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THE COMPLEX LINK BETWEEN MIGRATION AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the mutually reinforcing relationship between migration and organized crime in Latin America and the Caribbean. We argue that mobility and criminal governance are part of an interdependent system in which organized crime generates displacement through violence, extortion, and territorial control, while migration flows create new routes for criminal actors to expand geographically as well as new markets that they exploit for profit. We propose a novel conceptual framework to account for this feedback loop and analyze the available empirical evidence through its lens, which allows us to both formalize the mechanisms linking migration and organized crime and inform policy avenues. While the evidence suggests that migrants as *individuals* are largely victims of organized crime, large-scale mobility can also facilitate the expansion of criminal *organizations*. We hypothesize that, by reinforcing incomplete narratives that associate migration with insecurity, the latter dynamics dominate the former in shaping public perceptions in the region and encourage restrictive policies that heighten irregularity and migrants' exposure to predation. We show that information campaigns can partially correct seemingly biased perceptions and policy design crucially mediates the migration–crime nexus. Specifically, regularization and protection programs can reduce migrants' vulnerability and organized crime's profits, whereas deterrence and exclusion may strengthen illicit markets. The findings underscore the need for coordinated regional responses that combine rights-based migration management with strengthened state capacity to confront organized crime.

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The Complex Link between Migration and Organized Crime in Latin America and the Caribbean[1]

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I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past 15 years, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has experienced two profound parallel transformations. First, the region has seen unprecedented levels of human mobility, driven by economic instability, political crises, violence, and natural disasters. These flows include massive out-migration from Venezuela and Haiti, deportations from the US, and increasing numbers of extra-continental migrants crossing the Darién Gap toward North America. The Venezuelan crisis alone has produced the largest exodus in the Western Hemisphere in the last 50 years, with 6.8 million migrants—more than 80 percent of whom have remained within LAC. This transformation is part of a broader regional shift: LAC's immigrant population nearly doubled between 1990 and 2020, rising from just over 7 million to almost 15 million, with intra-regional movements accounting for 76 percent of all immigration—up from 56 percent in 1990.[2] Indeed, owing to tightening of immigration policies in the Global North and to larger income per capita in some LAC countries, South-South migration in the region has increasingly replaced the traditional preference for high-income destinations that characterized the LAC diaspora until the eve of the twentieth century.

Second, LAC has witnessed the rapid expansion and trans-nationalization of organized crime, as criminal groups diversify their activities, extend their territorial control, and prey on vulnerable populations. According to the 2020 Latinobarómetro survey, 14 percent of the respondents of 18 LAC countries (about 77–101 million people) experience some form of criminal governance (such as the provision of some criminal order) where they live.[3] The Global Initiative against Organized Crime (GI-TOC) lists 17 LAC countries in the world top 50 hosting criminal organizations that exert territorial control. Also, 12 LAC countries appear in the GI-TOC equivalent ranking of 'Organized Crime', which accounts for the scale of 15 criminal markets.[4]

While both migration and organized crime have received significant scholarly and policy attention, their intersections remain largely underexplored.[5] We argue that the two dynamics are deeply intertwined, shaping and reinforcing each other in ways that depend on policy responses both within the region and

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[2] Cruces et al. 2023.
[3] Uribe et al. 2025.
[4] Meléndez et al. 2025.
[5] Some initial contributions in this direction include Achilli (2024), Cantor (2014), and Knox (2026).

beyond. To that end, we propose a conceptual framework that emphasizes how organized criminal activities—whether violent or not—shape displacement patterns across LAC. The framework also argues that the opposite direction of causality closes the organized crime versus migration feedback loop. That is, migration alters criminal dynamics by opening illicit markets, increasing opportunities for coercive recruitment and exploitation, and facilitating the transnational diffusion of criminal organizations.

The mechanisms that shape the relationship between migration and organized crime depend on the vulnerabilities that migrants face at different stages of the migration process. Notably, these vulnerabilities manifest themselves irrespective of the reasons for migration and of the legal status of the migrants. That is, whether migrants are 'economic' or 'forced' and thus whether they can aspire to the status of *refugees* and be eligible for assistance, protection, and regularization initiatives, is both conceptually blurred and often less informative than commonly assumed for understanding exposure to organized crime. Indeed, many migrants move for mixed motives, and migration corridors tend to converge regardless of push factors, exposing all migrants to similar challenges. We thus emphasize a process-based approach to characterize threats and vulnerabilities and thus to target policy interventions more precisely, abstracting from the traditional *cause-based* or *legal-status* taxonomies that have thus far guided public policy.

Migration stages such as the initial expulsion or decision to flee, the transit through established or improvised corridors, the crossing of official or unsanctioned borders, the settlement in areas with or without existing support networks, and the decision to return determine migrants' exposure to organized crime by shaping (a) their access to protection, (b) their dependence on informal intermediaries, and (c) their exposure to predation. These stages also structure how and where criminal organizations intervene, shaping the types of illicit markets, coercive labor arrangements, and forms of territorial control that emerge along migration routes.

At origin, exposure to organized crime often begins before people move. Extortion, threats, selective violence, and forced recruitment can precipitate the decision to flee and shape who is able to do so, under what circumstances, and with which resources.[6] Risks frequently intensify during **transit**, when migrants travel through criminalized corridors with thin state presence and where kidnapping, human trafficking, and labor coercion become routine revenue streams.[7] **Border crossings** concentrate vulnerability in frontier bottlenecks where legal uncertainty and enforcement interact with local criminal governance, enabling groups to charge 'fees', extort families, and profit from document forgery and smuggling services.[8] Finally, **vulnerability persists at the destination**, where migrants often face criminal exploitation in housing and labor markets, gender-based violence, and predation—in addition to discrimination by local populations. This is exacerbated for **returning migrants**—voluntarily or through deportation—who may face stigma, exclusion, and, in some cases, targeting by criminal actors.

We discuss the available evidence on how vulnerabilities across these stages are linked to the activities of organized criminal groups and how these same criminal groups take advantage of migration waves to expand to new places. To illustrate these mechanisms, we highlight recent cases such as the Darién Gap, migrant kidnappings in Mexico, and the continent-wide expansion of the *Tren de Aragua* (TdA)

[6] Cantor 2014; Durán-Martínez 2017.
[7] Bada and Feldmann 2018; Evans and Franzblau 2013; Group 2023; OACNUDH 2025.
[8] Bada and Feldmann 2018; Feldmann and Durand 2008; Schmidtke and Yates 2024; Yates and Leutert 2018.

through human trafficking routes. We rely on evidence from sources with a range of methodological approaches, including academic research as well as investigative reporting by journalists. This underlines the importance of complementary mix-methods approaches for a thorough understanding of the vulnerability of LAC migrants and the role of organized crime.

This stage/vulnerability-based approach suggests that migrants are overwhelmingly victims rather than perpetrators of organized criminal violence in LAC. However, the perception that human mobility flows are associated with increases in crime rates is ubiquitous in the region. We hypothesize that this is probably induced by the fact that migration corridors do facilitate the transnational expansion of criminal groups such as TdA.[9] Moreover, by targeting individuals proven or suspected to belong to criminal organizations, deportation policies can also facilitate such a diffusion.[10]

We also document that the perception that migrants increase crime in LAC is positively associated with the share of irregular migrants at the country level. This suggests that regularization programs have the triple advantage of reducing migrants' vulnerabilities, increasing their chances of assimilation, and—perhaps as a byproduct of the increased assimilation—reducing the misperception that migrants increase crime.

We conclude by reviewing the policies that have been implemented over the past decade—in LAC and elsewhere—with the objective of either facilitating the assimilation of migrants or enforcing prohibitions against their movement or entry in specific regions. We analyze how those policies have shaped the relationship between migration and crime and what remains to be done to reduce the vulnerability of moving populations to the predation of criminal enterprises. We conclude that country-level policies have spillover effects across the region and suggest that international coordination is a desirable avenue in the years to come. A key example is border enforcement in the US, which increases the backlog of migrants in transit along corridors in Central America, making them more vulnerable to the abuses of local criminal organizations.

This policy paper makes five contributions. First, it develops a novel conceptual framework to clarify the mechanisms through which migration and organized crime shape and reinforce each other creating a feedback loop. Second, it applies such a framework to review how different stages of the migration process entail different vulnerabilities of migrants and create different opportunities for criminal organizations. Third, it reviews the available multidisciplinary evidence and illustrates the mechanisms of victimization and exploitation through recent case studies. Fourth, it links such mechanisms with the perception of Latin Americans about the migration–crime link in the region and discusses potential interventions to reduce seemingly biased perceptions. Fifth, it assesses policy responses across the region over the past decade, highlighting how choices around enforcement, regularization, and integration shape migrants' vulnerability to crime and underscoring the need for regional coordination. Together, these contributions show the extent to which migrants in LAC are either victims or perpetrators of organized crime and underscore how policies that reduce vulnerability and promote assimilation can simultaneously address misperceptions and strengthen security.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual framework, highlighting the mechanisms through which migration and organized crime reinforce one another. Section 3 discusses the relationship between migration and organized crime through the lens of the

[9] Ajzenman et al. 2023; Cruces et al. 2023; Guerrero and Sviatschi 2025; Ibáñez et al. 2025.
[10] Ambrosius 2021; Sviatschi 2022.

vulnerabilities faced by migrants along their migration process, regardless of their cause of migration or legal status. Section 4 studies the perception that Latin Americans have regarding migrants' involvement in criminal activities and the extent to which different interventions may correct potential misperceptions. Section 5 analyzes policy responses across the region, with particular attention to their unintended consequences and the need for coordination. Section 6 concludes by outlining additional policy avenues for LAC governments as migration pressures and organized crime threats continue to grow.

