Safety risks and dangerous locations reported by refugees and migrants in Mexico

Refugees and migrants from Central America often face safety risks and abuses during their journey north. 58% of all respondents said they had directly experienced one or more abuses during their journey. This snapshot focuses on dangerous places and perceived risks. What kind of risks do refugees and migrants face? In which specific locations were risks most often reported? Who are the perpetrators?[1]

This snapshot 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 in the country.

Key findings

- **76% of respondents** identified at least **one dangerous location** along their **migration route. 20%** reported **two or more dangerous locations. 58% of all respondents said they had directly experienced one or more abuses** during their journey.

- The most frequently **reported risks** were **robbery** (90%), **bribery or extortion** (74%), **kidnapping** (39%) and **non-physical violence** (39%).

- **Guatemala City and border cities were the locations more often reported as dangerous on respondents' journeys.**

- **The risk of bribery and extortion** was more frequently reported **in Guatemala,** while **risks of physical violence, detention and kidnapping** were more often reported in **Mexico.**

- **Likely perpetrators were most often reported to be criminal gangs** (93%), followed by **military or police** (24%) and **immigration officials** (22%).

Profiles

The analysis is based on 918 surveys conducted in Mexico between February and October 2021, mainly by face-to-face interview (97%) and partially by phone (3%). 68% of the surveys were carried out in Tapachula and 31% in Tijuana.[2] Enumerators collect data on refugee and migrant journeys through Central America.
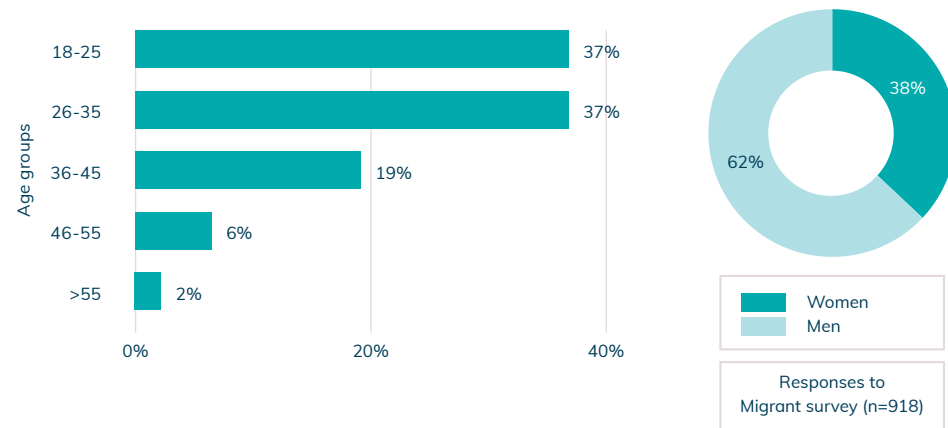
Most respondents surveyed in Tijuana had taken the Pacific Route in Mexico, but some had already tried to migrate to the United States (US) previously, and taken other routes through Mexico, which they referred to in the survey. Direct observation by 4Mi enumerators and interviews with local actors also fed into this analysis.

62% of respondents were men and 38% were women. 37% of all respondents were between 18 and 25 years old, and an equal share was between 26 and 35 years old. The average age of the sample was 30 years (see Figure 1).

63% of respondents came from Honduras, 23% from El Salvador, 10% from Guatemala, 3% from Nicaragua, and 1% from Venezuela.

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1   4Mi asks about dangerous places and perceived risks. Respondents are reminded throughout that they do not have to answer these questions. They are asked to talk about dangerous places they have passed through, and not to rely on hearsay. For ethical reasons, only one question in the survey relates to direct experience of any violation, and respondents are again reminded that they do not have to answer.

2   4Mi enumerators in Mexico are currently located in Tapachula and Tijuana. Data collection however began later in Tijuana (end of April 2021) meaning that data from this location is more limited.

Figure 1. Sex and ranges

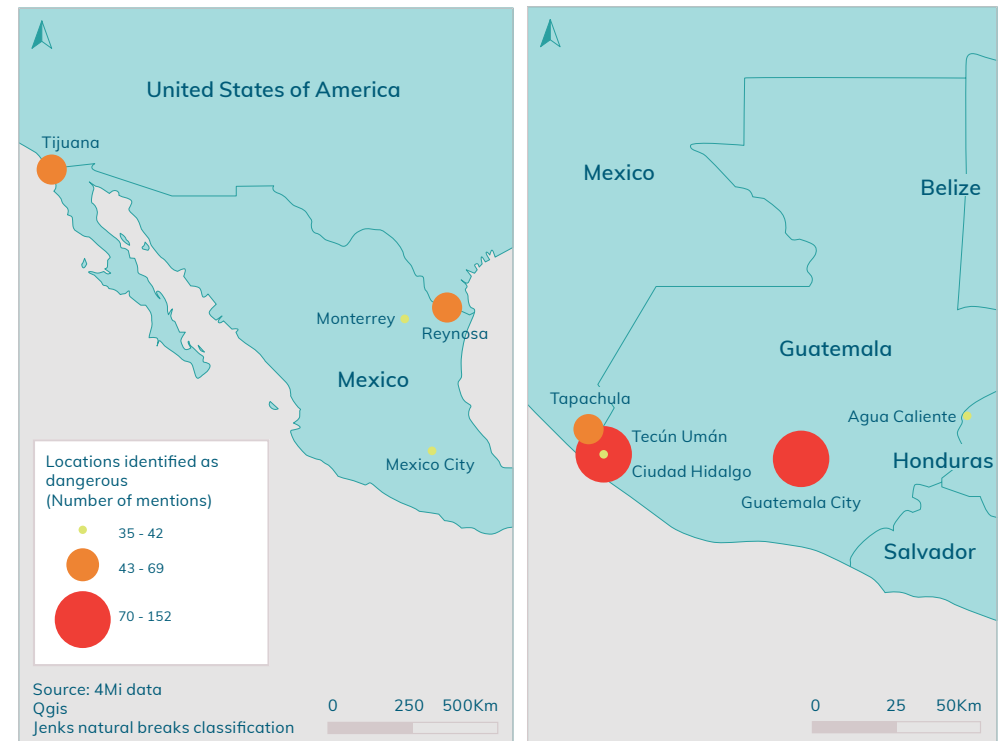## Figure 2. Locations identified as dangerous along the migration route

Guatemala City and border cities reported as most dangerous locations

Respondents to the survey were asked to identify the countries and specific locations that they considered to be dangerous along their migration route. 76% of respondents (696/918) reported at least one dangerous location, of which 20% (186/918) identified more than one dangerous location along the route. Mexico was the country most frequently indicated as dangerous (48% of locations reported as dangerous), followed by Guatemala (39%) and Honduras (9%).[3]

In Mexico, risks are reported across several cities, while in Guatemala they are concentrated in two locations, making Guatemala City the location most often reported as dangerous across all countries. Within Mexico, the main places identified as dangerous were Tapachula (reported by 10% of respondents who identified at least one dangerous location), Reynosa (8%), Tijuana (7%), Ciudad Hidalgo (6%), Mexico City and Monterrey (5%). In Guatemala, respondents reported Tecún Umán (22%) and Guatemala City (21%). In Honduras, Agua Caliente (5%) was reported as a dangerous location (see Figure 2).

24% of respondents did not report any dangerous location along their migration route. According to additional information shared by 4Mi enumerators, respondents who do not report any dangerous location often said they did not feel unsafe during their journey, compared to the high levels of danger in their country of origin.[4]

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3   It should be noted that enumerators' location and respondents' country of departure could affect the results presented in this snapshot. Not all respondents had been in Honduras, and different routes may have been taken within each country, meaning perceptions of dangerous locations may differ.

4   Despite a minority saying nowhere was dangerous, this "normalization" of violence and danger among people on the move, due to the extremely high insecurity they faced in their country of origin, was confirmed by local organizations.
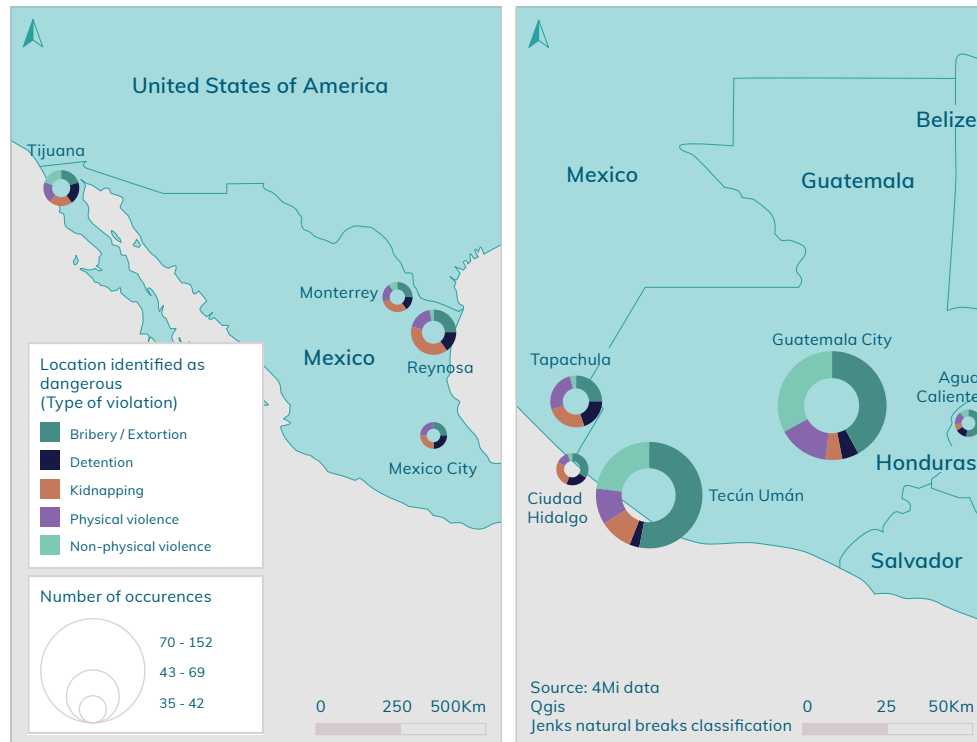
> "There are many risks at each border. Be careful: there are many gangs looking for someone to rob".
> **33-year-old man in Tapachula, Mexico.**

Safety risks vary between countries and locations

Respondents were asked to report the type of risks in each location. Significant differences were found between locations (see Figure 4).[5]

Figure 4. Type of reported abuses according to the location

Overall, robbery was the main reported risk (by 90% of respondents who identified at least one dangerous location, 622/696). 82% of all respondents identified that robbery was a risk in Guatemala, against 55% in Mexico. According to 4Mi enumerators, most refugees and migrants stop in Guatemala City or Tecún Umán just to change transport and continue their journey north. They are often targeted by criminal groups as soon as they arrive. According to local actors, most refugees and migrants avoid spending much time in these cities because of the high crime rate.

The risk of bribery and extortion was also significantly more frequently reported in Guatemala (70%) than in Mexico (41%). Research by Amnesty International found that extortion and bribery has increased in Guatemala during the Covid-19 pandemic.[6] Since October 2020, a PCR test is required to enter Guatemala[7] but its cost is too high for many. At some point, the requirement was changed to an antigen test. Without the test, people bribe police officers at each control, to be able to continue their journey.

The risk of non-physical violence was significantly more common in Guatemala (43%) than in Mexico (19%). According to 4Mi enumerators, refugees and migrants face insults and discrimination during police controls in Guatemala.

In contrast, the risk of detention was reported more frequently in Mexico (by 30% of respondents who identified at least one dangerous location along their migration route) than in Guatemala (8%). During the Covid-19 pandemic, according to local actors, Mexican authorities tightened controls on the main migration routes across the country to identify and detain irregular migrants.

The risks of kidnapping (45%), physical violence (29%), death (18%) and sexual violence (13%) were significantly more frequently reported in Mexico than in Guatemala (12%, 19%, 7% and 4%, respectively).

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5   Significant differences identified throughout this analysis were found through z-tests at the 0.05 level of significance.

6   Amnistía Internacional (2021): La excusa perfecta: Autoridades de Mesoamérica aprovechan el COVID-19 para frenar la migración.
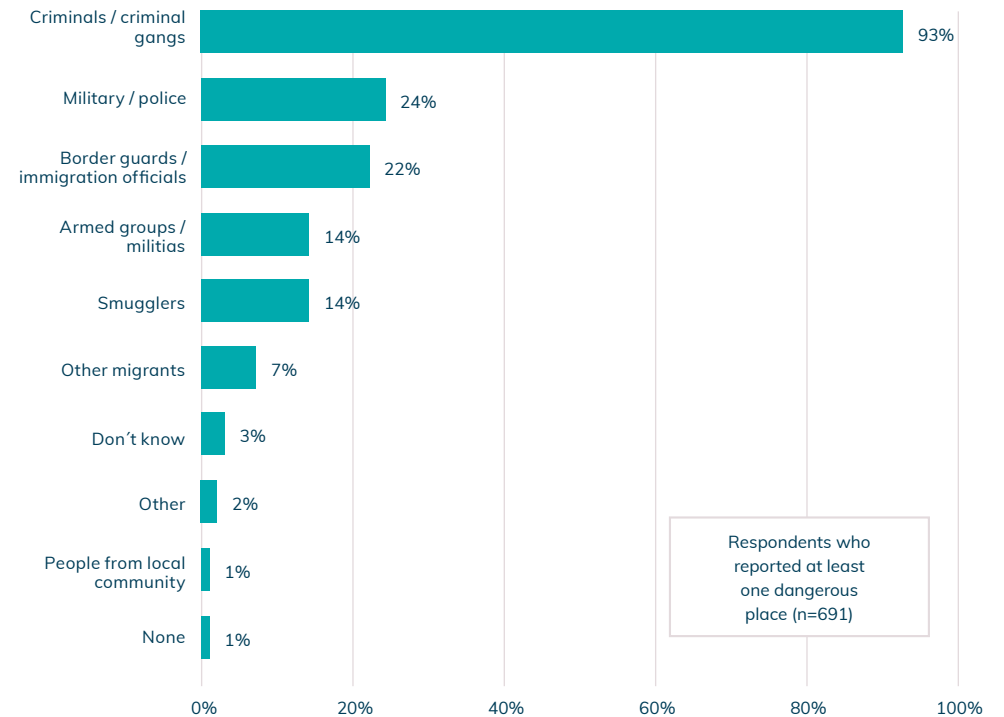
7   El Financiero (2021): Países piden prueba COVID a migrantes centroamericanos que saldrán en caravana hacia EU

In Mexico, drug cartels and other criminal groups directly target refugees and migrants to kidnap them and extort money from their family, telling them to pay a ransom to free their relatives.[8] Between January and October 2021, the organization Human Rights First tracked 7,647 incidents of kidnapping, sexual assault, and other violent attacks against asylum seekers and migrants who were staying in Mexico after being expelled from the US under Title 42.[9]

Criminal gangs perceived to be the main perpetrators of abuse, followed by public officials

The perceived perpetrators of abuses were most frequently criminal gangs (93%), followed by military or police (24%), immigration officials (22%), armed groups or militias (14%) and smugglers (14%) (see Figure 5). Criminal gangs were reported as perpetrators of abuse in each country of transit, while armed groups were mainly reported in Mexico (68% of all mentions). The prevalence of criminal gangs as perpetrators of protection abuses highlights the importance of security management in the country (which is obviously also and foremost an issue for Mexican citizens and citizens of other transit countries), as well as the specific importance of accountability for public officials, particularly those involved in border management and immigration control.

Figure 5. Who were likely to be perpetrating such incidents?

Criminals / criminal gangs	93%
Military / police	24%
Border guards / immigration officials	22%
Armed groups / militias	14%
Smugglers	14%
Other migrants	7%
Don´t know	3%
Other	2%
People from local community	1%
None	1%

Respondents who reported at least one dangerous place (n=691)

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

"I do not recommend migrating. Don't travel with children. I have seen abuses by immigration officers and there are too many robberies. There are many detentions by immigration guards in Mexico, they don't respect human rights. There are also a lot of risks with criminal gangs".
38 year old man in Tapachula, Mexico.

8   NBC News (2021): Migrants returned to Mexico describe horror of kidnappings, torture, rape
9   Human Right First (2021): "Illegal and Inhumane": Biden Administration Continues Embrace of Trump Title 42 Policy as Attacks on People Seeking Refuge Mount

4Mi data collection

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 and the protection risks for refugees and migrants on the move. 4Mi field enumerators are currently collecting data through direct interviews with refugees and migrants in West Africa, East Africa, North Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe.

Note that the sampling approach means that the findings derived from the surveyed sample provide rich insights, but the figures cannot be used to make inferences about the total population. See more 4Mi analysis and details on methodology at www.mixedmigration.org/4mi