asylum requests. However, despite the presence of the INM, COMAR, and even the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Tapachula, migrants face enormous obstacles and challenges when trying to regularize their status or claim asylum in Mexico due to severe institutional and bureaucratic deficiencies (Fernández Casanueva & Juárez Paulín, 2019, p. 167).

The logic underscoring the Mexican government's offer of protection for migrants seeking asylum instead of forcing them to transit the country undocumented can be interpreted as an indirect way of reducing migratory flows. Quite simply, migrants who are granted asylum in Mexico are less likely to continue migrating towards the United States due to their perception that they are unable to claim asylum there as well (Author's interview 23/06/23). Mexico had long been a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Building on these commitments, the Calderón administration (2006–2012) passed the Refugees, Complementary Protection and Political Asylum Law (*Ley sobre Refugiados, Protección Complementaria y Asilo Político* - LRPCAP) to provide protection to migrants who feared persecution in their home countries (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2011, p. 4–5, 10).[13] To perform these tasks, the INM receives support from branches of the Mexican Army or the GN if formally requested. The latter two actors have played a more active role in border control in recent years due to the growing presence of DTOs along Mexico's southern border, and are often the first state agents with whom migrants interact upon entering the country (Brewer et al., 2022, p. 8). However, their frequent recourse to subjecting migrants seeking asylum to a potential 'hot return' back to Guatemala compels most to avoid declaring their intentions at formal land crossings and instead entering illegally and proceeding to apply directly at the COMAR offices in Tapachula. There, they can select one of two mechanisms available for asylum seekers: refugee status and humanitarian visas (Fig. 2).[14]

According to the LRPCAP, asylum requests must be made at a SEGOB office within thirty business days of entry (2011, art. 18). COMAR agents then provide a document known as a proof of application (*constancia de trámite*) to the applicant (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2012; arts. 38), and grant them a credible fear interview after which their claim is decided upon within forty-five to ninety days (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2012; arts. 45,47). In the event that their claim is rejected, applicants can appeal this decision for up to fifteen days after the resolution or apply for additional protection mechanisms such as the Complementary Protection (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2011; arts. 25, 28). Additionally, those with a proof of application from COMAR can obtain a Unique Population Registration Code (*Clave Única de Registro de Población* - CURP) to apply for a Card of a Visitor for Humanitarian Reasons (*Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias* - TVRH) which grants them the ability to work and move through the country for one year.[15] In addition, the TVRH is also granted to unaccompanied minors who have experienced or witnessed a crime in Mexico.[16] However, obtaining a TVRH does not guarantee safe travel through Mexico as numerous reports have abounded of Mexican authorities arresting and deporting immigrants in possession of this document (Cano Padilla et al., 2023).

Beyond these two mechanisms, Mexican migration authorities also offer another option in the form of a Multiple Immigration Form (*Forma Migratorio Múltiple* - FMM). The FMM is a document designed for visitors who are not legally required to have a visa to be present in Mexico and who are only aiming to spend a limited time there (Gobierno de México, 2023a). Although this document usually limits a migrant's movement to a single Mexican state, sometimes it allows them to travel throughout the country for 45–180 days. Yet, instead of serving as a tool to augment the asylum process, the FMM is often issued incorrectly as a replacement for other legal procedures, leading to greater bureaucratic incoherence and corruption within the INM.[17] Civil society organizations and

[10] Air travel from Tapachula's airport to other destinations in Mexico is similarly only available to those foreign nationals with certain legal status in Mexico. The INM maintains a checkpoint in the airport prior to the official security checkpoint in order to confirm that all travellers are in the country legally.

[12] Overseeing the Mexican immigration regime is the Mexican Ministry of Interior (*Secretaría de Gobernación* - SEGOB), which alongside the INM is responsible for regulating migratory issues with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other auxiliary authorities (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 2011; arts. 18–21). COMAR is tasked with overseeing and processing the process of asylum requests in Mexico. Similar to the INM, COMAR is controlled by SEGOB.

[13] These include the Migration Law-LM, the Law on Refugees, Complementary Protection, and Political Asylum-LRPCAP, and the Regulation for the Law on Refugees and Complementary Protection-RLRPC.

[14] Fig. 2 provides a highly simplified schematic of migrants' main bureaucratic options upon arrival at Mexico's southern border and should be read as a visual aid to the more detailed analysis developed in the following pages.

[15] The number of applicants for this legal status increased from 2014 onwards, following the implementation of the SBP by the Peña-Nieto administration which exerted greater pressure against undocumented migrants entering Mexico (Angulo-Pasel, 2022).

[16] For those who have suffered or witnessed a crime in Mexico and seek to obtain a TVRH, applicants must present a certified copy of the crime report or a certificate issued by a Mexican prosecutor's office to the INM (Gobierno de México, 2020).