II. ORGANIZED CRIME AND MIGRATION SHAPE EACH OTHER

II.I Organized Crime Increases Migration

Organized crime in LAC is a powerful driver of migration and forced displacement. Because of its nature and manifestations—often violent, coercive, and deeply embedded in local communities—organized crime creates conditions under which remaining in may become untenable. Families, communities, and entire populations are frequently forced to move in search of safety, either within their own countries or across international borders. Surprisingly, however, human displacement generated by organized crime is poorly understood in LAC and has comparatively been much less studied than the relationship between internal conflict and displacement.[11]

Several features of organized crime in LAC make this displacement dynamic particularly acute. First, territorial control means that criminal groups are not merely participants in illicit markets but de facto authorities over geographic areas–often quite large. In many cities and rural zones, criminal organizations monopolize markets, enforce rules, and regulate daily life through coercion. Residents who resist their authority, refuse extortion payments, or are caught in the crossfire of disputes between rival groups often have no option but to leave. In this sense, displacement becomes a coping strategy to escape criminal organizations.[12]

Second, violence is both the tool and the byproduct of organized crime's operations. Establishing or defending territorial control typically involves high levels of lethal violence. Even once dominance is consolidated, violence remains an instrument for enforcing rules, punishing dissent, and signaling power. This violence contributes directly to displacement: households flee after targeted threats and communities escape when conflict between rival organizations escalates. In the region, unlike elsewhere, homicide rates are strongly correlated with the presence of organized crime.[13] However, it is worth noting that some forms of criminal governance may reduce overt violence. For instance, in some cases, criminal factions rely on mutually beneficial cooperative cartels, rather than resorting to violent competition over markets and territory.[14]

[11] Because of the long-lasting nature of the Colombian conflict and its continuation after the end of the Cold War, forced displacement as a result of conflict has received particular scholarly attention there (Bandiera 2021; Cantor 2014; Ibáñez and Vélez 2008; Steele 2017; Téllez 2022). The Victims' Unit reckons that the conflict has resulted in almost 9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), making Colombia part of the top three countries with the highest stock of IDPs after Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic (Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2025).
[12] Bada and Feldmann 2018.
[13] Meléndez et al. 2025.
[14] Blattman et al. 2025.

Third, extortion acts as a mechanism of forced mobility. The systematic collection of 'protection' payments undermines the viability of small businesses and households alike. When extortion demands escalate or when firms face 'double taxation' by both the state and criminal groups, many are compelled to shut down their activities or abandon the areas where they operate altogether. Extortion thus not only generates revenue for criminal groups but also drives a steady outflow of entrepreneurs seeking relief from economic suffocation and the threat of violence.

Finally, state capture and collusion exacerbate forced migration. Where criminal groups infiltrate or co-opt local authorities, communities find few institutional safeguards against predation. Police forces may delegate control of certain territories to criminal groups, politicians may rely on criminal financing or coercion, and justice institutions may be complicit in abuses. In these contexts, citizens lose faith in state protection and often view mobility as their only survival strategy.

Understanding migration in LAC therefore requires recognizing organized crime as both a proximate and structural driver of human mobility.[15] An emergent wave of forced migration in Central America (especially El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) and Mexico illustrates this point. This phenomenon is largely driven by drug trafficking, gang violence, extortion, and criminal group competition. In turn, these activities interact with the subregion's weak state capacity, which allows criminal organizations to exert pressure on local communities via threats, coercion, selective targeting, and extortion.[16]

In the specific case of El Salvador, the 2012–2014 gang truce resulted from an agreement between the government and the country's two largest gangs, MS-13 and Barrio 18, to reduce criminal violence. During that period, the emigration of Salvadoran children to the US dropped relative to the periods before the truce. This pattern is observed particularly in the areas affected the most by pre-truce gang violence.[17] Additional evidence from El Salvador, which is also corroborated by the experience of Guatemala and Honduras, suggests that increases in criminal violence (as measured by the homicide rate) are associated with surges in the number of unaccompanied minors apprehended at the US border.[18]

Organized criminal violence in post-conflict Colombia provides another example. Even after the peace process with the largest guerrilla group (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC, from the Spanish acronym]) in 2016, subsisting neo-paramilitary criminal organizations such as the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC) still cause large flows of forced displacement. In 2024, 388,000 IDPs were registered in the country.[19]

Figure 1 illustrates the cross-country correlation between the intensity of organized crime—as measured by GI-TOC's Organized Crime Index—and the magnitude of out-migration. LAC countries are highlighted in red. Panel a uses all available countries in the sample and panel b excludes outliers. In both cases, the correlation is positive and large.[20] In both cases, the correlation is very similar for the

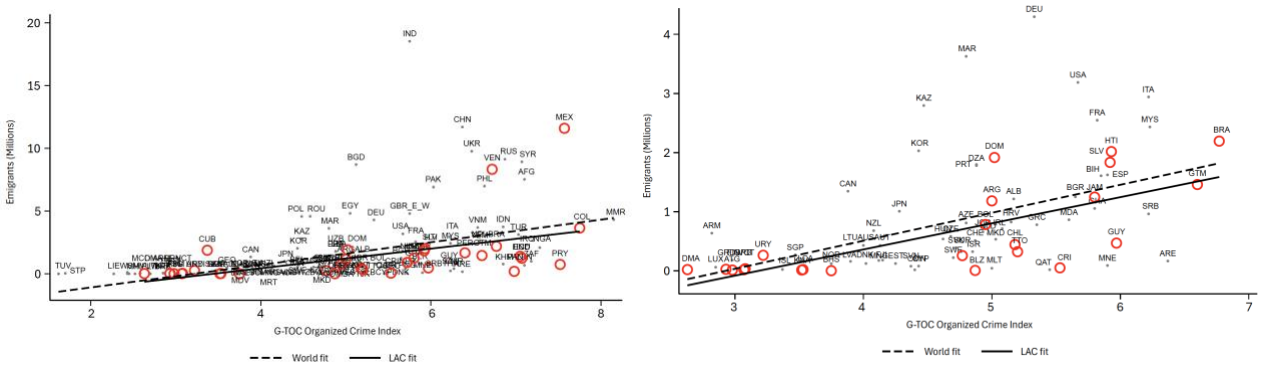
[15] This is important because organized crime-originated forced migrants rarely have the protections available under traditional refugee law frameworks, which emphasize persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a social group. This raises challenges for protection, asylum systems, and humanitarian responses.
16 Cantor 2014.
[17] Sviatschi (2022) infers the yearly number of children fleeing to the US by analyzing administrative records on all minors deported from the US back to El Salvador between 2011 and 2017, which include children's places of birth and year of emigration.
[18] Clemens 2021.
[19] Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2025.
[20] The correlation is 0.51 when using the entire sample (panel a) and 0.64 when outliers are removed (panel b).

whole world and within LAC, which suggests that the potential population expulsion role of organized crime is similarly strong in LAC and elsewhere. This is interesting because organized crime tends to be disproportionally more violent in LAC relative to any other world region, which suggests that out-migration as a response to organized crime is driven by many of the activities that the latter entails, whether violent (such as territorial or market disputes) or not (such as criminal governance and social regulation).

Figure 1. Organized Crime Index and emigration in LAC

a. All sample

b. Excluding outliers



Note: The figures report a cross-sectional correlation between organized crime and out-migration in the world. Organized crime intensity is captured by GI-TOC's 2023 index, which summarizes a country's exposure to criminal markets, the strength of criminal actors, and institutional resilience to organized crime. Out-migration is measured as the number of emigrants (in millions) using the latest year available from the United Nations International Migrant Stock (2024). In panel b, outliers are excluded by trimming observations above the 90th percentile of the distributions of emigration records and the GI-TOC index.

It is important to note that the observed relationship between organized crime and emigration may understate the full displacement effect of criminal governance. Organized crime not only creates incentives to leave—through violence, extortion, forced recruitment, or the collapse of livelihoods—but can also actively constrain mobility. In many territories, criminal groups impose curfews, operate checkpoints, control transport routes, and monitor communities in ways that raise the costs and risks of moving. Moreover, the threat of retaliation against relatives who remain behind can deter exit even when individuals face acute danger. As a result, a non-negligible share of those who would have fled may be trapped in place: Criminal governance produces not only displacement but also coerced immobility. This implies that standard measures of migration may capture only the *realized* mobility response to organized crime, not the *latent* displacement pressure that is suppressed by territorial control.[21]

[21] Melnikov et al. 2025.

