Dangerous locations and protection risks reported by refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico

This snapshot focuses on the protection risks that refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico face during their migration journey and at destination, amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It is based on 4Mi interviews with refugees and migrants and several key informant interviews in Guatemala City and Tapachula (Mexico). It aims to contribute towards a solid evidence base to inform targeted responses on the ground, as well as advocacy efforts related to the situation of refugees and migrants during the coronavirus pandemic.

Recommendations

- Strengthen protection responses for refugees and migrants in Guatemala and Mexico (e.g. shelter, legal assistance and psycho-social support), especially in the locations indicated as most dangerous by respondents.

- Conduct advocacy aimed at the adoption of more protection-oriented policies on migration and in response to the pandemic.

- Engage authorities in Guatemala and Mexico to uphold legal and institutional frameworks which make accountable the perpetrators of protection violations.
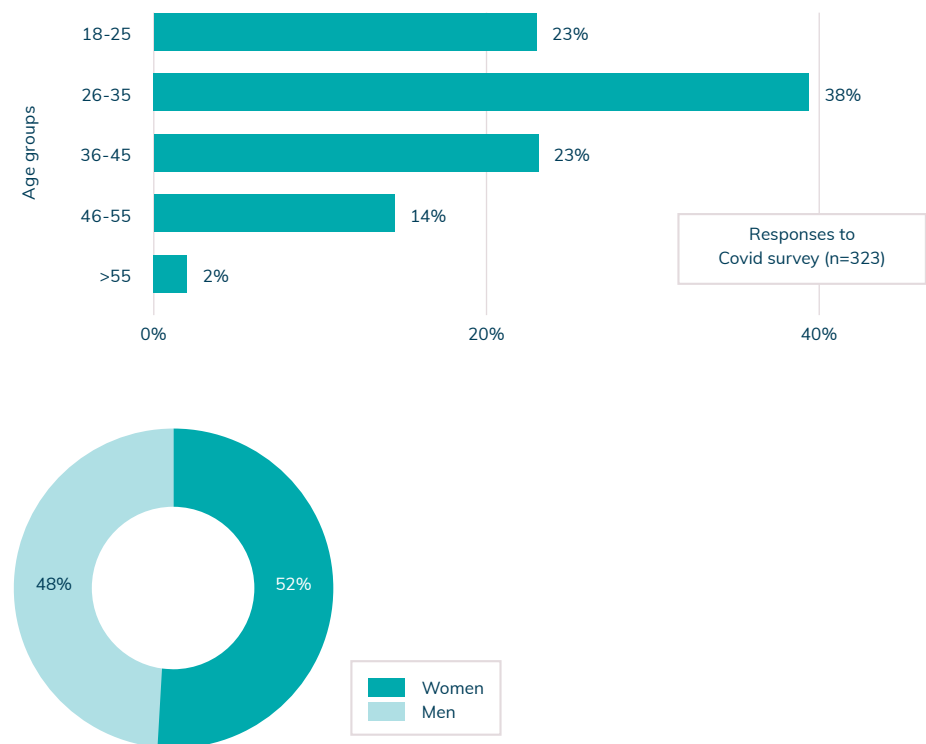
Profiles

This analysis is based on 323 surveys conducted between 13 July and 25 September 2020. Data collection was carried out remotely by phone. 43% of respondents were interviewed in Guatemala and 57% in Mexico. 88% of those surveyed in Guatemala were in the country's capital, Guatemala City, while 12% were in other cities such as Chimaltenango, Escuintla, Quetzaltenango, Sacatepéquez, among others. 90% of respondents in Mexico were in Tapachula (State of Chiapas) and the remaining 10% were in different cities including Tuxtla Gutierrez, Ciudad Hidalgo and Escuintla.