[17] Apart from the FMM, there is another legal document, the Regional Visitor Card (*Tarjeta de Visitante Regional* - TVR), that allows temporary residency with numerous limitations, similarly placing migrants in what scholars have denominated as "illegal legality" (Rojas Wiesner & Basok, 2020).

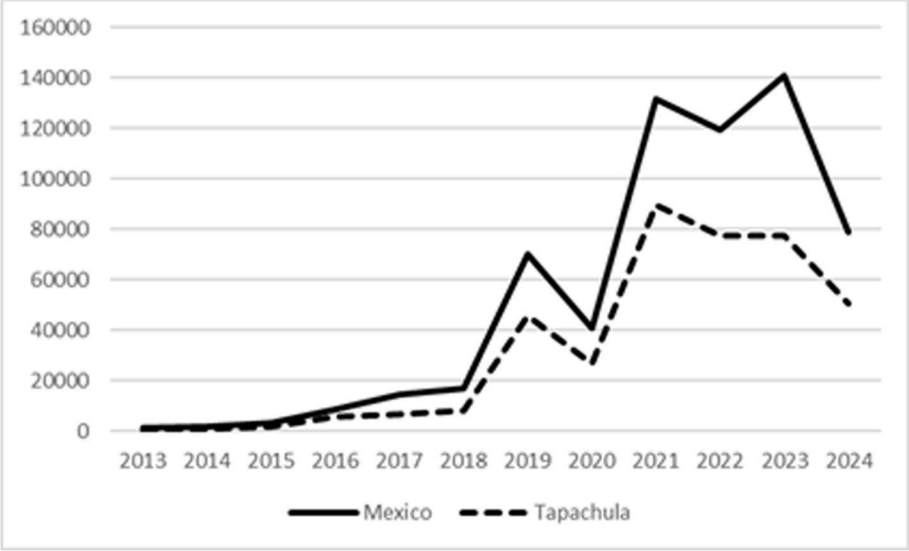

Fig. 1. Asylum requests in Mexico and Tapachula: 2013–2024 (COMAR)[11].

[11] Regarding 2018, COMAR only provides data about Tapachula refugee requests between January and September. In order to maintain proportionality, we decided to include the total requests in that period (the total requests for 2018 was 29.580).

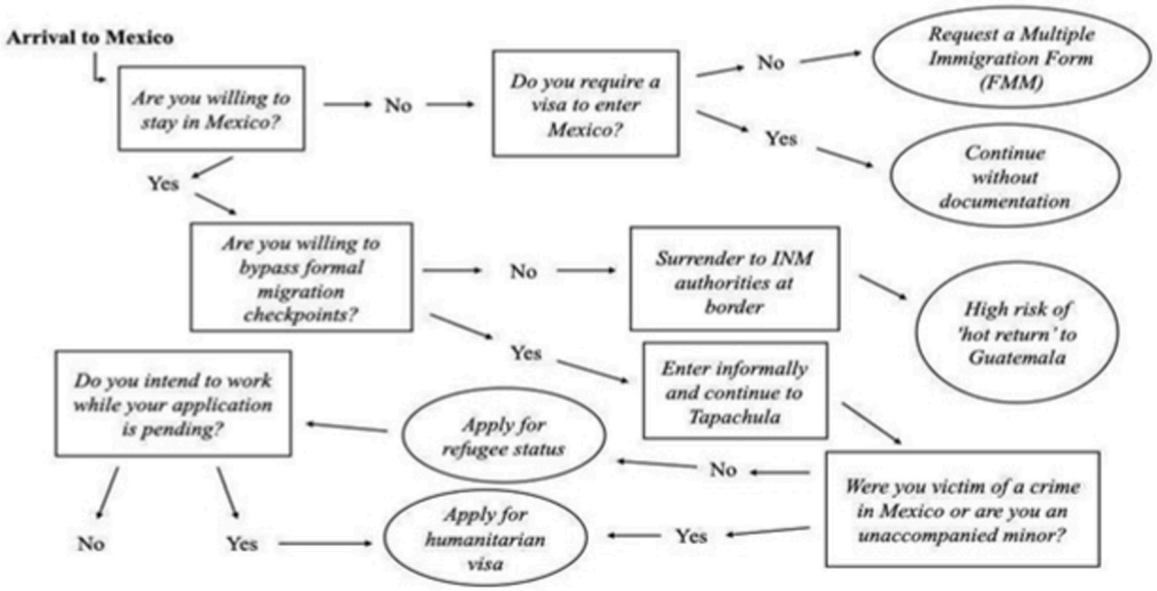

Fig. 2. Options for migrants arriving by land at the Mexico-Guatemala Border.

watchdog groups have documented and criticized the indiscriminate issue of FMM permits to migrants in Tapachula due to the limited timeframe it gives them to legally remain in Mexico coupled with the lack of legal protection it affords them. Additionally, INM agents often issue these with notes attached indicating that these permits are only valid in Chiapas, a condition which limits their mobility outside of the state and one which migrants can avoid if they are willing to pay illicit bribes for them to be removed (Colectivo de Monitoreo - Frontera Sur, 2023).

Despite the seemingly benign character of Mexican immigration law, the manner in which it is implemented on the ground for migrants in Tapachula demonstrates an enormous discrepancy between design and function. This is largely due to chronic underfunding by the federal government. Instead of facilitating mobility or meaningful integration, the bureaucratic machinery often serves to immobilize migrants through what Starosielski (2018) terms a "regulatory chokepoint", an immaterial yet powerful structure that obstructs flows through administrative lethargy. For instance, COMAR received $199,455,885 MXN ($12 million USD) from federal budgets between 2019 and 2023, severely undermining its capacity to process the massive increase in asylum requests from foreign nationals (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2023). Tellingly, the Mexican government decreased its public spending per request from $11,611 MXN ($873 USD) in 2014 to $342 MXN ($19 USD) in 2023. During this period, COMAR only avoided a complete fiscal collapse because the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) office covered 69,4 % of its total operating costs (Secretaría de

Gobernación, 2023). Confirming this budgetary deficiency, a leak from December 2023 revealed that the INM director had ordered a moratorium on deportations due to a "liquidity shortage" within the institution (La Verdad, 2023).

The lack of adequate funding has ultimately undermined the availability of these legal mechanisms for migrants, as the application process is riddled with problems for those who are attempting to regularize their status in Tapachula (Alonso Viña, 2023). Even if migrants have already started the asylum process, they remain likely to face illegal expulsions while also navigating governmental corruption, bureaucratic delays, and severe restrictions on their mobility, forcing applicants to wait extended periods in Tapachula until their claims are resolved (Doering-White, 2019; Miranda, 2023; Faret, 2022; Bueno-Amaral and Coraza de los Santos, 2020). Even though these applicants could legally move to other cities in Chiapas, they largely choose to remain in Tapachula due to their limited economic resources, the unpredictable manner in which COMAR operates, and their fear of being deported by migration authorities once they leave the city. In recent years, the latter factor has become more pronounced due to the GN's greater hand in enforcing migration control through what Candiz and Basok describe as "strategies of dissuasion" (2024: 9).

For those that do move to other locations in Chiapas while avoiding deportation, they still have to attend their asylum process appointments in Tapachula, regardless of the distance or inherent risk involved in leaving (Author's interview 04/07/23). Although migrants claiming asylum have forty-five to ninety days to resolve their cases, the chronic delays that are common at Tapachula's COMAR office leaves most applicants in legal limbo (Arriola Vega, 2021, p. 6). Many possess a proof of application which ostensibly protects them from potential deportation during the process, yet they are still highly susceptible to arbitrary deportations. In one case, INM agents deported one family that had relocated from Tapachula to Tuxtla Gutiérrez while attempting to resolve their case. In another instance of bureaucratic malpractice, migration agents deported another thirty-eight migrants who possessed either a proof of application, or another document called a proof of recognition (*constancia de reconocimiento*), that affirmed their refugee status in Mexico (Cano Padilla et al., 2023, pp. 16–19). Similarly, the INM has been accused of misconduct when promoting the voluntary relocations of asylum seekers to other cities in southern Mexico to hasten their migratory processes due to the overwhelmed capacity of Tapachula's COMAR office (Clemente, 2023). One shelter employee in Tapachula recalls witnessing this practice: "[The migrants] were tricked: they were taken to buses and told 'We are moving you to Tuxtla, the state capital so you can get an answer to your needs'. But of the seven buses leaving, only two arrived [at Tuxtla], as the rest were sent back to Guatemala." (Author's interview 11/06/23)[18]

4.2. Monetizing vulnerability: the commodification of migrants in Tapachula

Beyond the adverse impact the migratory chokepoint has on migrants' plans and aspirations, the prohibitory legal regime enforced by Mexican authorities has inadvertently created enormous opportunities for the widespread commodification, and ultimately victimization, of foreign nationals stranded in Tapachula. As Berghoff and Cuéllar (2024:185) observe: "An involuntary pause to a migration project can have complex consequences not only for the course of the migration project itself but for the physical and psychological integrity of affected migrants." Organized violence against migrants in Mexico has become an unfortunate reality confronting foreign nationals seeking to transit through or resettle in Mexico in recent decades (Alba Villalever et al., 2024; Infante et al., 2011; Rojas-Wiesner, 2024; Servan-Mori et al., 2014). Throughout the country, the restrictive immigration infrastructure has engendered a dynamic whereby "migrant bodies, labor, and lives are transformed into useful objects of exchange and exploitation" (Vogt, 2013, p. 765). This is especially salient in the Soconusco region of southwestern Chiapas. Writing on the border zone in the early 2000s, anthropologist Olivia Ruiz (2003, p. 2) described it in the following manner: "There, the multiplicity of threats faced by migrants, including assault, rape, robbery, and the loss of limbs due to falling from the train, to name just a few, makes this region stand out for the high level of risk it poses to those who attempt to cross it." The dramatic expansion and consolidation of prohibitory policies in Mexico's southern borderlands in the interim has converted this binational space into "a mosaic of migrant trails, military checkpoints, cartel territories, and different local entrepreneurs that seek to profit from this phenomenon, each adding layers of complexity to the journey of those in transit" (Cruz-Piñeiro et al., 2024, p. 2143).