II.II Migration as a Driver of Organized Crime

The relationship between migration and organized crime in LAC is not unidirectional. While organized crime often produces displacement, human mobility also reinforces and reshapes *preexisting* criminal structures and facilitates their geographic expansion. This distinction is crucial: migration does not, by itself, generate organized crime. Instead, the particular characteristics of organized crime in LAC—territorial control, criminal governance, extortion, and state capture[22]—provide the conditions under which migration flows become valuable resources for illicit groups. However, whether and how these opportunities materialize depends on policy responses to migration flows.

Migration can exacerbate organized crime through several reinforcing mechanisms. The first is **market creation.** Migrants are not just 'passive' flows but become resources within criminal markets. Migrant corridors generate lucrative markets for smuggling, trafficking, and extortion. Predation during transit—kidnapping, sexual violence, and forced labor—provides a revenue stream for criminal groups. Extortion often extends beyond the migrants themselves to their families, who are coerced into paying ransoms across borders. A direct form of migrants' for-profit exploitation is **labor coercion.** Migrants, particularly youths and deportees, constitute a vulnerable labor pool for organized crime. Recruitment may be coercive (under threat) or opportunistic (driven by lack of alternatives).

Second, the portfolio of profitable activities that migration entails for criminal organizations incites them to move along migration corridors to exploit different types of migrants' vulnerabilities and therefore new business opportunities, often exploiting existing social ties. A salient example of this **criminal diffusion** (of organizations and criminal capital) mechanism is the Venezuelan displacement crisis, which has facilitated the diffusion of gangs across international borders.[23] For example, in the past few years, the prison-based TdA has consolidated control over much of the migration economy in LAC, managing transportation routes, extorting migrants, and operating temporary shelters across multiple countries including Mexico, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile.[24]

While migration corridors allow gangs to export their criminal capital into new territories, deportations facilitate the transfer of criminal skills, networks, and rivalries back to countries of origin, thus reinforcing cross-border criminal connectivity. Historical evidence from the early twentieth century shows how Chinese migration to Mexico facilitated the introduction of poppy cultivation, laying the foundation for later cartel activities.[25]

Organized crime leverages migration to not only expand across borders but also consolidate its criminal structure in countries of origin. The Venezuelan case again illustrates this point: when the population exodus peaked in 2017, TdA exploited the vulnerability of departing migrants and established control over both migrant smuggling routes and the places of origin, extorting the families of those leaving and recruiting among those left behind.[26] Pro-regime militias known as *colectivos* as well as other gangs called *sindicatos* also sought to profit from the management of migration flows, taxing crossings and controlling access to basic goods and services in migrant-heavy areas.[27] Moreover, the resulting

[22] Meléndez et al. 2025.
[23] We use 'criminal diffusion' to refer to the cross-border transfer of criminal actors, organizational presence, and criminal practices.
[24] El País 2023; Insight Crime 2023b.
[25] Murphy and Rossi 2020.
[26] Insight Crime 2018, 2023a, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e.
[27] Insight Crime 2021a, 2021b.

depopulation and weakening of local social networks created spaces for criminal organizations to expand territorial control and criminal governance. Observationally, municipalities with higher out-migration experienced a significant increase in violent events involving non-state actors such as *colectivos*, *sindicatos*, and Colombian guerrillas such as the National Liberation Army of Colombia (ELN from the Spanish acronym) and dissidents from the FARC.[28]

A third, albeit related, mechanism is **criminal adaptation.** Migration flows force criminal groups to innovate, adjusting their strategies and portfolios to new opportunities. Criminals diversify into services along migration routes (transportation, shelters, protection) while at the same time capturing the illicit and informal economies of receiving countries. This flexibility allows them to grow across areas and consolidate power.

Taken together, these mechanisms highlight that migration can exacerbate organized crime when two conditions are met: (a) the pre-existence of criminal organizations with the capacity for territorial control, extortion, and governance and (b) migration flows that create new opportunities for predation, labor coercion or illicit markets, and criminal diffusion. In this sense, human mobility in LAC interacts with organized crime by reinforcing its reach, diversifying its activities, and deepening its transnational character.

Evidence from Selected Case Studies

From the above exposition, it should be clear that the aforementioned mechanisms are not independent from one another, and they rarely operate in isolation: the new opportunities that migration flows generate for extortion and predation depend on the ability of criminal organizations to adapt, adjusting their business models to new contexts and territories. In turn, the adaptation capacity of criminal organizations determines their ability to expand across borders and business lines. The concomitant nature of the mechanisms that connect migration flows to the growth of organized crime can be illustrated with a few salient case studies.

The kidnapping of migrants along transit routes in Mexico. Nowhere are the predatory opportunities of migrant corridors clearer than in Mexico, where cartels have turned kidnapping and extortion of transit migrants into an industrial-scale business. Between 1.5 and 3 million migrants fleeing civil war, natural disasters, and economic hardship in their home countries—mostly in Central America—have crossed Mexican territory over the past decade. There, many of them face extortion, theft, and especially kidnapping by criminal organizations, often in collusion with corrupt officials. Estimates suggest that between 18,000 and 22,000 migrants are kidnapped annually all across Mexico—roughly 5–7 percent of all irregular migrants.[29] Clearly, these figures are likely conservative given underreporting and the difficulty of tracking kidnapping victims in transit.

Criminal groups run industrial-scale extortion rackets, holding migrants in abandoned ranches—called '*gallineros*'—until their families wire ransoms. Victims report set prices of around US$75 per person, with higher rates charged to those assumed to have more resources (such as Chinese nationals). The brutality of migrant kidnappings is not new, as highlighted by the 2010 San Fernando massacre in

[28] Cabra-Ruiz et al. 2024.
[29] Yates and Leutert 2018.

Tamaulipas, where the *Zetas* cartel killed 72 migrants. US intelligence later described how the *Zetas* operated with 'near total impunity' in the region, often in collusion with compromised security forces.[30]

This case study also illustrates how enforcement policies in one country can have negative spillovers elsewhere. Following US pressure to curb northward migration, Mexican authorities increased checkpoints and reduced humanitarian visas while forcibly busing tens of thousands of migrants back to southern states such as Chiapas and Tabasco. These dynamics fed mass kidnapping rings that now capture migrants almost immediately after they cross the Guatemalan border.[31] Complementing this narrative, causal evidence on US deterrence policies—including the April 2018 'zero-tolerance' prosecution policy and the 2019 Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)—indicates unintended negative effects within Mexico. Municipalities situated along migrant corridors experienced significant post-policy increases in migrant–police encounters, reported coyote fees, discoveries of mass graves and recovered remains, and homicides of foreign nationals. When enforcement bottlenecks stretch migrant stays from days to months, criminal profits rise—fueling more exploitation and more killings of migrants.[32]

The Darién Gap: Predation amid a humanitarian crisis. A different but equally stark illustration is the Darién Gap, a dense stretch of jungle between Colombia and Panama, where extreme natural hazards intersect with systematic predation by organized groups. The gap has become one of the most critical and perilous migration corridors in the world. The route has recently experienced unprecedented flows, with over half a million crossings recorded in 2023 alone, the majority of them Venezuelan nationals.[33] This sharp increase reflects the lack of accessible legal pathways in the region and its protracted forced migration crisis, featuring Venezuela, Haiti, and more recently Ecuador. Despite the dangers of the terrain—including exposure to flooding rivers, wildlife, and criminal groups—the Darién Gap remains a key route for those seeking to reach North America.

Migrants crossing the Darién Gap face some of the most severe human rights abuses, as organized groups and local armed actors target them with robbery, extortion, sexual violence, and forced recruitment.[34] Reports show a dramatic rise in cases of gender-based violence and sexual assaults against women and children during the crossing. But even in the absence of criminal predation, crossing migrants suffer injuries, illnesses, or death from exposure to harsh natural conditions. Despite these risks, migration flows continue to rise, including growing numbers of extra-continental migrants.[35]

Recent policy shifts have compounded these vulnerabilities. In Panama, new government measures—supported by US migration deterrence priorities—have restricted humanitarian access and increased deportation threats, leaving many migrants without basic protection or medical care. Although Panamanian and Costa Rican authorities have coordinated bus transfers to move migrants more quickly through their territories, these programs exclude many and often leave individuals stranded without adequate resources or information. Organized groups exploit bottlenecks created by such restrictive policies, charging corridor 'fees' and diversifying into smuggling and extortion schemes. Moreover, restrictions on transit and reductions in humanitarian aid have generated a returning flow, where

[30] Evans and Franzblau 2013.
[31] Green 2024.
[32] Bandiera et al. 2025.
[33] Schmidtke and Yates 2024.
[34] Human Rights Watch 2023; International Crisis Group 2017.
[35] Schmidtke and Yates 2024.

thousands of migrants return southward from Mexico and the US. This increases exposure because returnees often lack resources and legal status, and they reenter corridors controlled by armed groups making them vulnerable to the risk of renewed exploitation and abuse.[36]

The rapid expansion of TdA along migration corridors. Perhaps the paradigmatic example of migration reinforcing organized crime is the rapid transnational expansion of TdA. This example demonstrates how migration flows can be systematically exploited by organized crime through three main mechanisms: market creation, adaptation, and criminal diffusion. First, mass Venezuelans traveling without legal protection or resources became vulnerable to systematic extortion. TdA located itself in transit hubs such as *La Parada* on the Colombia–Venezuela border, where it taxed illegal crossings, charged fees for lodging and transport, and profited from coercive services such as forged documentation.[37] These practices transformed migrant mobility into a lucrative revenue stream and facilitated the group's expansion into Colombia, Peru, and Chile, with reports of presence in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Brazil.[38]

Second, once established, the group quickly adapted to tap into local illicit economies. In Chile and Peru, it shifted from taxing migrants in transit to controlling prostitution markets and sexual exploitation networks. It also engaged in micro-trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, and illegal lending systems such as *gota a gota*. In several regions in Chile and Peru, certain forms of organized crime were historically rare and only emerged later, coinciding with the expansion of transnational criminal networks, some of which involved migrant criminal actors.[39] This flexibility in adapting its rackets to different host-country contexts while maintaining a common brand and identity allowed the gang to entrench itself across urban peripheries and consolidate dominance through selective violence.

Third, state responses often fueled its geographical spread. Crackdowns such as the 2023 Tocorón prison raid disrupted the gang's original headquarters but displaced leadership abroad, reinforcing external cells rather than dismantling them.[40] Similarly, mass deportations of Venezuelan migrants from Chile, Peru, and the US under suspicions of affiliation have sometimes provided the group with fresh recruits and reinforced transnational mobility channels.[41] These dynamics illustrate how punitive migration and security policies can inadvertently strengthen rather than weaken criminal networks.

Deportation and the rise of MS-13 and Barrio 18 in El Salvador. The unintended effects of deportation are also apparent in the case of US forced removal of migrants back to Central America. This example illustrates how forced return flows can seed or strengthen transnational gangs, with long-lasting effects. Between 1998 and 2014, US immigration authorities deported nearly 300,000 individuals with criminal records to the region, many of them gang members.[42] Designed to reduce crime in Los Angeles, these measures instead dispersed street gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 across El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. But deported gang leaders brought organizational knowledge, networks, and norms of violence, which established long-lasting new gang structures in receiving communities.[43]

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[36] Feldmann and Durand 2008; OACNUDH 2025.
[37] El País 2023; Insight Crime 2023b.
[38] Insight Crime 2025.
[39] Guerrero and Sviatschi 2025; Insight Crime 2025.
[40] Insight Crime 2025.
[41] Insight Crime 2025; Trotta and del Pino 2024.
[42] Johnson 2006.
[43] Ambrosius 2021; Kalsi 2018; Sviatschi 2022.

Communities receiving deported gang leaders (who usually returned to their place of birth, where they had their family and networks—as most migrated to the US as children) experienced higher rates of homicides and systematic extortion of small businesses, residents, and workers. The absence of formal employment opportunities, combined with high inequality and limited state protection, facilitated their recruitment of marginalized youth.[44] Thus, these dynamics not only fueled violence but also eroded children's human capital, increasing the likelihood of migration. The cycle therefore repeats itself in what has been called the 'deportation boomerang'.[45]

Policy Responses and Conditional Effects

These case studies eloquently illustrate that the extent to which migration generates new business opportunities for organized crime or facilitates its territorial expansion depends critically on the policy response to migration shocks. Weak or uncoordinated state responses may acquiesce or amplify these dynamics. When states are unable to manage large inflows or returns—by building state capacity and increasing enforcement in areas where criminal leaders arrive, providing protection to migrants in transit, granting legal status and access to services for those who stay, or supporting reintegration for deportees—criminal actors fill the resulting institutional void as a source of profit, control, and territorial expansion. Conversely, when governments implement regularization policies and increase law enforcement, they reduce migrants' dependence on illicit intermediaries and narrow the space for organized crime to thrive.[46]

An illustration of how migration flows generate new illicit markets under restrictive migration regimes is the recent case of Peru. The introduction of visa restrictions for Venezuelans increased demand for smuggling services, facilitating the expansion of TdA in this country. This growth in irregular migration services was accompanied by sharp rises in extortion, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation, particularly along migrant corridors such as border towns, informal settlements, and transport hubs.[47] These dynamics underscore how policy choices interact with criminal organizations: by constraining legal migration, governments may inadvertently expand the space for organized crime to flourish. We return to this point in Section 5.

In this sense, migration-related criminal opportunities are not an inevitable consequence of mobility itself but rather the result of policy failures that leave both the host areas where criminal organizations settle and migrants themselves unprotected. Ultimately, the causal path from migration to crime is mediated by governance capacity and policy design. These conditional effects highlight that policy responses are not only humanitarian instruments but also critical components of crime prevention.

Receiving states also face fiscal challenges when managing large migrant inflows. But recent evidence suggests that regularization can help alleviate these pressures. In Colombia, estimates indicate that hosting a regularized Venezuelan household is fiscally less costly than hosting an irregular one, as programs such as the *Permiso Especial de Permanencia* (PEP) raise migrants' income and

[44] Dudley 2021.
[45] Ambrosius and Leblang 2025; Sviatschi 2019.
[46] Examples discussed above as well as in Section 5 include the restrictive visa regimes adopted in Peru and Chile, which expanded the market for smuggling and extortion; Colombia's large-scale regularization programs, which mitigated such effects; and the limited reintegration support for deportees in El Salvador, which has facilitated criminal recruitment.
[47] Guerrero and Sviatschi 2025.

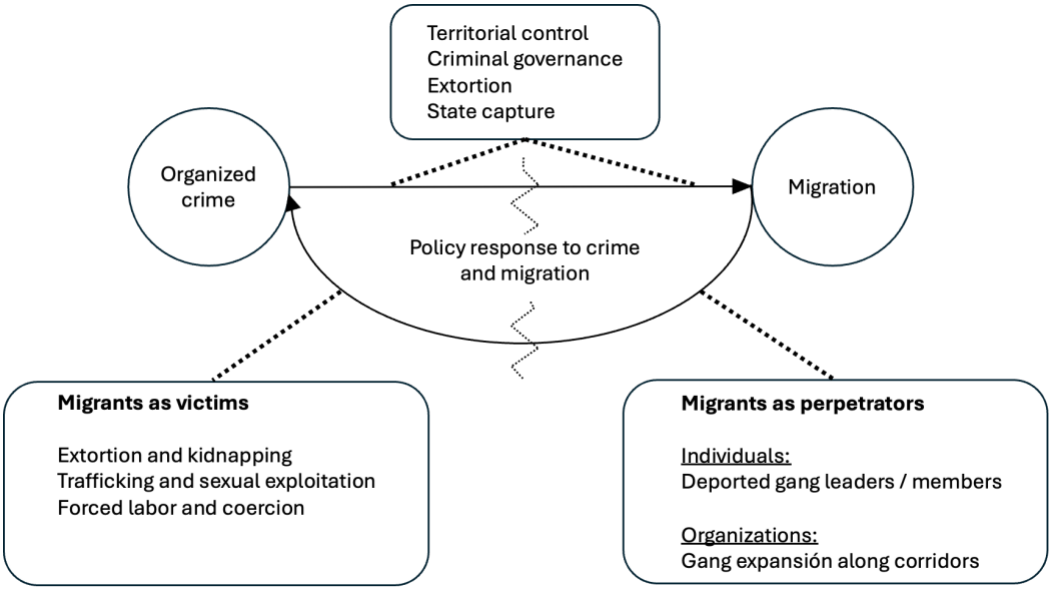
consumption—thus expanding the tax base—while reducing reliance on costly emergency-only health services.[48] This suggests that inclusive migration regimes can generate short-term fiscal gains, challenging the notion that regularization necessarily imposes unsustainable costs on host governments.

Finally, while policy responses primarily moderate the migration-to-crime channel, they can also affect the reverse channel by shaping the state's capacity to limit criminal governance and violence.

II.III Mutually Reinforcing Dynamics

The evidence presented above suggests that migration and organized crime in LAC are best understood as part of a mutually reinforcing system. On the one hand, criminal violence and governance drive displacement (Figure 1). On the other hand, migration flows—especially when irregular or forced—can be swallowed into existing criminal structures and generate new opportunities for predation, recruitment, and transnational expansion. This circular causality highlights why the LAC context is particularly susceptible to feedback loops between mobility and organized crime. We summarize these arguments and highlight the main mechanisms of each causal path in Figure 2, which synthesizes the mechanisms discussed in this section into a unified conceptual framework.

Figure 2. Feedback loop between migration and organized crime in LAC



Note: The figure summarizes the conceptual framework linking migration and organized crime in LAC. Solid arrows indicate the bidirectional causal link of organized crime and migration. The mechanisms that mediate each direction of causality are summarized in the boxes. Those listed above the upper horizontal arrow mediate the effect of organized crime on migration. Those underneath the curved arrow account for the exacerbating effect of migration flows on organized crime and distinguish between migrants as victims and migrants as perpetrators. Migrants are predominantly victims of criminal predation, while increases in crime associated with migration operate through selected individual perpetrators and the transnational expansion of criminal organizations. The dotted transversal zigzag line represents the moderating role of policy responses to organized crime and migration, which can either weaken or reinforce the bidirectional link between them.

[48] Ibáñez et al. 2025.

Migrants as Victims and Channels of Criminal Diffusion

Figure 2 also highlights a distinction that is essential for interpreting the relationship between migration and organized crime in LAC. Across most migration flows and contexts, migrants are overwhelmingly victims of organized crime. Their legal precarity, limited access to protection, and dependence on informal intermediaries expose them to extortion, kidnapping, sexual violence, trafficking, and labor coercion at origin, in transit, and at destination. This victimization channel constitutes the dominant interaction between migration and organized crime in the region.

At the same time, migration can be associated with increases in criminal activity through mechanisms of criminal diffusion. Importantly, this does not imply that migrants as a group become perpetrators of crime. Rather, diffusion operates through two more specific channels. The first involves a highly selected subset of individuals already embedded in criminal organizations, such as deported gang leaders or members whose forced or voluntary movement contributes to the geographic spread of criminal practices and networks. The second channel operates at the organizational level: criminal groups themselves expand transnationally by following migration corridors and exploiting migrant vulnerability, as illustrated by the continental expansion of TdA through trafficking, extortion, and smuggling networks.

Distinguishing between these channels is critical both analytically and normatively. While migration may facilitate the diffusion of organized crime under certain conditions, migrants remain predominantly the targets of criminal violence. Conflating migrants with criminality obscures the underlying organizational dynamics that drive insecurity and risks legitimizing policies that exacerbate migrants' vulnerability without weakening criminal structures.

Breaking the Feedback Loop

Critically, the figure also emphasizes that the strength of this feedback loop is not fixed. The vertical dotted zigzag line represents the moderating role of policy responses to migration and crime. State capacity, state willingness, and policy implementation function as moderators that can either dampen or reinforce the diffusion of organized crime through migration. When states provide protection to migrants in transit, grant legal status and access to services to those who settle, and support the reintegration of deported migrants, they reduce migrants' reliance on criminal intermediaries and constrain opportunities for organized crime. Conversely, restrictive, fragmented, or absent policies amplify the feedback loop by channeling migration into irregular and criminally governed circuits.

In this sense, migration and organized crime form a conditional system rather than an inevitable cycle. Policy responses determine whether migration weakens or strengthens criminal governance, linking the analytical framework developed here to the policy discussion in Section 5.

III. MIGRANT VULNERABILITIES AND CRIMINAL OPPORTUNITIES

The interaction between migrants and organized crime is shaped less by the reasons people flee than by the distinct vulnerabilities that emerge at each stage of the migratory journey—origin, transit, border crossing, and destination. At every point, the conditions under which people move intersect with the presence and strategies of criminal actors, generating specific risks ranging from extortion and forced

recruitment to labor exploitation and trafficking. Understanding the shared vulnerabilities that arise along this trajectory is crucial for designing policies that reduce migrants' exposure to predation and prevent the reinforcement of criminal markets. The strength of each mechanism varies across contexts depending on territorial control, state capacity, and the composition of migration flows.

III.I Vulnerabilities at Origin

Vulnerabilities to organized crime often begin before people start moving. In many parts of LAC, criminal organizations exercise territorial control and criminal governance, regulating everyday life through extortion, threats, and selective violence.[49] Communities face protection rackets, forced recruitment of youth, and gender-based violence, particularly against women and other marginalized groups.[50] In this context, migration becomes a mechanism to escape criminal coercion rather than solely a response to poverty or formal political persecution. Yet exposure to organized crime at origin is not confined to forced migrants: economic migrants, asylum seekers, and mixed flows frequently emerge from the same neighborhoods where gangs, cartels, or armed groups act as de facto authorities. Weak or complicit state institutions—police collusion, local political capture, and impunity—magnify these risks and shape who is able to leave, when, and with what resources.[51]

III.II Transit through Criminalized Corridors

Risks intensify during transit as migrants move through territories where state presence is thin and criminal actors control key routes. Cartels, local gangs, and corrupt officials frequently treat migrants as a predictable revenue stream, engaging in kidnapping, extortion, sexual violence, and forced labor.[52] The main migration corridors in Mexico and the Darién Gap illustrate this dynamic vividly: As flows increased and enforcement policies created bottlenecks, industrial-scale kidnapping, ransom extraction, and exploitation became central business lines for criminal groups.[53] These patterns affect Central Americans, Venezuelans, Haitians, and extra-continental migrants alike. Dependence on smugglers—often the only way to cross dangerous or restricted territories—further heightens vulnerability, as smuggling networks may be subordinated to or in collusion with larger criminal organizations.[54]

The global scale of this transit economy underscores its significance. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, at least 2.5 million people were smuggled in 2016, generating an economic return of US$5.5–7 billion—a figure comparable to the humanitarian aid budgets of the US or the European Union in the same year.[55] Smuggling networks are not always fully integrated into organized crime, but in many contexts, they must pay cartels or armed groups for the 'right' to operate or hand over migrants for further extortion and exploitation. Corruption is pervasive, ranging from petty bribes at

[49] Cantor 2014; International Crisis Group 2017; Knox 2026.
[50] Insight Crime 2023c, 2023e.
[51] Durán-Martínez 2017; Garzón-Vergara 2012; Meléndez et al. 2025.
[52] Green 2024; Human Rights Watch 2023; Yates and Leutert 2018.
[53] Evans and Franzblau 2013; Group 2023; OACNUDH 2025.
[54] Feldmann and Durand 2008; UNODC 2018.
[55] UNODC 2018.

border posts to high-level collusion.[56] While the dominant pattern is one of victimization, coercive environments also create conditions in which some migrants are forced into participation in illicit activities. Rigorous evidence on the mechanisms and scale of these abuses is limited, largely because of underreporting and the clandestine nature of transit.

III.III Border Crossings and Frontier Bottlenecks

The border crossing stage concentrates risks where migration control, territorial criminal governance, and legal uncertainty overlap. Frontier zones—such as the Mexico–US border, the Colombia–Venezuela crossing, or choke points around the Darién route—often combine high enforcement with limited protection and entrenched corruption.[57] Restrictive visa regimes, expedited removals, and externalized border control interact with weak state capacity, uneven humanitarian provision, and criminal governance of frontier zones to produce bottlenecks that trap migrants in precarious limbo on the border.[58] These bottlenecks are lucrative for organized crime: groups charge 'fees' for crossing, sell forged documents, and extort from migrants and their families under threat of violence or denunciation.[59] Border enforcement can therefore reshape, rather than reduce, criminal opportunities by concentrating large numbers of vulnerable populations in predictable frontier nodes and extending their time in transit. When short passages turn into months-long stays, migrants must secure housing, documents, transport, and income in settings where protection is limited, increasing dependence on informal brokers and illicit intermediaries and, in turn, exposure to extortion and exploitation.

A particularly stark illustration is the Darién Gap on the Colombia–Panama border, where extreme natural hazards intersect with systematic predation. Migrants crossing this inhospitable corridor face robbery, sexual violence, and death amid limited state presence.[60] Reports show a dramatic rise in gender-based violence against women and children during the crossing. Similar vulnerabilities affect extra-continental migrants (especially from Africa and Asia) who increasingly rely on this route, often with even fewer support networks.

Importantly, in the absence of formal, legal, and secured alternatives, migrants themselves often need and seek out these illegal support networks during their journey.

III.IV Settlement, Return, and Vulnerabilities at Destination

Vulnerability does not end upon arrival at destination. Migrants who manage to settle—temporarily or permanently—often confront new forms of exploitation in housing, labor, and access to basic public services, especially when their status remains irregular.[61] Their search for employment and integration makes them vulnerable to protection rackets, informal labor arrangements, and trafficking networks. In particular, women face heightened risks of sexual exploitation and gender-based violence. Journalistic investigations and international organizations have highlighted the precarious conditions of women

[56] Ibid.
[57] Bada and Feldmann 2018; Feldmann and Durand 2008; Gandini et al. 2024.
[58] Schmidtke and Yates 2024.
[59] Insight Crime 2023a, 2023d; Yates and Leutert 2018.
[60] Group 2023; Human Rights Watch 2023.
[61] Cruces et al. 2023; Ibáñez et al. 2025.

migrants—especially Venezuelan—in places such as Chile and Peru, where human trafficking and exploitation are widespread.[62] Young women are often targeted with false job offers, scholarships, or promises of safe passage, ultimately to be coerced into sexual exploitation.[63] Enforcement policies may unintentionally exacerbate these dynamics. As mentioned in Section 2.2, when Peruvian authorities made it harder for Venezuelans to obtain visas, TdA saw the opportunity to open human smuggling routes where sexual exploitation was frequent.[64]

Stigma and xenophobia can reinforce these vulnerabilities by pushing migrants into informal or clandestine economies where criminal groups are well established. However, there is no quantitative evidence of the role of migrants as perpetrators of crime. For instance, in Chile, evidence shows null effects of immigration on crime against natives, even during a period when the foreign-born population nearly tripled.[65] In Colombia, the arrival of Venezuelan forced migrants has been associated with an increase in homicides near the border, a pattern driven primarily by crimes committed *against the migrants* rather than targeting Colombian nationals.[66] Similarly, in Brazil, there is no evidence that the surge of Venezuelan migrants caused an increase in violent crime against locals. Instead, victimization rates among Venezuelan males ages 15–39 did increase near border areas.[67] Finally, other studies suggest that Venezuelan immigrants commit substantially fewer crimes than the native born after 2019, relative to their share in the overall population.[68]

However, evidence from Chile's Public Prosecutor's Office indicates that a small number of highly organized criminal networks of specific national origins are responsible for a disproportionate share of predatory crimes such as kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking.[69] Venezuelan-origin organizations display particularly high levels of criminal sophistication, combining involvement in drug markets with violent offenses. This finding reinforces a central policy implication: protecting migrants regardless of migratory status is essential not only on humanitarian ground but also as a way to limit criminal infiltration and reduce opportunities for exploitation.

At the same time, return and deportation create a distinct layer of destination-linked vulnerability. Those who are forced back often arrive with little or no documentation, may face stigma in their communities, and lack access to stable employment. These conditions make them highly exposed to victimization by organized crime, which targets returnees for extortion or coerces them into joining criminal networks as a survival strategy.[70] In Mexico, for instance, municipalities more exposed to US deportations have experienced higher levels of violent crime, especially among young men and minors.[71]

As mentioned, beyond individual vulnerability, deportations also have broader systemic consequences for organized crime. They can serve as a channel for the transnational transfer of gang networks, know-how, and violent practices. The case of El Salvador is worth reemphasizing: large-scale US deportations in the 1990s and 2000s facilitated the growth of MS-13 and Barrio 18. These groups consolidated their

[62] Chile 2025; International Organization for Migration 2022.
[63] Amnesty International 2023.
[64] Guerrero and Sviatschi 2025.
[65] Ajzenman et al. 2023.
[66] Knight and Tribin 2023.
[67] Marques 2025.
[68] Bahar et al. 2020.
[69] Fiscalía de Chile 2024.
[70] Ambrosius and Velásquez 2024.
[71] Rozo et al. 2021.

presence, expanded child recruitment, and escalated lethal violence.[72] Their expansion also fueled renewed migration northward, creating a cycle where deportation policies inadvertently strengthened criminal organizations and contributed to new displacement.

Taken together, these experiences show that returnees are doubly affected by organized crime: first as victims of stigma, marginalization, and coercion, and second as carriers of criminal structures when deportations displace gang members across borders. Migration policies that emphasize enforcement over integration can therefore unintentionally reinforce the power of criminal organizations rather than weaken it. More broadly, while migrants overwhelmingly remain victims rather than perpetrators of crime, large-scale mobility from territories under criminal governance can enable organized groups to exploit migrant flows to extend their reach—highlighting migrants' dual vulnerability as both targets of predation and, at times, instruments of criminal expansion.

These patterns, however, should be interpreted with caution. Crime and victimization statistics are shaped by data generation processes that may either overcount or undercount migrants as perpetrators. In Colombia, there is evidence of police bias against migrants, with a disproportionate number of arrests. At the same time, however, if the prosecutor cannot verify the identity of suspects brought in by the police—a situation more likely to take place for undocumented migrants—they are required to release her/him.[73] As a result, official records may understate migrants' involvement in crime even as the available evidence still indicates that they bear a disproportionate share of victimization.

IV. MIGRATION AND CRIME IN PUBLIC OPINION IN LAC

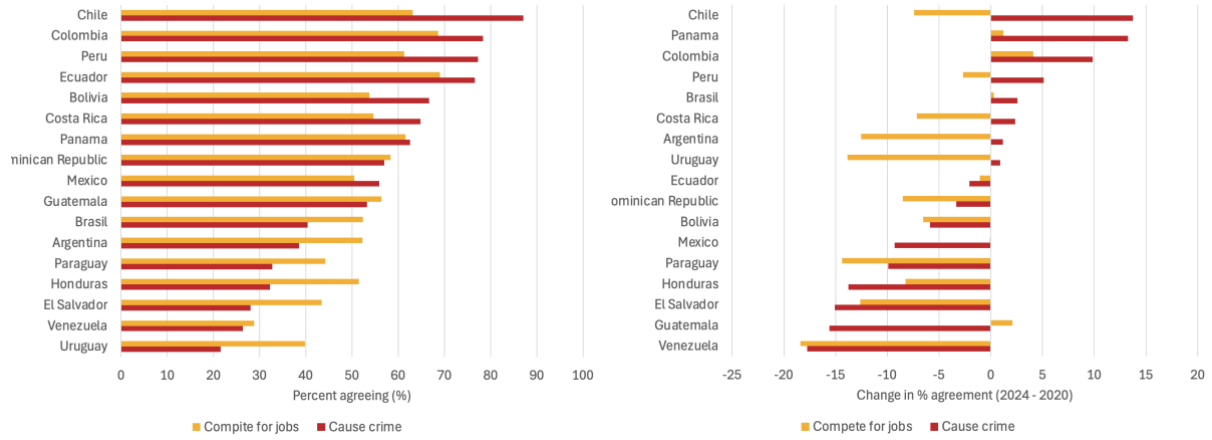
Fear of crime is one of the strongest drivers of anti-migrant sentiment in LAC, shaping policy debates and often justifying restrictive approaches that make migrants more vulnerable.[74] Survey evidence confirms how widespread this perception is. The 2024 wave of Latinobarómetro—a public opinion survey that covers most of the region—shows that more than half of LAC respondents believe that *immigrants cause a crime surge*.[75] The share is larger than 70 percent in Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador, the countries that have seen large inflows of Venezuelans (Figure 3a). In these countries, the share of respondents who believe that immigrants cause crime increases is significantly larger than the share of respondents who believe that immigrants compete for the jobs of natives. The latter is indeed the main worry of immigrants in public opinion surveys around the world.[76] There is also a large heterogeneity in how the perception that migrants increase crime (or compete for jobs) has changed since 2020, the first year in which these questions were included in the Latinobarómetro questionnaire. Again, in the countries that received the largest inflows of Venezuelans (Chile, Colombia, and Peru), as well as in Panama, the perception that migrants cause crime surges increases substantially over the five-year period. In the rest of the region, this perception has been either stable or decreased during the same window (Figure 3b).

[72] Ambrosius 2021; Sviatschi 2022.
[73] Tobón et al. 2025b.
[74] Cruces et al. 2023.
[75] Italics are literally translated from the Spanish survey question.
[76] Fasani et al. 2019.

Figure 3. LAC public opinion about the involvement of migrants in crime and jobs competition

a. Percentage of LAC respondents who believe immigrants cause crime surges/compete for jobs

b. 2020–2024 Change in the share who believe immigrants cause crime surges/compete for jobs



Source: 2020 and 2024 waves of Latinobarómetro.

Is this perception correct? Let us answer this question through the lens of the evidence discussed so far. On the one hand, in Sections 2 and 3, we have argued that migrants in LAC are largely victims of organized crime rather than criminals. This would suggest that the perceptions are biased. On the other hand, however, we have also pointed out that migration flows seem to facilitate the diffusion of organized crime across borders. Because organized crime in LAC is highly violent, this criminal diffusion can manifest in ways that are both visible and salient to host societies.[77] This would then suggest that the perception is not so biased. Note that, taken together, these two stylized facts suggest that, even if migrants *as individuals* tend to be victims, migration *as a phenomenon* can increase the reach and intensity of organized crime.

Strictly speaking, the fact that the majority of LAC respondents believe that **immigrants** (rather than immigration, see footnote 78) cause a crime surge does seem inconsistent with the evidence, but the difference between *immigrants* and *immigration* is arguably nuanced in public opinion surveys: citizens conflate the presence of migrants with the violent activities of the criminal organizations that prey upon them.

But misinformation—or in the best-case scenario selective attention—thrives on such kinds of subtleties. Three factors may explain why the citizens of LAC blame immigrants for the misdeeds of gang-captured migration. First, the **salience** of violent organized crime means that spectacular events—kidnappings of migrant buses, extortion rackets in border towns, or highly publicized murders—leave a disproportionate imprint on public opinion. Second, **media coverage** often emphasizes crimes committed by immigrants, amplifying their visibility. Third, political actors sometimes **instrumentalize** these narratives to justify anti-immigration policies.[78]

[77] See Meléndez et al. (2025) for evidence about the disproportionate violence of organized crime in LAC relative to the rest of the world.
[78] Rozo and Vargas 2021.

The Venezuelan displacement crisis offers a clear illustration. TdA expanded across the continent by exploiting business opportunities—particularly smuggling, extortion, and trafficking—along migrant corridors. By doing so, TdA also diversified into local illicit markets, contributing to rises in kidnappings, homicides, and sexual exploitation in several host countries. The fact that these activities are brutal and highly visible—and amplified by the media and political discourse—increases the perception that all migrants cause crime. In this sense, the widespread perception in LAC that migration fuels criminality is not necessarily wrong but reflects the indirect and mediated ways in which migration can reshape the criminal landscape.

Recognizing this nuance is essential for policy. Efforts to address public misperceptions should not simply deny any link between migration and crime—as academics usually do—but rather clarify the mechanisms through which migration interacts with organized crime. Communication strategies that highlight both the vulnerability of migrants and the structural drivers of organized crime can reduce scapegoating while acknowledging citizens' legitimate security concerns. For example, recent evidence suggests that providing neutral, factual information about migrant populations along with immersive experiences (such as, stories, testimonies, art, and immersive virtual reality) which simulate the lived struggles of unauthorized migrants crossing the US southern border may significantly enhance empathy among citizens and express more positive political attitudes toward immigration.[79]

Recent experimental evidence from nine LAC countries carried out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) suggests that short information campaigns can significantly increase the share of individuals who believe that migrants do not increase crime or do not compete with natives for jobs.[80] In randomized online experiments, participants were first surveyed about their baseline beliefs about those two statements and then assigned to one of three treatment groups: an informative video, an emotive video, or a control. The informative intervention presented factual evidence on the size, origin, and educational composition of migrant populations, as well as research findings showing no systematic relationship between immigration, crime, or negative labor market outcomes for natives. The emotive intervention used migrant testimonies to contextualize migrants' economic participation.

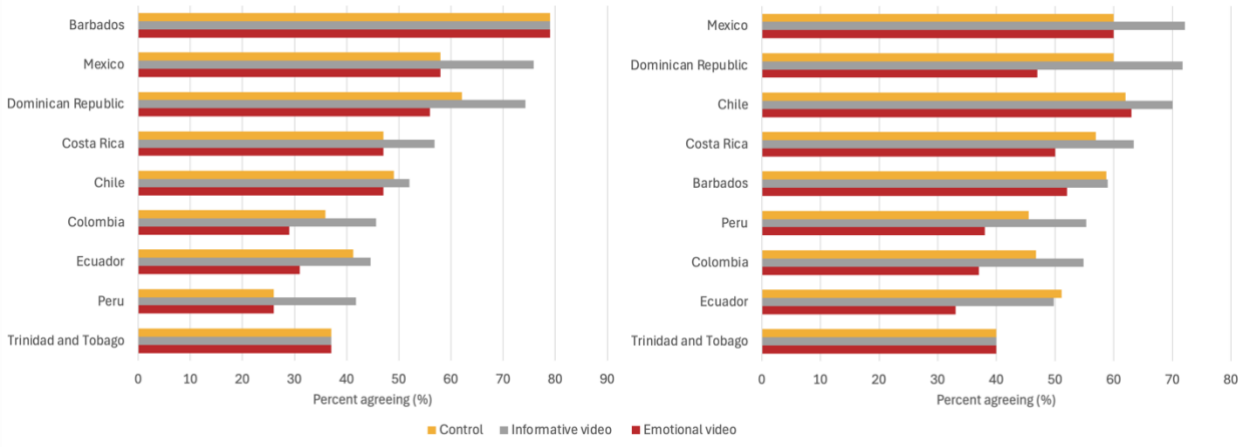
Across most LAC countries, the information treatment tended to increase the perception that migrants do not increase crime. The emotive video was much less effective and did not achieve better results in any country compared to the information treatment (Figure 4a). Similar results are found for the perception that migrants do not compete for jobs (Figure 4b). The effects are particularly strong among lower-income and less-educated respondents and in settings where skepticism toward migrants was initially high.[81]

[79] Andries et al. 2024.
[80] Cruces et al. 2023.
[81] Cruces et al. 2023.

Figure 4. Baseline beliefs about the role of migrants in increasing crime and competing for jobs + treatment effects

a. Perception that immigrants do not increase crime

b. Perception that immigrants do not compete for jobs



Source: Graphical representation of the results reported by Cruces et al. (2023).

From a policy perspective, these findings indicate that providing clear and credible information can help address negative perceptions about migration. Information campaigns may therefore serve as a feasible and relatively low-cost tool for correcting inaccurate narratives about migrants' impacts on crime and labor markets in the region. Still, as discussed in Section 5, policies that expand regularization, protect migrants from victimization, and strengthen regional cooperation remain first-order tools to undercut organized crime's ability to exploit human mobility. This implies that information campaigns are complements rather than substitutes of interventions aimed at reducing migrants' vulnerabilities.

V. HOW HAS POLICY IN LAC SHAPED THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MIGRATION AND CRIME

Public policy in LAC has played a decisive role in shaping how migration intersects with crime. While states in the region have often struggled with irregular migration, human trafficking, and organized crime along migration routes, their policy choices have either reinforced the association between migration and crime or provided frameworks that reduce migrants' exposure to criminal networks.[82] From regional

[82] As Betts (2013) notes, a key difference of today's migration waves from the Cold War era is that many recent displaced people are not experiencing explicit state persecution but the severe human rights deprivations produced by fragile states. Rather than being deliberately targeted by their governments, individuals now often leave because weak states are unable or unwilling to guarantee basic protections. This shift has expanded the category of survival migrants, who face serious threats yet do not qualify as refugees under existing legal definitions because the harm they experience results from state omission rather than state action. Policy responses should therefore prioritize addressing the structural conditions that endanger these individuals in the different stages of their migration process rather than relying on reforms in origin countries that lack the capacity or political will to enact meaningful change.

declarations to bilateral agreements and national reforms, the region's responses illustrate how legal regimes can both mitigate and reproduce the vulnerabilities that link migration to crime.

The early development of humanitarian norms and integration frameworks sought to reduce migrants' exposure to irregularity. The Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (1984) represented an early turning point by adapting international refugee law to the realities of LAC. It recognized displacement generated by generalized violence, internal conflicts, and human rights violations, which were common during the 1980s. Its influence extended beyond its adoption, shaping national asylum systems across the region and continuing to be referenced in court rulings and asylum practices today.[83]

In the following decades, regional integration agreements further broadened the scope of mobility. The CA-4 Free Mobility Agreement, signed in 2006 but rooted in the 1990s accords, created one of the most open migration zones in LAC by allowing citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua to travel, work, and reside without visas. Similarly, the MERCOSUR Residence Agreement, signed in 2002 and entering into force in 2009, provided nationals of participating states with renewable residence permits, strengthening South American integration and reducing irregular migration.[84] By expanding rights and pathways for regular residence, these measures reduced migrants' dependence on smugglers and diminished opportunities for organized crime to exploit irregular flows.

Other national experiences further illustrate how policy shaped migrants' exposure to crime. Costa Rica's bilateral temporary work permits for Nicaraguans in the 1990s–2000s created legal avenues for employment in agriculture but often reinforced segmentation into low-wage and precarious labor.[85] While these schemes reduced reliance on smugglers, they left many workers tied to temporary status and vulnerable to exploitation. Brazil's humanitarian visa for Haitians in 2012, by contrast, provided one of the first large-scale legal alternatives for extra-continental migrants in the region. By allowing Haitians to apply directly at consulates for visas leading to residency, Brazil reduced dangerous reliance on irregular Amazonian routes controlled by criminal actors.[86]

Other examples of successful policies are the ones that reduce migrants' exposure to criminal groups through the provision of humanitarian assistance to those in transit. Evidence shows that providing support—such as food vouchers and flexible debit cards—to migrants traveling from Venezuela to Peru reduced thefts and incidents of sexual exploitation, mitigated declines in self-reported life satisfaction and well-being, and led to better mental health and greater aspirations.[87]

At the same time, restrictive policies reinforced the association between migration and illegality. Chile's 2018 visa restrictions for Haitians and the creation of the 'Visa de Responsabilidad Democrática' for Venezuelans exemplify how humanitarian discourse coexisted with selective exclusion. While the latter initially facilitated Venezuelan entry, growing requirements later limited access, pushing many into irregularity. Similarly, Mexico's readmission and repatriation agreements with Central American states, intensified after 2014, enabled rapid deportations with minimal due process. These measures, justified

[83] Triandafyllidou 2018.
[84] Acosta and Harris 2022.
[85] Idem.
[86] Idem.
[87] Dunsch et al. 2026.

as orderly migration management, often exposed returnees to organized crime in border areas and transit routes, heightening insecurity.[88]

More recent large-scale regularization schemes reflect renewed efforts to decouple migration from crime by guaranteeing status and reducing irregularity. In Colombia, the *Permiso Especial de Permanencia para el Fomento de la Formalización* (2018–2020) sought to link Venezuelan migrants to the formal labor market, while the broader *Estatuto Temporal de Protección* (2021–2031) became the most ambitious mass regularization effort in the region, covering over 2 million people. In 2025, Colombia introduced PEP-Tutor (*Permiso Especial de Permanencia*) to support guardians of Venezuelan minors and allow the accumulation of residence time at the family level, further reducing risks of irregularity.[89]

Peru followed a different path. Initially, it implemented the PTP (*Permiso Temporal de Permanencia*) in 2017–2018 to regularize early arrivals but by late 2018 tightened entry with stricter visa rules requiring passports and apostilles. In 2023, the government launched the CPP (*Carné de Permiso Temporal de Permanencia*), a time-limited bridge to residence, but the closing of applications in December 2023 pushed many back into irregularity.[90]

Chile followed a more restrictive trajectory. Its 2021 immigration law and 2022 regulation normalized expulsion practices and led to large-scale returns of irregular migrants to the northern border with Bolivia in 2024–2025. While humanitarian and child-focused channels persisted, their scope remained limited.[91] Ecuador also shifted policy by terminating its bilateral migratory statute with Venezuela in September 2025 and imposing new visa requirements, raising entry barriers for Venezuelans.[92]

These shifts marked a regional turn away from the first generation of inclusive regularizations (2015–2019). Early Venezuelan migrants often had resources to secure documents and travel legally, but later waves—families from poorer backgrounds—were forced into irregular crossings, heightening their exposure to smugglers and criminal groups. As legal pathways narrowed, irregularity rose, and organized crime profited by taxing mobility and settlement.

TdA exemplifies these dynamics. Operating across Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile, it diversified from extortion and trafficking into kidnapping, migrant smuggling, and document forgery. It did so as a consortium of factions that follow more a franchise logic than a centralized command. In Peru and Chile, investigations report expanded rackets, a surge in trafficking victims (mostly Venezuelan women), and violent competition with local groups along the Ecuador–Peru border.[93] Journalistic accounts describe a franchise logic that establishes 'plazas' in border hubs and deploys factions such as 'Los Gallegos' in Peru to tax businesses, transport, and sexual exploitation. This criminal diaspora

[88] Triandafyllidou 2018.
[89] Acosta and Harris 2022; GIFMM Colombia (R4V) 2022; La Silla Vacía 2024; MIAP 2025; UNHCR Colombia 2025.
[90] Amnistía Internacional 2023; Superintendencia Nacional de Migraciones del Perú 2023.
[91] Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile 2024; Gobierno de Chile, Ministerio del Interior y Seguridad Pública 2021; Ministerio del Interior y Seguridad Pública de Chile 2025; Servicio Nacional de Migraciones 2025.
[92] Primicias 2025a, 2025b.
[93] Criminal competition can exacerbate patterns of violence and exploitation along migration routes. Indeed, just as competition among cartels escalates violence in the drug trade (Durán-Martínez 2017), competition over control of migrant routes intensifies predatory behavior.

has also spilled into Chile, where Peruvian groups export extortion practices. Despite leadership arrests, diversification into multiple illicit markets has allowed the network to persist.[94]

Importantly, this does not mean that regularization is a no-brainer policy, especially from a dynamic perspective. Regularization can have feedback effects on migration itself. By improving migrants' access to formal employment, services, and mobility, it lowers the costs of settlement and increases the expected returns to migration, potentially inducing additional inflows when conditions in origin countries remain precarious. Whether such an effect is quantitatively important depends on magnitudes and on whether regularization is perceived as a one-off humanitarian response or as a durable policy regime. But to the extent that regularization increases inflows, it may also generate labor market adjustments in host countries. Even if average effects on wages and employment are small, distributional impacts may be concentrated among lower-skilled workers and in localities where migrants cluster. This creates a political trade-off: regularization may reduce migrants' vulnerability to organized crime and attenuate misperceptions that migration causes crime, but it can simultaneously shift concerns toward labor market competition and pressures on public services. For this reason, regularization programs are most effective—and most politically sustainable—when paired with active labor market and integration policies, targeted fiscal support for receiving communities, and mechanisms that facilitate formal employment matching and skill certification.

The hardening of US migration policies has generated significant externalities across LAC, particularly in transit and origin countries. By sharply restricting access to asylum under expedited removal and presidential proclamations, many migrants who would otherwise seek protection in the US are pushed back into irregular circulation. This has contributed to a surge in returning flows of migrants, where thousands of people expelled from Mexico and the US are stranded in Central America and northern South America without support networks or legal status.[95] Such returns amplify the demand for clandestine crossings and expose migrants to criminal actors who control smuggling routes, thereby reinforcing the overlap between restrictive border policies and the expansion of organized crime economies.

The consequences of these spillovers are particularly acute in areas such as the Darién Gap, where criminal organizations benefit directly from increased flows of desperate migrants. Stricter enforcement further north, coupled with the suspension of humanitarian aid, leaves migrants more vulnerable to extortion, trafficking, and forced recruitment.[96] Similar evidence in Mexico shows that US migrant deterrence policies, by extending migrant stays from days to months in territories under the control of criminal organizations, increase criminals' expected returns, thereby intensifying both nonlethal exploitation and lethal violence against migrants.[97] These policies not only intensify the humanitarian crisis but also strengthen illicit economies that profit from migration, blurring the line between migration management and crime control in the region.

Finally, regional coordination and transnational initiatives have attempted to align national responses and reduce migrants' vulnerability to criminal networks. The Quito Process, launched in 2018, created an unprecedented forum for more than a dozen Latin American states to coordinate on Venezuelan

[94] Bahar et al. 2020; Garzón-Vergara 2012; Infobae Perú 2023, 2025; Ojo Público 2023, 2024.
[95] OACNUDH 2025.
[96] OACNUDH 2025.
[97] Bandiera et al. 2025.

displacement.[98] Though nonbinding, agreements to recognize expired documents and facilitate access to services reduced some of the pressures that drive irregularity. By institutionalizing regional dialogue, such initiatives illustrate how cooperation can mitigate the security risks that emerge when states act unilaterally or prioritize short-term restrictions.

Yet coordination on migration, while necessary, may not be sufficient. Addressing the reverse causal channel—from criminal organizations to displacement—requires strengthening the state capacity of LAC to combat organized crime. Put differently, where organized crime is pervasive, migrants are more readily framed as criminals; weakening these organizations would likely erode that stigma. It is therefore essential that countries in LAC also coordinate on transnational policies that curb the expansion of organized crime across the region.[99]

VI. CONCLUSION

Migration and organized crime in LAC are best understood as part of a mutually reinforcing system. Organized crime generates displacement through territorial control, violence, and extortion, while migration flows create new markets and vulnerabilities that criminal groups exploit. This circular causality explains why mobility pressures and criminal organizations have become so tightly intertwined across the region.

Through the lens of this bidirectional relationship where migration and organized crime reinforce one another through a feedback loop of violence, displacement, and predation, our review highlights three main insights. First, the relationship between migration and crime depends strongly on the vulnerabilities faced by migrants along the migration process, irrespective of the causes of fleeing and of their legal status. At all stages, migrants are overwhelmingly victims rather than perpetrators of crime, yet their movements can still reshape the geography and intensity of criminal violence.

Second, public perceptions do not fully align with this evidence. While migrants are rarely the source of crime, the salience of brutal violence by groups such as the TdA makes migration appear closely linked to insecurity. This gap between perception and reality complicates integration efforts and fuels restrictive policies that often exacerbate irregularity and vulnerability.

Third, policy responses matter greatly. Inclusive frameworks—such as regional residence agreements or Colombia's mass regularization programs—reduce migrants' reliance on criminal actors and weaken organized crime's grip on mobility. Restrictive approaches, by contrast, reinforce the overlap between migration and illegality, creating opportunities for extortion, trafficking, and coerced recruitment. Because migration and organized crime operate transnationally, unilateral policies often generate spillovers; regional coordination is therefore essential.

In summary, migration does not cause organized crime, but it can amplify its reach across the region. Recognizing this distinction is key for designing responses that both protect migrants and reduce crime. Effective strategies will combine regularization and integration with stronger institutions of justice and security, thereby undercutting the ability of organized crime to prey on human mobility. As migration

[98] Acosta and Harris 2022.
[99] For reviews of policy responses to organized crime, see, for example, Tobón et al. (2025a).

pressures and organized crime threats continue to grow, the challenge for LAC governments is to move beyond reactive restrictive migration policies and toward cooperative, rights-based, and regionally coordinated solutions while simultaneously strengthening state capacity to prevent the expansion of criminal organizations.

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