52% of all respondents were women and 48% were men. The average age of respondents was 34 (see Figure 1). Interviewees came from Honduras (45%), El Salvador (26%), Nicaragua (17%), Guatemala (5%), Cuba (3%), Venezuela (3%) and Mexico (1%).
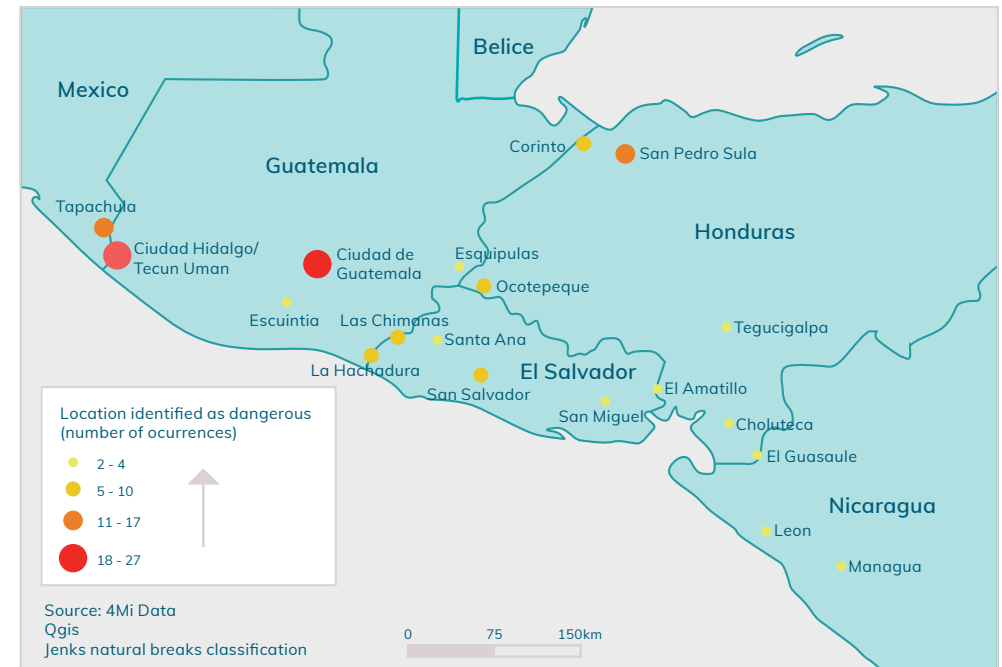
Figure 1. Age range and sex

Guatemala City and border with Mexico reported as most dangerous

Respondents to the survey were asked to identify the country and specific location that they considered to be the most dangerous on their migration route. At the country level, Guatemala was most frequently indicated as dangerous with 22% of all mentions, followed by Honduras (15%), Mexico (14%), and El Salvador (11%), among other countries. It must be noted that, due to the respondents' countries of origin and migration routes, a higher proportion of them has crossed Guatemala and Mexico than other locations.

30% of respondents did not report any dangerous location. According to additional information shared by 4Mi monitors, respondents often said that that danger was very high in their country of origin and, in comparison, they did not feel unsafe during their journey. Local organizations also confirmed having noted a "normalization" of violence and danger among the people on the move they assist, due to the extremely high insecurity they faced in their country of origin. Additionally, for a minority of respondents, the journey to Guatemala City or Tapachula was also brief due to the short distance and/or the means used to migrate. Lastly, most interviewees were referred to 4Mi by local organizations assisting people on the move; they thus might have faced less dangerous and precarious journeys than people who were not reached by organizations providing assistance and information.