Despite the gradual militarization of Mexico's southern border, the historically weak state presence in the zone has allowed for smugglers and seasonal migrant laborers from Guatemala to cross the Suchiate river informally on a daily basis with the tacit acceptance of Mexican immigration authorities (Beltran Cortez, 2019). From the moment migrants attempt to cross the border between Guatemala and Mexico, they are forced to make decisions that come with varying risks attached. For instance, to cross the river border informally, migrants have to pay one of the numerous rafts (*balsas*) devoted to smuggling people between the two countries. However, the amount that migrants are charged for this service varies wildly depending on their nationality and their linguistic capacities. From our interviews, the normal prices reported for most migrants hailing from Spanish-speaking countries ranged between $10–50 Guatemalan quetzales ($1,28 USD and $6,42 USD). In contrast, Haitians can be charged as high as $120 USD due to their general inability to speak Spanish which makes them more vulnerable to unscrupulous smugglers (Author's interview 05/07/23). Another migrant from Honduras who crossed the river multiple times confirms this disparity:

> When one comes with someone who does not know the place, they will tell him 'It is 200 or 300 [Quetzales]" […] They take advantage of people's innocence as they do not know the place they are crossing. They [locals] scare them with immigration officers, so people get frightened and do as they are told (Author's interview 05/07/23).

Nevertheless, paying the fee demanded by the raftsmen provides no guarantee of safe passage across the Suchiate river. Many migrants who pay the required fare are at risk of assault by raftsmen or assailants who wait for unsuspecting migrants to arrive on the other side of the river. In an interview with a Honduran man, he highlighted how the threat of victimization awaits migrants from the moment they arrive on Mexican soil:

> Yes, we were robbed on the rafts. The same people who helped us cross took all our money at gunpoint. They said that if we didn't give them the money, they would rob us and kill us, and they claimed to be from the Sinaloa cartel. (Author's interview, 17/06/23).

Once they reach Tapachula, most migrants find themselves with minimal to no resources at their disposal due to the costs incurred along the way. However, the available economic resources will determine the options migrants have in Tapachula, particularly for those that do not want to risk transiting Mexico undocumented and will try to regularize their legal status with the COMAR. For migrants, this process involves spending indeterminate periods of time in Tapachula, a city where 41.4 % of the population lived below the poverty line and an additional 17.1 % in extreme poverty as recently as 2020 (Gobierno de México, 2023b).

[18] Apart from the threat of deportation, migrants attempting to regularize their status in Tapachula are frequently coerced to pay networks of corrupt immigration officials and fixers to expedite their applications or to obtain the requisite documents required to transit through Mexico or to merely work legally (Clemente & Verza, 2022).

These structural conditions further compound the challenges faced by migrants awaiting resolution of their legal status. For those with some money at their disposal, they may opt to rent some form of accommodation in the various hotels located around the city. Migrants who cannot afford private accommodation are left with the choice to either stay in a migrant shelter or the street. However, since the arrival of the first large scale migrant caravan in 2018, the demand for spaces in Tapachula's three main migrant shelters has far outstripped their existing capacity, obligating those migrants with sufficient financial resources to look for private accommodation elsewhere in Tapachula. A considerable number of migrants lack the means to rent any form of accommodation and are forced to camp out in the city's public spaces (IOM, 2021).

Although the shelter infrastructure has received substantial funding from international donors, not all of these spaces operate within the same ethical framework. Migrant shelters in Mexico vary enormously in terms of their capacity and their altruism. Even most of them operate under compassionate guidelines, criminals and civilians alike will often attempt to benefit from the ancillary economy that surrounds shelters from the collection of wire transfers for a fee to the orchestrated kidnapping of migrants themselves (Vogt, 2013, p. 776; Doering-White, 2019, pp. 18–19; Galemba et al., 2021). Reflective of this disturbing reality, a transgender migrant who fled Honduras due to an attempted sexual assault committed by a local gang, encountered one of their victimizers at a migrant shelter in Tapachula, who had similarly left their country due to threats from a rival gang. When they reported this interaction to the INM, their agents refused to expedite this individual's asylum application or provide additional protective measures (Author's interview 17/06/23). One shelter in particular has gained notoriety amongst international organizations and local activist networks for its profit-oriented character and exploitation of migrants. One Honduran woman recalls her experience while staying there:

> [In the shelter], the food had to be bought […] My children were in a state of malnutrition. […] And for three months we had to sleep on the floor. But I had to endure all those humiliations. I also did it because they told me that I was going to be paid. I had to wake up at five in the morning to sweep the patio, to sweep the TV room, to empty the bathrooms, to clean the room where the sick stay, and sometimes I helped in the kitchen […] But I was never paid in the three months that I worked there. (Author's interview 17/06/23).

Lacking economic resources and without formal permission to work to support themselves, many migrants are driven into working off the books in the agricultural, construction, and service sectors. Others engage in informal commerce in the Tapachula's public spaces. However, these opportunities imply working long hours in unsafe conditions for low wages. One Salvadoran migrant who worked as a carpenter for 13 h a day for a salary of 150 MXN (or $0.70 USD an hour) recalls that his salary "was not enough to pay rent, to pay for the bus, or to pay for food" (Author's interview 8/11/23). Even for migrants who regularize their status and receive a work permit, local employers take advantage of their fear of potential deportation to withhold wages and mistreat them. Another Salvadoran migrant describes this tendency: "[Employers] say, 'you are not in your country, you will do as we tell you'. They pressure you and then pay you [what they want]" (Author's interview 17/06/23). Female migrants are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and exploitation during job interviews and while on the job. A single mother from Honduras recalls how she experienced sexual harassment on her first day working as a maid in Tapachula:

> When I got there, I expected to see his wife, but there was no wife there, only two big dogs and two gates with a padlock. That was weird, but I needed the money to buy some food for my children. I had to endure it all day while I was there. [My employer] offered me a beer, and I told him I didn't want it, that I was there to do what I came to do, which was to clean the house. [I told him] 'There are women who might get drunk with you, but in my case I'm not on your list' […] He told me to sit on the couch, that he would pay me anyway […] Then he came over, touched me, and said he would help me if I helped him. Then he came and touched me again, and I told him not to touch me because I was pregnant (Author's interview 17/06/23).

Due to their enhanced vulnerability, many female migrants and those identifying as LGBTQ + are driven into the city's burgeoning sex trade in order to support themselves as they attempt to navigate the country's complex immigration regime (Miranda, 2022). For some migrants who engage in sex work in Tapachula, they are not only driven by financial necessity, but also by the need for protection from organized criminal groups that exploit the vulnerability of migrants (Muñoz Martínez et al., 2020). Two Honduran women interviewed ended up living on the streets of Tapachula with their children and subsequently engaged in prostitution to survive, even though they lacked contraceptives and understood the inherent risks involved (Authors interview July 04, 2023). Many local bar owners take advantage of female migrants' desperation and necessity, particularly single mothers, by offering them jobs as waitresses or bartenders, after which they subsequently inform them that they are expected to engage in sexual activities with clients for money (Correa-Cabrera & Clark, 2016).

Apart from labor exploitation, civilians in Tapachula have also found ways to profit from the victimization migrant population stranded in the city waiting to regularize their status to continue on their journey northwards. Many residents of Tapachula have converted parts of their houses into rooms to rent for migrants, although several do so in order to defraud potential occupants. According to a Salvadoran migrant: "There are people who rent rooms and they tell you 'Look, we're going to rent [this room] to you for a month, and they only let you stay for five days and then they evict you and keep the whole month's rent" (Author's interview 17/06/23).

Beyond unscrupulous civilians, migrants stuck in Tapachula face considerably greater risks posed by the various organized criminal groups that have entrenched themselves in the borderlands. The growth, power, and reach of Mexican DTOs has reached dizzying heights over the past two decades, as these organizations "have become more violent and have also expanded their operations into other areas of criminality" (Magaloni et al., 2020, p. 1130). Due to declining U.S. markets in traditional illicit commodities such as cocaine, Mexican DTOs have made up for the losses in revenue by taking advantage of the massive growth of the migrant economy. This diversification has attracted criminal organizations to previously tranquil regions of the country located along the principal transit routes such as Tapachula (Graham, 2024). While the Central American '*maras*' briefly appeared in the city in the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Mexican authorities eventually succeeded in reducing their presence in the region (Brigden, 2018; Sullivan, 2005). During this period, the fearsome Mexican DTO, Los Zetas, expanded into the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands, yet organizational fragmentation saw their presence in the zone weakened over time (Hurtado, 2011). In recent years, Tapachula (and Chiapas) have experienced the mass arrival of the CDS and the CJNG, both of whom have violently fought for control of the lucrative borderlands (Manjarres, 2024).

In multiple interviews with locally-based experts and migrants, virtually all recognize the presence of these DTOs in Tapachula, yet generally do so cautiously and without directly stating their names. The arrival of DTOs to southern Chiapas has transformed the role played by '*coyotes*', or those individuals who informally transport and smuggle migrants across the Mexico-Guatemala border. According to one academic based in Tapachula: "Coyotes used to be […] independent operators, but now they no longer operate independently. Instead, they have all been recruited by organized crime to become just another service that [DTOs] provide" (Author's interview 23/06/23). Female migrants and children are particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation by

criminal actors in the border region, as "migration has served as a gateway into sex-trafficking networks; traffickers pose as smugglers or labor recruiters, luring women away and abusing them as soon as they have left the protective confines of their homes" (Brigden, 2018, p. 123; Guevara González, 2018; Sánchez, 2021). Indicative of this fact, a Salvadoran woman interviewed recounted how she was kidnapped by members of a DTO while leaving her workplace in Tapachula, trafficked to a distant state in northern Mexico where she was then held captive. For months, she endured continuous physical and sexual abuse by cartel members until one day she managed to escape. During her captivity, she was repeatedly shown pictures of numerous mutilated and murdered women, some of whom were her acquaintances who had gone missing, and she was threatened with a similar fate if she attempted to flee (Author's interview 04/07/23).

The foreboding presence of organized crime in the zone is also mirrored by omnipresent petty criminality which similarly plagues the migrant population. For example, those who cannot afford to rent private accommodation or are unable to find a place in a shelter are often victims of robbery and assaults in the public spaces where they spend the nights. One Salvadoran man interviewed recalled that while he was sleeping in a park in downtown Tapachula, he was awakened by an assailant holding a knife to his neck who subsequently dispossessed him of his mobile phone and official identification (Author's interview 05/07/23). Similar risks abound for migrants seeking to find employment in the city. A Haitian woman recounted how her partner placed an advertisement online offering his services as a metalsmith. A couple of days later he was contacted by extortionists who demanded that he pay them 300,000 MXN (approximately $18,000 USD) or they would kidnap his family. They immediately reported the incident to Mexican migration authorities and requested protective measures, but at the time of the interview had not received any formal response (Author's interview 05/07/23).

Despite the robust presence of different federal, state, and municipal authorities in Tapachula, they ultimately fail to provide adequate protection for migrants trapped in this elevated risk environment. This failure reflects a broader deficiency that plagues the provision of security throughout Mexico. For decades, the country has grappled with corruption across every level of government (Valverde Loya, 2019). Symptomatic of this is the penetration of Mexican institutions by the country's various DTOs, particularly those tasked with combating drug trafficking (Nieto, 2012). For this reason, the López Obrador administration decided to replace the notorious Federal Police (*Policía Federal* - PF) with the GN in 2019, a revised incarnation of the federal authority that is primarily composed and directed by the Mexican Army (Hernández & Romero, 2019; Ortega Ramírez and Morales Gámez, 2021). Despite this reform, there have been uniform reports from experts, activists, and migrants of systematic illegal conduct by the GN and the INM along the Mexican-Guatemalan border (Meyer & Isacson, 2019).

The relationship between state authorities and organized crime in Soconusco is complex and context dependent. According to Mexican journalist Miriam Ramírez (2024): "The military and organized crime coexist in this complex territory; sometimes they engage in shootouts, other times they just keep watch on each other." However, the numerous accusations against Mexican law enforcement in the region suggests a more symbiotic relationship where authorities directly collaborate with criminal elements. One Honduran woman interviewed describes this dynamic bluntly: "[Here] the cartels are allied with the police. When you are on a bus, they [police officers] stop you so that you can subsequently be robbed or harmed by [DTOs]" (Author's interview 23/06/23). As a result, there exists an immense distrust of Mexican law enforcement amongst the migrant population in Tapachula. A middle-aged Nicaraguan man describes this sentiment succinctly: "The police themselves will rob you. Who can you turn to? No one, because they are the same ones involved in theft and everything else. Who protects you from thieves? The police are the same but worse." (Author's interview 23/06/23).

In recent years, Mexican law enforcement agencies in Tapachula have been accused of a litany of abuses against the migrant population such as robbery, extortion, and physical assault. Migrants are frequently coerced to pay bribes to patrols to avoid arrest and deportation, despite such powers residing solely with the INM. In extreme cases, immigrants face severe brutality at the hands of law enforcement. A Honduran woman recounts one such experience en route to Tapachula: "I was kidnapped [by the state police] and they took all of my money. They dropped me off with four others, and they took all our clothes and all our money. They held me down with a gun to my head." (Author's interview 17/06/23). Another local activist who advocates for female migrants recalls seeing local police directly partake in underage prostitution during her outreach:

> I saw some police officers when I was doing my outreach early in the morning, and there was a girl who was prostituting herself. She was sitting on their laps. Then she went [with a client], came back, and sat like that with them again. […] She was a Central American girl. (Author's interview 09/06/23)