The specific locations most frequently indicated as dangerous by respondents were the border between Tecun Uman (Guatemala) and Ciudad Hidalgo (Mexico), and Guatemala City (see Map 1). Other dangerous locations along the route included San Pedro Sula, Corinto, and Ocotepeque (Honduras); Tapachula, Ciudad Hidalgo and Talisman (Mexico); and Las Chinamas, San Salvador and La Hechadura (El Salvador).
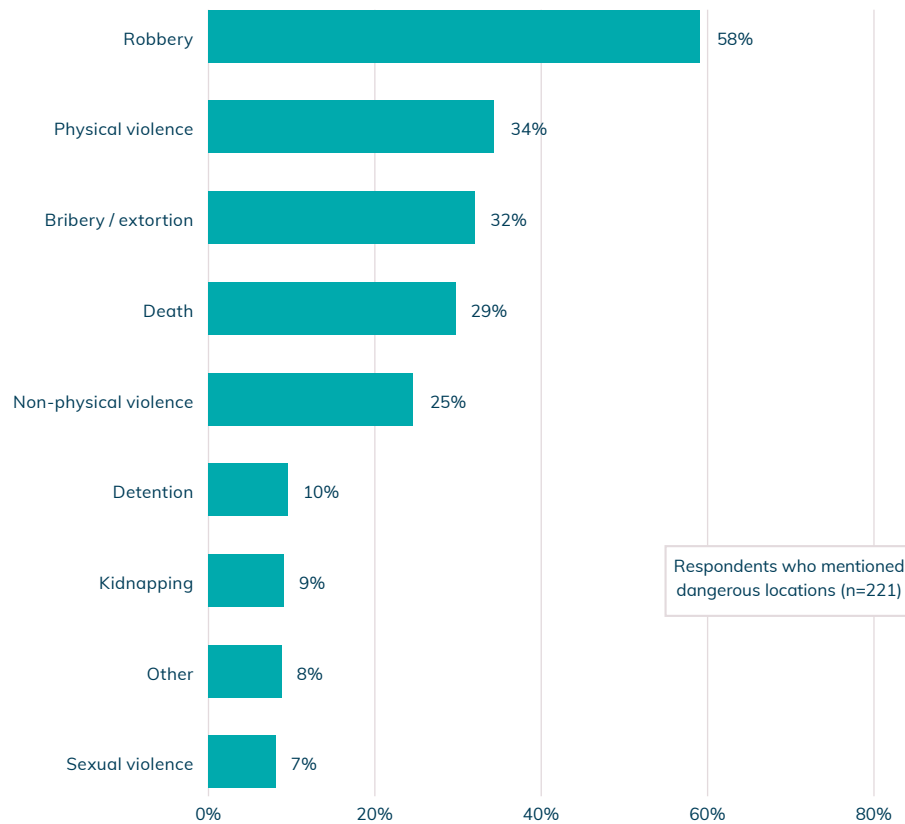
Map 1. What was the most dangerous location on your journey?

Source: 4Mi Data
Qgis
Jenks natural breaks classification

Robbery is the most reported protection risk

The most frequently mentioned risk was robbery, reported by 58% of all respondents (see Figure 2). This trend is even higher among respondents interviewed in Mexico, where 69% of respondents who indicated dangerous locations on their journey mentioned robbery as a risk in those locations. Other commonly mentioned protection risks included physical violence (34% of all respondents who reported at least one dangerous location), bribery or extortion (32%), death (29%), and non-physical violence (25%). Risk of physical violence and death was more frequently reported by respondents in Guatemala than by those interviewed in Mexico, with 40% and 37% versus 28% and 20% respectively.

Figure 2. What were the main risks?

Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.

Robbery — 58%
Physical violence — 34%
Bribery / extortion — 32%
Death — 29%
Non-physical violence — 25%
Detention — 10%
Kidnapping — 9%
Other — 8%
Sexual violence — 7%

Respondents who mentioned dangerous locations (n=221)

Fewer mentions were made of other protection risks such as detention (10%), kidnapping (9%), and sexual violence (7%). Local organizations based in Guatemala City and Tapachula provided potential explanations behind these trends. In the case of detention, deprivation of liberty for irregular migration is not the norm in Guatemala; while it is more common in Mexico, local actors indicate that the presence of law enforcement and immigration controls in the State of Chiapas, at the border with Guatemala, have decreased during the pandemic as the authorities' attention shifted toward other issues. 4Mi monitors also mentioned that, according to respondents, it has become easier to avoid detention when entering Mexico irregularly as more government officials accept to turn a blind eye in exchange for a bribe. Additionally, it must be noted that most respondents in

Mexico are referred to 4Mi by a local NGO that provides assistance to people on the move, including legal advice and representation in asylum proceedings, which helps diminish their exposure to detention.

According to local actors, the risks of kidnapping and sexual violence are much more common in subsequent parts of the migration route towards the US, where drug cartels have a stronger presence and control over territory.

> "Yes, I have seen that robberies have increased during the pandemic. I suffered myself a robbery, and they stole everything from me, they left me with nothing, so I had to stay in a collective shelter."
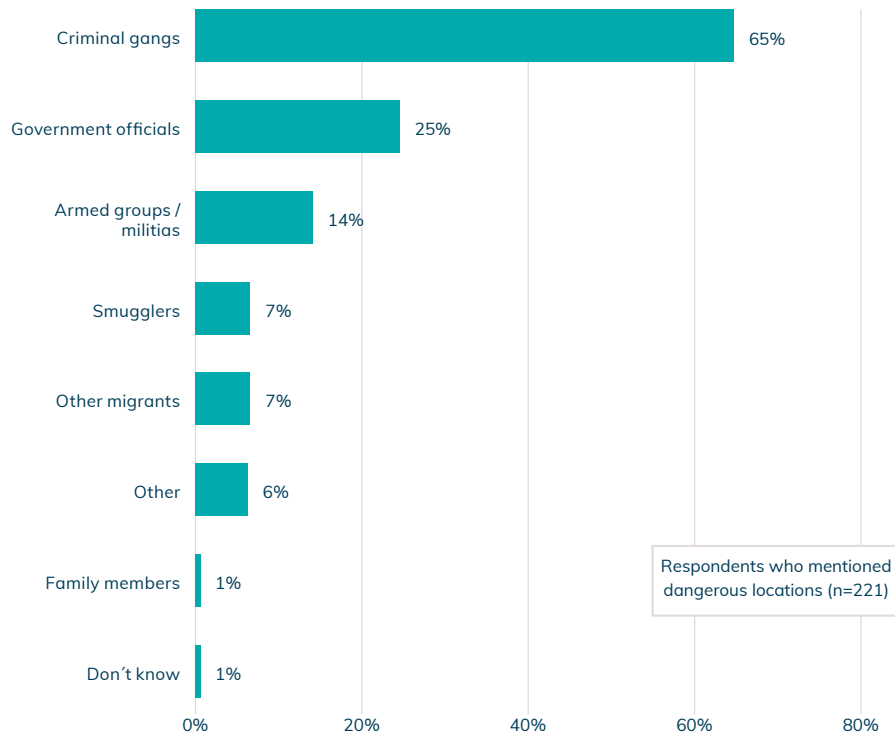> **25-year-old Honduran man in Guatemala City.**

Criminal gangs considered the main perpetrators of incidents

Criminal gangs were by far the most frequently reported perpetrators of protection incidents, mentioned by 65% of respondents who indicated at least one dangerous location. The refugees and migrants interviewed also mentioned government officials (25%) and armed groups or militias (14%) as perpetrators (see Figure 3). Militias were most frequently reported by people on the move from Nicaragua, in connection with protection risks during their journey in their home country.

Smugglers were only indicated as perpetrators by 7% of respondents. It is however worth noting that, in practice, this category often overlaps with two of the ones previously mentioned – in particular, criminal gangs and government officials. It appears that, in general, a smuggler is perceived by respondents to be someone who organises an entire journey, whereas people who engage to facilitate only a part of it are not perceived as smugglers. Smuggling dynamics in the region and the perceptions of people on the move on the issue are worth further exploration.

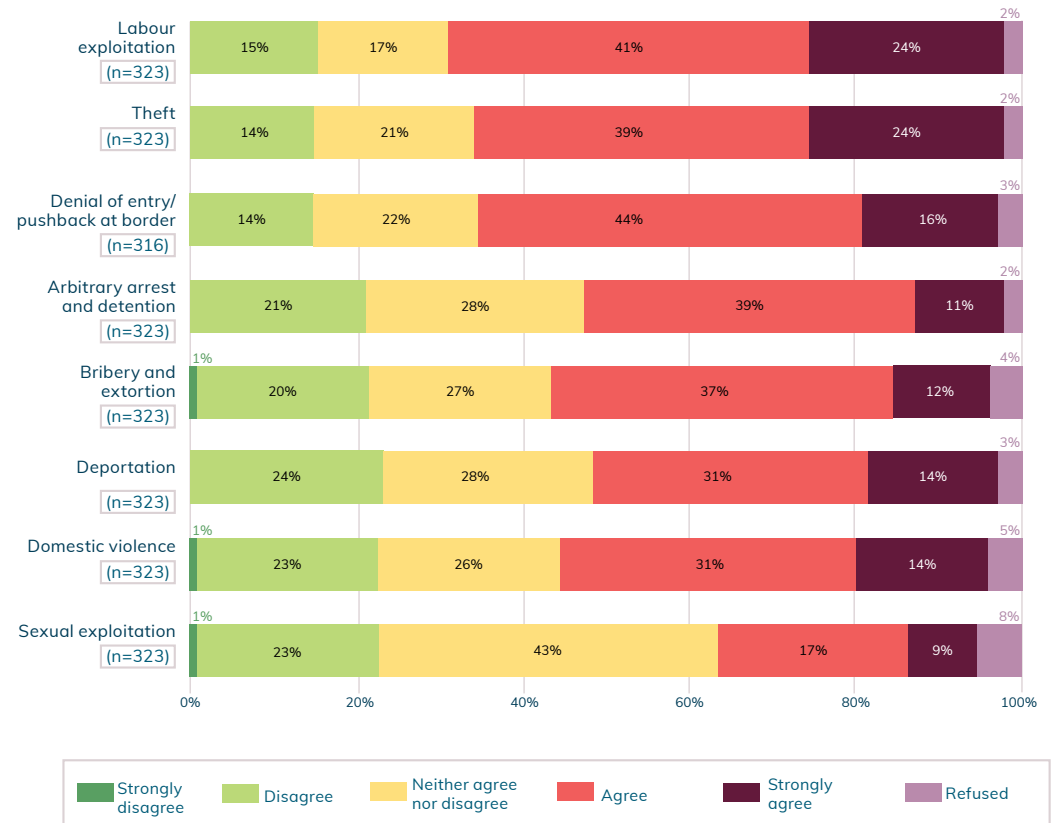## Figure 3. Who were likely to be perpetrating such acts?