Additionally, migrants find extreme difficulties to report these crimes or access any meaningful form of justice in Tapachula. Tellingly, employees of Mexico's Attorney General's Office (*Fiscalía General de la República* - FGR) in Tapachula often demand a bribe to process their cases. A social worker from a local NGO that assists LGBTQ + migrants describes this: "We've heard reports that they ask for money, saying things like […] 'Well, let's fill out your report. I can give it to you like this, but if you want it signed and stamped, you'll have to pay $1000 USD'" (Author's interview 10/06/23). Another Cuban woman interviewed who fled her country was kidnapped and tortured by a cartel-linked coyote in Nicaragua recalls how when she escaped her captor and arrived in Tapachula, she sought to report her ordeal to FGR authorities there. However, as she recounts, they were ultimately unhelpful:

> So I went [to the FGR] and [a worker] told me that the cartels have people everywhere. Do you understand? [He told me] that I should change my name, my hair color, as I used to be blonde, I had to get my haircut and I started using a pseudonym. What [the FGR] did only terrified me more […] There was no support or orientation at all. (Author's interview 05/07/23)

4.3. Navigating immobility: migrant Agency and chokepoint pragmatics

The consolidation of a migratory chokepoint in Tapachula has created a dynamic whereby the migrant population in the city struggles with uncertainty and vulnerability on a daily basis. This bureaucratic limbo has generated enormous opportunities for locally-based actors to commodify and exploit migrants for their own benefit. Many migrants, exhausted by the dizzyingly long waits to regularize their status in Tapachula and the meagre opportunities to support themselves economically, end up abandoning the city to travel to the U.S.-Mexico border without obtaining legal status in Mexico. They do so despite the heightened risk of detention, deportation, or various other forms of victimization they may experience at the hands of state and non-state actors (Sánchez, 2024). While vulnerability may be a constant feature of the migrant experience for those who remain trapped in Tapachula, victimhood is not inevitable. Rather, migrants, in tandem with other in-group and out-group allies, have developed different contestation strategies to mitigate the precarious risk environment in the city, or chokepoint pragmatics, to ameliorate their day to day exposure to these threats (Middleton, 2020).

These strategies are often deployed by migrants from the moment they enter Mexico by crossing the Suchiate river. Based on shared information accumulated from others' previous experiences that is disseminated through various forms of social media, most migrants opt

to cross the border informally rather than run the risk of suffering an express deportation back to Guatemala by Mexican authorities (Cruz-Piñeiro et al., 2024; Díaz de León & Doering-White, 2024). Offering support, a group of local civil society organizations from both Mexico and Guatemala known as the Monitoring Collective–Southern Border (*Colectivo de Monitoreo-Frontera Sur*) routinely travel to formal border crossings to observe whether migrants surrendering to Mexican authorities are treated properly and whether their asylum requests are handled in accordance with existing legal protocols. The presence of these transnational advocacy networks has effectively served as a deterrent for Mexican immigration authorities to commit abuses or violate migrants' rights. This is particularly salient for those demographics more likely to experience mistreatment crossing the border due to lingering cultural biases such as LGBTQ + migrants (Author's interview, 10/06/23).

Upon arriving in Tapachula, migrants first focus on where to find shelter, although their options are entirely limited to the resources they have at their disposal. Given the predation migrants encounter when in transit, most arrive to the city with minimal resources and are thus forced to improvise. With the migrant shelter infrastructure overwhelmed by the excessive demand, many end up camping out in various public spaces of Tapachula where they face constant threats from a myriad of bad faith actors. From the first large-scale migrant caravan in 2018 until the present, different migrant groups who cannot secure a space in a shelter or afford to rent private accommodation have established temporary camps in different places of the city, including highly visible spaces such as public parks and the outskirts of INM facilities (Sawhney, 2022). Some multinational groups assemble informal collectives in public spaces to amplify their visibility and to protect themselves in this volatile risk environment. Others mobilize around their compatriots due to the cultural and linguistic similarities. Notably, Haitian migrants have established an open air market and informal camp in Tapachula's main square for these exact reasons. A migrants' rights activist describes their notable solidarity: "The Haitian community is well organized due to their historical entrepreneurship. They organize themselves to sell water and juices and find ways to resist [their situation]" (Author's interview 11/06/23).

Although the shelter system is oversaturated and is unable to provide safe space for all those seeking admission, many facilities offer ancillary support networks to migrants. These services include legal orientation, psychological support, medical care, and education for children, often in collaboration with local NGOs, international organizations, or the Catholic Church (Author's interview, June 12, 2023). The provision of legal assistance to migrants seeking to regularize their status in Tapachula is particularly valuable due to the convoluted immigration regime that is mired in bureaucratic deficiencies. An older Honduran man who was forced to abandon his home and business after finding himself unable to pay a local gang's extortive demands following the damage if Hurricane Eta in 2020, recalls how this assistance was crucial in obtaining his legal status in Mexico:

> The problem started when I did my first process in 2021. My process went wrong because my phone number didn't appear, nor did my email. That's when I had to go around in circles, over and over, and I couldn't get it resolved. Then immigration transferred me to Toluca, and that's where they gave me my one-year immigration permit. Later, I went back when it was about to expire, and that's when the obstacle came. November came, and it was tough, it cost me a lot, it was really difficult. They made a big deal out of it, and actually, I'll tell you, I even said it during the interview, that I had to tell the guy that if they didn't give me my papers that day, the next day I'd be showing up with a human rights lawyer […] I went to [a local NGO offering legal assistance to migrants] and because of that they started speeding up my paperwork. (Author's Interview, 17/06/23)

Apart from drawing on local solidarity networks to apply pressure on the INM and COMAR to hasten the processing of the considerable backlog in visa applications, migrants have also mobilized collectively to protest these bureaucratic delays. In November 2021, thousands of migrants organized public demonstrations in the city, protests that escalated with blockades of city streets in response to the bureaucratic strategy of delay and containment (Gómez, 2021).

While leaving Tapachula without the proper documentation comes with elevated risks, many migrants decide to embark upon this course of action after exhausting their time and patience in the migratory chokepoint. Although the strategies for migrating northwards vary, the migrant population has demonstrated an adaptive capacity to utilize existing mechanisms in the immigration system that will enable them to continue on their journeys northwards. One such strategy consists of applying for asylum or other forms of humanitarian protection to freely circulate through the country and then attempt to enter the United States. Although some migrants apply for asylum out of a genuine desire to remain in Mexico, countless others have abandoned their legal processes after obtaining a TVRH by traveling to the U.S.-Mexico border in an attempt to cross into the United States to apply for asylum there. Others strategically apply for a TVRH as a 'Plan B' as a means to enable them to legally travel northwards if their applications for asylum in Mexico are rejected (Candiz & Basok, 2024, pp. 11–13). Migrants also use more active ways to contest the migration authorities such as the mobilization of migrant caravans, a longstanding practice in Tapachula which helps them leave the city while reducing the numerous risks that present themselves on the journey (Arriola Vega and Coraza de los Santos, 2020).

The multiple tactics employed by migrants in Tapachula, whether informal crossings, temporary encampments, gaming the existing legal system, or public protests, reflect the complex, situated, and often improvised responses that define chokepoint pragmatics. Rather than being mere passive victims of immobility, migrants demonstrate agency through an evolving repertoire of pragmatic adaptations that are negotiated in response to both institutional constraints and the repressive geography of containment. These strategies not only challenge the physical and bureaucratic architecture of the chokepoint, but also reveal the deeply relational and politicized nature of mobility itself. As such, understanding Tapachula as a chokepoint is not only about recognizing its role in halting movement, but also about making visible the everyday logics of resilience, resistance, and survival enacted within it.

5. Conclusion

The formation and consolidation of a migratory chokepoint in Tapachula represents a space where delay and stagnation is not simply incidental, but structurally determined. It is not only a site of migratory congestion but a strategically designed space of geopolitical and bureaucratic constriction. Despite operating under the guise of a humanitarian project, the migratory chokepoint in Tapachula effectively serves as a containment apparatus aimed at decelerating and displacing migration flows to the United States. Stranded in the binational space, migrants are commodified and victimized with alarming regularity, often by those state institutions tasked with regulating them. However, migrants in Tapachula have also demonstrated a remarkable adaptivity to the constantly evolving risk environment by developing strategies and tactics that enable them to navigate, resist, or contest institutional restrictions that render them vulnerable in the first place. Understanding Tapachula through the lens of chokepoint pragmatics thus shifts the analytical focus from a static narrative of enforced immobility to one of relational agency.

Although Mexican immigration authorities and other actors continue to enforce the migratory chokepoint in Tapachula, it remains to be seen whether the border city retains its national and international relevance as a major transit point and bureaucratic way station for large-scale flows of migrants seeking refuge either in Mexico or in the United States. While the recent shift in government in the United States has undoubtedly altered regional migration dynamics for the time being, it

is unclear whether those fleeing extremely precarious conditions caused by crises of governance in Central America, the Caribbean, and beyond will suddenly view Mexico as one of the only viable and geographically proximate options offering them a chance of asylum, or whether new irregular modes of immigration to the United States develop in response to the draconian policies being implemented on the U.S. southern border. Regardless of the outcome, the case study of Tapachula and the invisible infrastructure that converted it into one of the world's largest migratory chokepoints provides an excellent point of reference for future comparative research examining the formation and governance of these global constriction points. Beyond this article, there remains an unexplored frontier for scholarship that will be able to analyze the interactions between national and local actors to create these spaces, and longitudinal studies examining the impact of the evolving geopolitical context on migratory dynamics.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

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

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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