Criminal gangs	65%
Government officials	25%
Armed groups / militias	14%
Smugglers	7%
Other migrants	7%
Other	6%
Family members	1%
Don't know	1%

Respondents who mentioned dangerous locations (n=221)

Note: Respondents may select more than one answer to this question.

Protection risks increased during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is acting as a threat multiplier for people on the move in Guatemala and Mexico: all protection risks covered in the survey were considered by respondents as having increased since the start of the pandemic.

The protection risk that respondents most frequently reported as having increased since the pandemic began is labour exploitation, with 65% of respondents strongly agreeing/ agreeing with the statement (see Figure 4). According to local organizations, this is primarily due to the adverse impact of the pandemic on the economy and the rise in unemployment, which makes conditions more difficult and people more desperate for a job.

Figure 4. There is an increased risk of (protection incident) since the COVID-19 outbreak

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Refused
Labour exploitation (n=323)		15%	17%	41%	24%	2%
Theft (n=323)		14%	21%	39%	24%	2%
Denial of entry/ pushback at border (n=316)		14%	22%	44%	16%	3%
Arbitrary arrest and detention (n=323)		21%	28%	39%	11%	2%
Bribery and extortion (n=323)	1%	20%	27%	37%	12%	4%
Deportation (n=323)		24%	28%	31%	14%	3%
Domestic violence (n=323)	1%	23%	26%	31%	14%	5%
Sexual exploitation (n=323)	1%	23%	43%	17%	9%	8%

A majority of respondents also indicated an increase in the risk of theft, and denial of access to territory and pushback across borders during the pandemic (63% and 60% of respondents, respectively). An increase in other protection risks was also reported by a relevant portion of respondents, including arbitrary arrest or detention (49% of respondents), bribery or extortion (49%), deportation (45%), and domestic violence (45%). Sexual exploitation was the only type of incident where the level of agreement that it has increased was balanced by the level of disagreement.

A higher percentage of respondents in Guatemala reported increases in all protection risks, compared to Mexico. An explanation offered by local actors based in Tapachula is that the risk of protection violations in the city was already high before the pandemic, therefore it would be difficult to perceive much of an increase. Additionally, according to 4Mi monitors, respondents in Mexico often declare not having first-hand knowledge of any change in protection risks as they have barely left the house during the pandemic.

4Mi & COVID-19

The Mixed Migration Monitoring Mechanism Initiative (4Mi) is the Mixed Migration Centre's flagship primary data collection system, an innovative approach that helps fill knowledge gaps, and inform policy and response regarding the nature of mixed migratory movements. Normally, the recruitment of respondents and interviews take place face-to-face. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face recruitment and data collection has been suspended in all countries.

MMC has responded to the COVID-19 crisis by changing the data it collects and the way it collects it. Respondents are recruited through a number of remote or third-party mechanisms; sampling is through a mixture of purposive and snowball approaches. A new survey focuses on the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and migrants, and the surveys are administered by telephone, by the 4Mi monitors in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia and Latin America. Findings derived from the surveyed sample should not be used to make inferences about the total population of refugees and migrants, as the sample is not representative. The switch to remote recruitment and data collection results in additional potential bias and risks, which cannot be completely avoided. Further measures have been put in place to check and – to the extent possible – control for bias and to protect personal data. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi