

UNDETECTED: Sexual
Exploitation of Migrant
Children during the
COVID-19 Pandemic

INTRODUCTION

This study was designed by Cynthia Moreno, MSW, Norma Negrete (ECPAT México), and Maria Eugenia Villareal (ECPAT Guatemala) and the report was written by Cynthia Moreno, MSW. The survey was administered in Mexico by Fernando Viveros of ECPAT-México, and in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras by the staff of ECPAT Guatemala. Ricardo Aguilar, Joelle Besch, Jose Davila IV, and Lillie Horton of Yale University’s Jackson Institute of Global Affairs conducted data analysis, interviewed U.S.-based service providers, and contributed to the writing of this report. Editorial oversight was provided by the staff of ECPAT-USA, ECPAT México, ECPAT Guatemala, and ECPAT-USA interns Joelle Besch and Sophie Foster.

We are extremely grateful to the 164 informants who took the time to answer survey questions and to the 10 immigration service providers and advocates interviewed by the Jackson Institute student researchers. We are also indebted to the subject matter experts who shared critical insights as part of the Jackson Institute Capstone course, read the draft study, and provided substantive content.

This research study and report were generously underwritten by the Oak Foundation Children First Fund, a fund of Tides Foundation.

ABOUT ECPAT

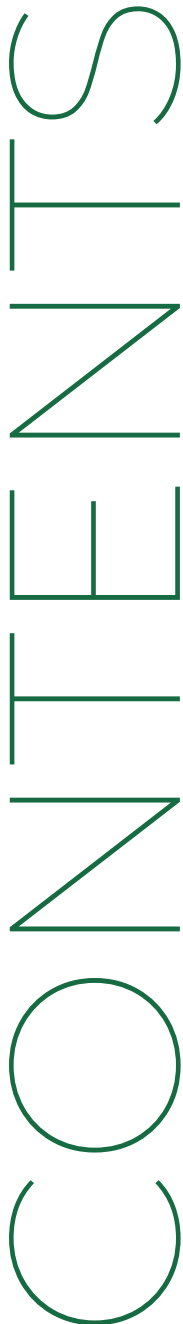
ECPAT International is currently comprised of 122 ECPAT members in 104 countries across all regions with one common mission: to eliminate the sexual exploitation and trafficking of children around the world.

ECPAT-USA is the leading anti-child trafficking organization in the United States seeking to end the commercial sexual exploitation of children through awareness, advocacy, policy, and legislation.

ECPAT México was founded 28 years ago as a non-profit organization by a team of professionals from different areas of knowledge and specialization. From the onset, the team was committed to preventing the sexual exploitation of children through advocacy, awareness-raising, research, and prevention initiatives.

ECPAT-Guatemala, operating for 22 years, coordinates with government, nonprofits, and international organizations with the aim of contributing to the elimination of gender violence, human trafficking, and commercial exploitation through training, research, consulting, and helping to coordinate efforts amongst stakeholders.

Table of Contents



Executive Summary	04
Terminology	05
Introduction	07
Methodology	08
Limitations	08
Literature Review	10
Pre-Pandemic Baseline Trends	10
Trafficking in Migration: Exacerbating Factors	11
Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic	13
Trends in U.S. Humanitarian Aid to Mexico and NCA Countries Leading up to and at the Onset of the COVID- 19 Pandemic	15
Results & Analysis	16
Area 1: Children’s Vulnerabilities	16
Area 2: COVID-19’s Impact on Access to Critical Items	19
Area 3: COVID-19’s Response & Child Migration	21
Area 4: COVID-19’s Impact on Online and Offline Sexual Exploitation of Children	22
Conclusion	34
Recommendations	35
References	39

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant children from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Specifically, this study seeks to understand whether COVID-19 was a factor in child migration from these countries to the United States and whether it caused an increase in child sexual exploitation and trafficking. The objective was to obtain data that would help inform U.S. policymakers while they implement foreign aid to the regions, particularly as those aid allocations impact child protection strategies.

Supported by the Oak Foundation Children First Fund, a fund of Tides Foundation, this study was conducted locally, both in person and remotely, with the partnership of leading child protection organizations ECPAT-USA, ECPAT México, and ECPAT Guatemala. This study used a mixed-method research approach and focused on four areas relating to the impact of COVID-19: (1) children's vulnerabilities, (2) access to critical items, (3) migration patterns, and (4) online/offline sexual exploitation of children. ECPAT México and ECPAT Guatemala administered the survey to 164 professionals working with vulnerable and migrating children, including those who have experienced violence or sexual exploitation. The respondents represented at least 62 government agencies, 30 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO's), six shelters, and six international organizations. The data collected was analyzed and compiled into this report by ECPAT-USA and student researchers at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs. Additionally, the Yale student researchers interviewed service providers and advocates based in San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Mexico, who work with Central American and Mexican migrants entering or seeking entry into the United States.

Key Findings:

1. Respondents noted the forms of violence most affecting children currently receiving services in the countries of interest are physical abuse and domestic violence.
2. Respondents reported that migrants' access to basic resources such as steady employment, in-person schooling, and healthcare was limited due to the pandemic.
3. The majority of respondents in each country believed their country's COVID-19 pandemic response and socioeconomic conditions exacerbated child migration and trafficking.
4. While half of the respondents indicated the sexual exploitation of children increased during the pandemic, almost 44% did not know whether or not there had been an impact, potentially revealing a pervasive lack of knowledge and screening for such abuse.
5. Service providers who assist migrant children and their families in San Diego interviewed for this report do not routinely screen for trafficking indicators.
6. Political repression negatively impacted the administration of the survey in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador and prevented participation in Nicaragua.

TERMINOLOGY

Child

A “child” is defined as a person under the age of eighteen years (6 U.S. Code § 279).

Unaccompanied Child

An unaccompanied child is defined by U.S. law as someone who enters the United States under 18 years old, without lawful status, and without an accompanying parent or legal guardian (6 U.S. Code § 279).

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Civil society organizations work within “the arena outside the family, the state, and the market, which is created by individual and collective actions, organizations, and institutions to advance shared interests” (VanDyck, 2017, p. 1).

Extortion

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “extortion consists of obtaining property from another through the wrongful use of actual or threatened force, violence or fear” (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2018).

Family Separation

Family separation refers to the dispersal of family members in a child’s home country, often due to parental migration. This term does not refer to the U.S. government’s separation of families at the U.S.-Mexico border or upon arrival in the United States.

Human Trafficking

Under the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000), human trafficking in persons refers to “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.”¹

Migration

Migration is defined as temporary or permanent relocation of residence either within or between countries.

¹ The United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children are commonly referred to as the “Palermo Protocol.” Although there are national definitions of human trafficking in each of the countries studied for this report, the Palermo Protocol was used as a universal definition for the purposes of the survey.

Northern Central America (NCA)

Northern Central America refers to Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. NCA is also referred to as the “Northern Triangle” of Central America.

Online Harms

Online harms refer to abuse that is perpetrated through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), including social media. While children in migration may be affected by online harms such as cyberbullying and the dissemination of child sex exploitation material (including live streaming), this paper primarily focuses on the spread of false and misleading information, online grooming, and online recruitment. Each of these harms was noted by survey respondents as affecting children in migration and is defined in detail below.

False and Misleading Information

Survey respondents identified numerous forms of false or misleading information as harmful to the safety of children in migration. These include false promises of employment, false promises of safe passage to the United States, misinformation about U.S. immigration policy, and misleading characterizations of conditions in destination countries (Alvarez, 2021; Garcia, 2021.) Respondents also noted the use of false online identities by traffickers and gang members who intend to groom or recruit children.

Grooming (online/offline) for Sexual Exploitation

According to the Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, “In the context of child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse, ‘grooming’ is the short name for the solicitation of children for sexual purposes. ‘Grooming/online grooming’ refers to the process of establishing/building a relationship with a child either in person or through the use of the Internet or other digital technologies to facilitate either online or offline sexual contact with that person” (p. 51).

Online Recruitment (for Gang Membership and Labor Exploitation)

Online recruitment includes the advertising of fraudulent job offers and direct mobile communication with prospective victims to facilitate online or offline gang membership or labor exploitation.

Poverty

The United Nations (UN) defines poverty as “more than the lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods. Its manifestations include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion, as well as the lack of participation in decision-making” (United Nations, Ending Poverty). With global price differences taken into account, 85% of the global population lives on less than \$30 per day, and two-thirds live on less than \$10 per day. For this paper, the children whom the respondents discuss are among the latter (Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2013).

Extreme Poverty

A person who lives on less than 1.90 international dollars (int.-\$) per day is considered to be in extreme poverty (The World Bank, 2022).

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project was to collect information on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted child migration and vulnerability to child sexual exploitation and trafficking in Mexico and Northern Central America. The data provided is open-sourced to aid NGOs, governments, international organizations, and community agencies in their advocacy, programming, and policy development efforts.

Additionally, the study sought to collect data to help inform Congress and the U.S. administration as they direct COVID-19 assistance and re-evaluate foreign aid through the appropriations process. The U.S. federal government has a significant opportunity to strengthen and modernize existing public health protocols not only for the COVID-19 pandemic but also for the prevention of child sex trafficking and exploitation. While this study revealed some perennial policy issues, it also uncovered the urgent need for more transparency and collaboration between both civil society and government entities. Recommendations provided in this report draw upon pre-existing conditions and executive orders enacted during the Trump administration. More recently, the Biden administration unveiled a “five pillar strategy” to address the root causes of migration in Central America. Areas of this strategy would directly help to reestablish funding and programs initially cut in 2019. The recommendations contained in this report draw upon the Biden administration’s current initiatives with an overarching goal of improving child protection.

The research study was conducted in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador by regional members of the ECPAT network. ECPAT México and ECPAT Guatemala helped to draft and implement the survey tool at the local level, both in person and remotely, while also providing feedback on the survey results and report findings. ECPAT México’s research was conducted in Mexico, and ECPAT Guatemala surveyed contacts in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The survey was sent to professionals with experience serving migrant children with vulnerabilities and their families and working in the prevention, intervention, or investigation of the sexual exploitation of children. The respondents for this study represented at least 62 government agencies, 30 NGOs, six shelters, and six international organizations.

This study used a mixed-method research approach with a total of 38 optional survey questions. Respondents had the choice to answer each question, leave a question blank, or write “N/A” (not applicable). There were a total of 164 respondents from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador with the following breakdown:

- **Mexico: 80 respondents**
- **Guatemala: 50 respondents**
- **Honduras: 22 respondents**
- **El Salvador: 12 respondents**

Due to the inclusion of optional questions, some findings were based on a smaller number of responses. The survey was written and conducted in Spanish and translated to English during analysis.

The survey process began on September 23, 2021, and ended on November 30, 2021. To determine which issues affected existing vulnerabilities, the survey asked about the forms of violence most prominent among children receiving services. Questions then focused on children with vulnerabilities who were considering or had already begun migrating to other countries. The instrument sought to determine the magnitude of online/offline sexual exploitation of children based on each country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the study focused on four areas: (1) Children's vulnerabilities, (2) COVID-19's impact on access, (3) COVID-19 response and child migration, and (4) COVID-19's impact on online/offline sexual exploitation of children.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected by ECPAT México, ECPAT Guatemala, and local partners in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The 164 survey respondents were direct service providers who work in positions related to child migration, including government, public and private shelters, NGOs, human rights organizations, and international organizations. The 38 quantitative and qualitative questions were organized into three sections: vulnerabilities in origin countries, migration, and sexual exploitation.

The quantitative questions had a finite number of fixed answers from which respondents could choose. The results for these questions were first standardized in terms of spacing, punctuation, and capitalization across identical responses. Next, responses were categorized by country, respondent institution type, and role. The number of respondents who answered "N/A" for each question is noted and included in the findings, where relevant.

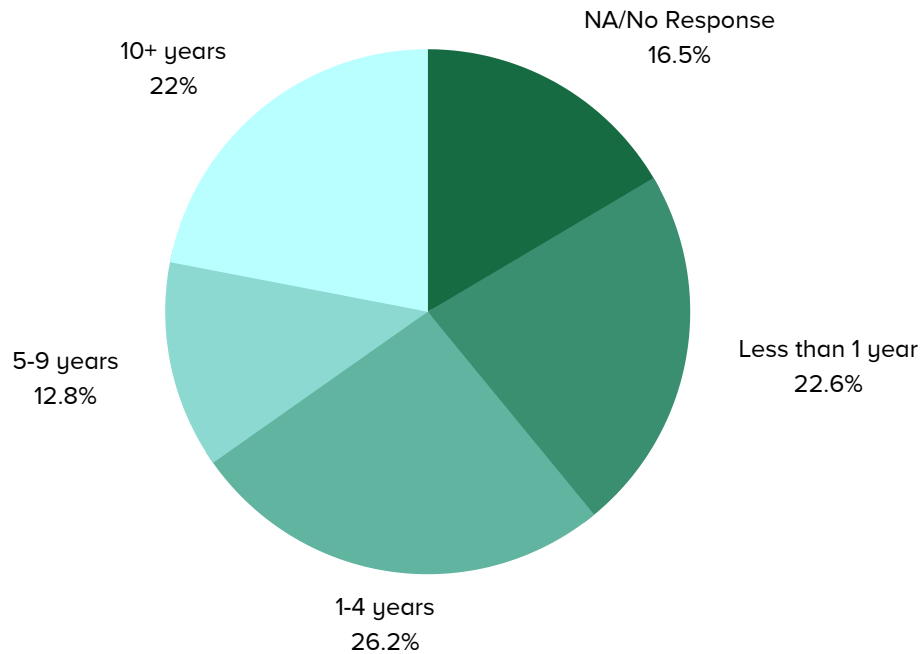
The qualitative questions asked for free-form short-answer responses. For the qualitative short answers, analysis proceeded in three phases: creating general descriptive categories of information, narrowing these into specific categories related to this study's four key research areas, and looking for explicit connections between data points and conceptual ideas. Some of the quantitative questions offered the option to add qualitative comments. In these instances, the quantitative data and qualitative responses were analyzed separately. A team of undergraduate seniors at Yale University's Jackson Institute for Global Affairs completed a preliminary analysis of the data for this project. They also conducted in-person, qualitative interviews with direct service providers and advocates based in San Diego, California, and Tijuana, Mexico, who work with migrant children and their families from NCA countries and Mexico.

LIMITATIONS

Because direct interviews with migrant children were not possible given concerns about child safeguarding protocols and confidentiality, this study is drawn from a limited, non-random sample of individuals with varying levels of experience working with vulnerable and migrant children from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

This limitation is further compounded by the finding that the qualifications of respondents are, at best, highly variable. The individuals interviewed were selected based on their identification as experts in their field; however, almost half of the responses indicated less than four years of experience, with a significant percentage failing to answer at all, raising concerns about training and qualifications to identify and assist at-risk children.

How many years of experience do you have working with migrant children?



A scarcity of reporting and information on the trafficking and sexual exploitation of child migrants was a dominant trend throughout the survey results. The literature confirms a significant lack of training among Mexican and NCA officials and service providers, as well as inadequate protocols for the identification of trafficked and sexually exploited children. In particular, victim referrals from first responders in Mexico remain largely “ad hoc,” with procedures that “varied from state to state” (Trafficking in Persons [TIP] Report: Mexico, 2022). In Guatemala, judicial officials “had an inadequate understanding of the elements and indicators of trafficking crimes,” in part due to a lack of sufficient training and resources (TIP Report: Guatemala, 2022). In El Salvador, police, immigration agents, and first responders “lacked sufficient training to properly identify, interact with, and protect victims” (TIP Report: El Salvador, 2022). Finally, Honduran officials did not systematically screen for trafficking indicators among returned migrants (TIP Report: Honduras, 2021).²

The challenges of identifying trafficking indicators among migrant youth are not limited to Mexico and NCA countries. While NGO staff working with migrants on the U.S. side of the border have relatively greater access to resources, interviews with service providers and advocates in the region underscored the challenge of identification. U.S.-based advocates shared anecdotal accounts suggesting that policies

² Although the most recent TIP report noted the recent inclusion of screening protocols, the Honduran government did not indicate whether officials identified any trafficking victims among returning migrants during the year. (TIP Report: Honduras, 2022)

such as the public health emergency order “Title 42” in response to COVID-19 and the 2019 Migrant Protection Protocols for asylum seekers arriving by land (known as the “Remain in Mexico” program) have exacerbated trafficking along the U.S.-Mexico border. (Interview, October 2021).³ However, multiple service providers in the region indicated that they did not screen for trafficking or sexual exploitation among migrant children present in the United States (Interview, October 2021).

These findings are also limited by pressures faced by NGOs in NCA countries and Mexico. The research team originally planned to include Nicaragua, but as Human Rights Watch reported, the Nicaraguan government “employed selective repression” against civil society in a 2021 crackdown that coincided with the survey period (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Consequently, the tense political climate was unsafe for ECPAT researchers to conduct the survey in Nicaragua.

Political repression also constrained the administration of the survey in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Governmental pressure on NGOs appears to have inhibited their participation and resulted in disproportionately higher participation by public officials. This issue was particularly severe in El Salvador, where space for civil society’s free expression has been constricted since the 2021 presidential election (Aleman & Sherman, 2021; Transparency International, 2021). As a result, researchers in El Salvador were unable to survey as many civil society members as originally planned, leading to a dataset skewed toward public officials. The impact of this bias is unclear, however, among the 12 respondents in El Salvador, there was not a significant difference between the answers from public officials and NGO workers.

These political, economic, and social factors, combined with the lack of a pre-COVID baseline survey, limit the ability to accurately calculate the scope of trafficking crimes before and during the pandemic. Even so, these novel survey results are an important first step toward filling the data gap on these issues. A review of existing literature can help to construct pre-pandemic baseline conditions in the surveyed regions and address existing gaps in information.

Literature Review

PRE-PANDEMIC BASELINE TRENDS

Examining baseline conditions for children in NCA countries and Mexico prior to the pandemic contextualizes the survey results and illuminates the deepening challenges facing child protection efforts in the region. Prior to the pandemic, children in NCA countries and Mexico faced overlapping vulnerability factors that impeded healthy child development, including poverty and lack of educational attainment.

In 2021, Save the Children published the End of Childhood Index using pre-pandemic data to rank countries based on eight indicators, including protection of the childhood experience (Geoghegan, 2021).

³ On February 2, 2021, the CDC issued a notice temporarily exempting unaccompanied children from expulsion. Following a “reassessment” of public health protocols, on July 16, 2021, the CDC again formalized this exemption for unaccompanied children. On August 2, 2021, the CDC replaced the October 2020 order with a new order continuing Title 42 expulsions while exempting unaccompanied children. On March 12, 2022, the CDC formally terminated Title 42 for unaccompanied children in response to a court order overturning the exemption. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/guide-title-42-expulsions-border>

This index provides useful information and a baseline for the health and safety of children in the four countries of interest before the pandemic. The countries of interest ranked 97th to the 163rd (out of 180 countries) in assessing rates of children missing out on their childhood, noting that children in these countries often endure “intensified poverty, increased hunger, reduced health care and schooling, and the diminished presence of caring, healthy adults in their lives” (Geoghegan, 2021). More specifically, Mexico (ranked 97th) and El Salvador (ranked 134th) both had relatively high rates of teen birth and childhood exposure to extreme violence (Geoghegan, 2021). Honduras (ranked 147th) had high rates of violence, childhood malnourishment, and primary and secondary school dropouts (Geoghegan, 2021). Finally, Guatemala (ranked 163rd) had high rates of teen birth, malnutrition, and child labor (Geoghegan, 2021). Guatemalan students consistently attained fewer years of education than minimally expected prior to the pandemic, with less than 40.92% completing upper secondary education (Jaramillo, 2020, p. 7). Low educational attainment is inextricable from low socioeconomic status, residence in rural areas, and Indigeneity. Educational inequities along these lines are also exemplified in Mexico (Sánchez-Cruz et al., 2021). This index indicates a childhood “free from fear, safe from violence, protected from abuse and exploitation” contrasts with the childhood that many experiences, especially in NCA countries (Geoghegan, 2021).

Trafficking in Migration: Exacerbating Factors

Beyond raising concerns about the negative impact on childhood, the rankings also point to specific risk factors associated with both trafficking and migration.

Lack of Access to Basic Resources

According to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), economic pressure is one of the most significant trafficking risk factors, making people who lack basic resources more susceptible to sex or labor trafficking during migration (Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2020). Significant economic recessions correlate to greater trafficking flows, according to the UNODC (Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2020). A number of factors help explain this correlation, including that more individuals fall beneath the poverty line and fewer protective resources are available, making more people at risk of migrating and being trafficked. For example, a UNICEF technical note on children in monetary poor households and COVID-19 stated that, prior to the pandemic, an estimated 38.2% of children from Latin America and the Caribbean lived in monetarily poor families (2020, p. 3). In addition, countries with a lower GDP per capita typically detect more children than adults among detected victims of sexual exploitation (Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2020).

Migrants’ lack of access to basic resources makes them increasingly more susceptible to exploitation. These insufficient resources include essential needs such as food, money, healthcare, secure housing, migration information, education, and a support network (David et al., 2019). Traffickers exploit these vulnerabilities to gain access to, and the trust of, migrant populations. By threatening to remove migrants’ access to these basic resources, traffickers can compel migrants to remain in exploitative situations (David et al., 2019).

Lack of Oversight

In transit, the trafficking of child migrants is most likely to occur in locations of minimal oversight and limited access to basic necessities (David et al., 2019). As per the International Organization for

Migration (IOM) definition, minimal oversight refers to a lack of investigative, reporting, or protection mechanisms. Examples of spaces lacking oversight include irregular migration pathways, jobs hidden from public view (e.g., mining), private houses or businesses, and regions of sociopolitical upheaval (David et al., 2019). This lack of oversight can be attributed to a combination of social variables that discourage reporting, such as a climate of discrimination against migrants, indigenous populations, impoverished populations, and women. Inadequate oversight beyond migrant discrimination also stems from gaps in legal and enforcement protections for migrants, including investigative and judicial rights and processes (David et al., 2019). A lack of migrant protection measures makes the trafficking of migrants especially lucrative for criminal organizations for whom the financial gain outweighs the potential danger of being caught. This helps explain why eastern Mexico's absence of oversight contributes to the prevalence of drug cartels and independent trafficking rings collaborating for mutual gain (Cabrera, 2017).

A lack of oversight and basic resources are factors that appear in the migration journey from NCA countries through Mexico towards the United States and converge in key locations, including shelters and border crossings. Although shelters seek to provide safe housing and access to reliable resources for migrants, ironically there are reports of trafficking operations that have targeted shelters to exploit migrants (Cabrera, 2017). Similarly, once migrants arrive at a border, their need to hide from authorities increases, as does their likelihood of relying on smugglers or other offers for financial and migration assistance, ultimately increasing their susceptibility to extortion and exploitation. Compounding the problem is the reality that "there are disincentives for victims to self-identify such as the threat of criminalization for offenses committed while exploited (David et al., 2019)." In addition, migrant support networks tend to be weak at border crossings, and there is a desensitization to criminal activity due to a high prevalence of illegal trading that depresses reporting (David et al., 2019). When migrants are stalled at the border, as has been the case with the US-Mexico border under the COVID-19 U.S. immigration policy, the aggregation of people with vulnerabilities attracts organized crime, including trafficking (David et al., 2019). Insufficient protections and weakened systems in spaces where help is sought like shelters and border crossings compound the obstacles faced by trafficking victims during crises.

Prior History of Abuse & Violence

Studies have linked a prior history of abuse with a higher likelihood of repeat exploitation, which could be due to victim conditioning, lack of support resources, alternative employment, and safe housing (David et al., 2019). Similarly, an unstable family history increases a child's likelihood of both migrating and being trafficked. Domestic violence and other forms of abuse can be a migration push or pull factor, either escaping abuse or finding better living conditions and employment. The lack of resources, employment, and safe housing options for children with unstable family situations exacerbates their risk of sexual exploitation during migration (Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2020). Other children may migrate to find work or educational opportunities, sometimes out of familial pressure. For those child migrants who do have support networks – either in person or online – their connections can turn exploitative. Due to migrants' high degree of vulnerability, even relatives and friends of a child migrant may exploit them for sex or labor (David et al., 2019). Beyond intrafamilial abuse, according to a 2019 study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), socially organized violence in a child's home country – for example, threats from local armed gangs – can lead migrants to choose irregular routes to avoid detection, since criminal organizations have been known to follow targets as they migrate north (David et al., 2019).

Ineffective Legal Mechanisms and Corruption

Mechanisms for reporting, investigating, and prosecuting trafficking crimes are another important component in combating sexual exploitation; however, NCA countries and Mexico have unreliable prosecutorial policies, especially when it comes to migrant populations. The 2022 TIP Report by the U.S. Department of State (DOS) found that Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador all need to strengthen their victim identification and referral systems to better combat trafficking. Of note, the 2022 TIP report highlighted as an area of “special interest” the role of political corruption in trafficking crimes, including complicity, collusion, and participation,” which was also referenced for each of the countries reviewed in this study. The report’s call for strengthened reporting mechanisms and anti-corruption campaigns in the face of low victim identification rates underscores the importance of law enforcement reliability in combating trafficking. In addition to government outreach and transparency, an investigative and prosecutorial effort is also necessary to signal to the population that they can trust governments enough to report trafficking and sexual exploitation.

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Children’s vulnerability to trafficking and migration deepened during the pandemic due to the above exacerbating factors.

The United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and Save the Children reported that the number of children globally living in multidimensional poverty soared to 1.2 billion since the onset of the pandemic, an increase of 15% over early 2020 (UNICEF, 2020). Further, they noted that “the COVID-19 crisis has changed the usual models of trafficking and exploitation, according to the report, and criminal groups dedicated to sexual exploitation have been very quick to adapt their ways of working, by escalating the use of online communication and exploitation in homes. Crises tend to fuel impunity, the breakdown of law and order and the destruction of communities, and foster the conditions in which trafficking and other forms of exploitation flourish, often past the point at which the crisis ceases” (UNICEF, 2020). A 2021 UN Special Rapporteur found that “new forms of sexual exploitation and abuse both online and offline, have been surging as a consequence of COVID-19 lockdowns” (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021). Further, the report indicated the economic, political, and social upheavals due to the pandemic hurt humanitarian efforts and child exploitation prevention strategies (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021). A Congressional Research Report on Latin America and the Caribbean estimated that 22 million people were pushed into poverty due to the pandemic (Sullivan & Meyer, 2022). A particularly concerning consequence of pandemic-related economic setbacks is the exacerbation of socioeconomic inequities that nourish the conditions for child labor and labor exploitation. Between 109,000 and 326,000 children in Latin America and the Caribbean are expected to enter the labor market as a result of pandemic-related poverty (Castelló et al., 2019). The pandemic has also given rise to online commercial sexual exploitation of children (IOM, 2017). At the same time, children lost an essential support network that could have detected and addressed such exploitation: schools.

Less than two months after the global shutdown, 1.3 billion students, including 160 million in Latin America and the Caribbean, lost access to in-person schooling. Even after a year of the pandemic, Latin America and the Caribbean had the highest number of children missing in-person schooling of any region in the world, setting it on track to lose \$1.7 trillion in earnings due to long-term educational setbacks. Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador all had school closures that lasted longer than 41 weeks.

UNICEF has described school closures and isolation as exacerbating the challenges faced by children who suffer from violence at home, as they are “cut off from teachers, social service workers, and other key forms of support” while experiencing additional “stress and stigma” from the economic impacts of the pandemic (Protecting the most vulnerable children, 2020).

The UNODC notes that the “effects of the pandemic on children have been far-reaching, with children trafficked for sexual exploitation, labor, forced marriage, forced begging and forced criminality (Chatzis et al., 2021, p. 30).” In addition, online sexual exploitation of girls has “significantly increased” since the start of the pandemic (Chatzis et al., 2021, p. 30). Officials’ capacity for identifying, investigating, and prosecuting trafficking crimes has concurrently been affected. The U.S. TIP report for 2021 notes that El Salvador and Honduras had identified fewer victims in 2020 than the year before, while staff shortages in Mexico and Guatemala “hampered efforts to investigate new cases and prosecute pending cases” (p. 389). The UNODC reports that the pandemic has “resulted in a reduced capacity and reduced resources of law enforcement authorities to respond to reported trafficking in persons cases (Chatzis et al., 2021, p. 48). Travel restrictions and lack of normal labor inspections have presented additional challenges for law enforcement in gathering evidence of trafficking, while investigations and prosecutions have been delayed (Chatzis et al., 2021, p. 48). At the same time, traffickers have “been able to continue to conduct their normal activities” and capitalize on the “chaotic situation created by the pandemic” (Chatzis et al., 2021, p. 48).

Against this backdrop, large numbers of migrants, including an increasing number of unaccompanied minors, began arriving at the US-Mexico border in April of 2020 (Fox & Spagat, 2021). U.S. Customs and Border Protection recorded 146,925 Southwest Land Border encounters with unaccompanied children and 479,728 individuals in a family unit during fiscal year 2021 (FY21), causing overcapacity problems in unaccompanied child migrant facilities in the U.S. (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2022; Shear et al., 2021). Encounters have only increased, reaching 115,580 unaccompanied minors and 402,703 individuals in a family unit as of June FY 2022, compared with 94,807 unaccompanied minors and 245,210 individuals in a family unit from the same time period in FY21 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2022). Although unaccompanied children are technically exempt from Title 42 immigration restrictions, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) public health rule that allows immigration authorities to deny admission to the U.S. at ports of entry, civil society organizations in Tijuana and San Diego disclosed in interviews that U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) has, indeed, turned some child migrants away at the border (Border Angels of San Diego, personal interview, October 21, 2021; Al Otro Lado, personal interview, October 21, 2021). Together with the 2019 Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) requiring asylum applicants arriving by land along the U.S.-Mexico to “remain in Mexico” while their claim is pending, these policies dramatically increased the number of displaced migrants at the border and the size of border encampments (Fox & Spagat, 2021). Unaccompanied minors living among strangers in shelters and camps are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, especially given anecdotal evidence from migrant rights organizations of organized criminal activity and labor trafficking within the camps (Border Angels of San Diego, personal interview, October 21, 2021; Taladrid, 2022; Human Rights Watch on Mexico, 2021).⁴

⁴ The student researchers noted during a visit to a community center serving migrant families permitted to enter the United States, Russian-language signs supplemented Spanish. The service provider indicated that most new arrivals were from Ukraine who, despite entering by land through Mexico, were unimpeded by MPP or Title 42 restrictions. A dual system emerged, in which Russian and Ukrainian speakers gained entry and access to services, while Spanish and indigenous language speakers languished in Mexican tent encampments. ~ Biden administration White House press release

Trends in U.S. Humanitarian Aid to Mexico and NCA Countries Leading up to and at the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic

NCA countries were significantly impacted by the Trump administration's freeze on new funding to the Department of State (DOS) and the U.S. Agency on International Development (USAID) in March of 2019. Suspended funding lasted over a 14-month period, subsequently moving \$396 million (85%) of the fiscal year 2018 priority spending to other projects.

These cuts were implemented to pressure NCA countries and Mexico to reassess immigration policies to reduce the number of migrants traveling to the U.S. However, this executive decision negatively impacted countries in these regions, complicating pre-existing conditions and exacerbating the impacts of COVID-19. While the administration reinstated \$258 million in foreign assistance in April 2020, it should still be noted that assistance fell by nearly one-third from Obama administration levels (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that both DOS and USAID experienced adverse implications in terms of program implementation, including delayed timeframes, decreased frequency, reduced quality, and fewer services provided during the funding suspension. According to the report, the stall in funds affected 65 of DOS's 168 projects and 92 of USAID's 119 critical programs, as well as posed significant challenges for both the agencies and personnel requiring support in the countries of origin (GAO, 2021).

Programs that faced termination or restructuring due to the U.S. suspension of funds had been addressing a range of long-standing concerns, including, but not limited to, combating domestic violence and gender-based violence, food and housing insecurity, and education. Data collected from respondents highlight the impact of foreign aid cuts on increased vulnerabilities inflicted on people in countries of origin (Welsh, 2021).

Alternatively, in February of 2021, President Biden pledged to further invest \$4 billion in funding to address the root causes of migration in Central America (Welsh, 2021). The administration's "five-pillar strategy" to address the causes of migration is as follows:

1. Addressing economic insecurity and inequality;
2. Combating corruption, strengthening democratic governance, and advancing the rule of law;
3. Promoting respect for human rights, labor rights, and free press;
4. Countering and preventing violence, extortion, and other crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs, trafficking networks, and other organized criminal organizations; and
5. Combating sexual, gender, and domestic violence.

"This Strategy identifies, prioritizes, and coordinates actions to improve security, governance, human rights, and economic conditions in the region. It integrates various U.S. government tools, including diplomacy, foreign assistance, public diplomacy, and sanctions."

Results and Analysis

Area 1: Children's Vulnerabilities

“
The government does not offer public policies to address the needs of their citizens, and they plunge them further into poverty.

~ Shelter Worker, Mexico

“
In many communities, child marriage has been normalized.

~ NGO Worker, Guatemala

“
Violence is often driven at the community level, specifically by maras and youth gangs.

~ NGO Worker, El Salvador

“
There is little access to basic services for the population most affected by social problems.

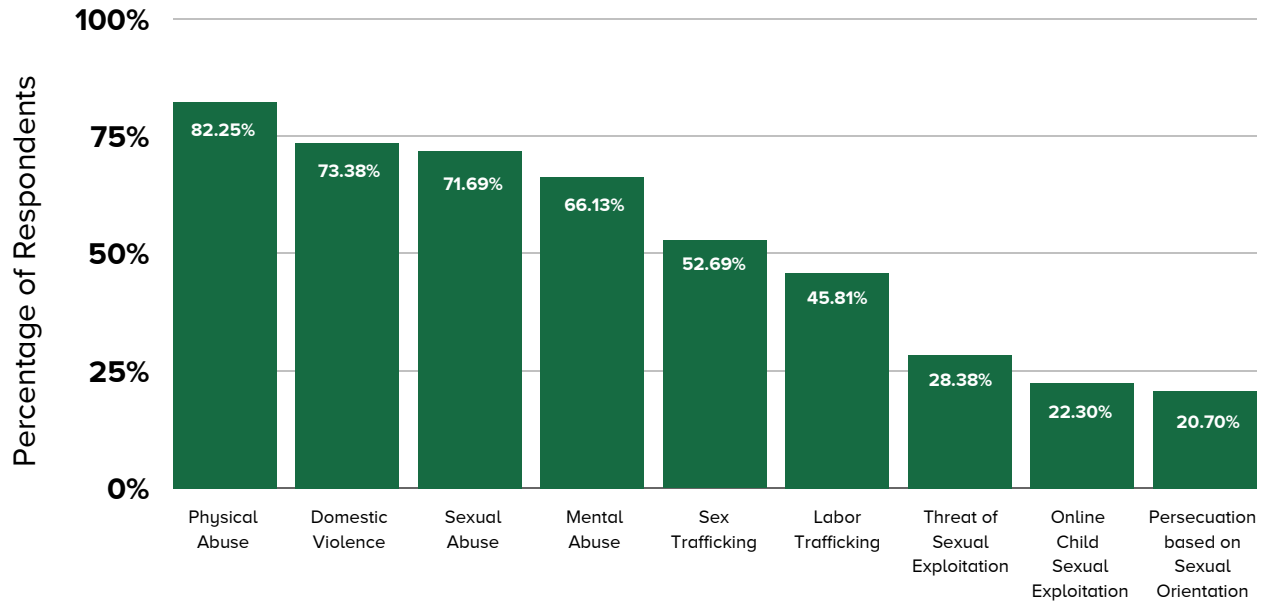
~ Government Official, Honduras

“
Organized crime has [...] taken advantage of the impoverishment of families and their need for income.

~ NGO Worker, Mexico

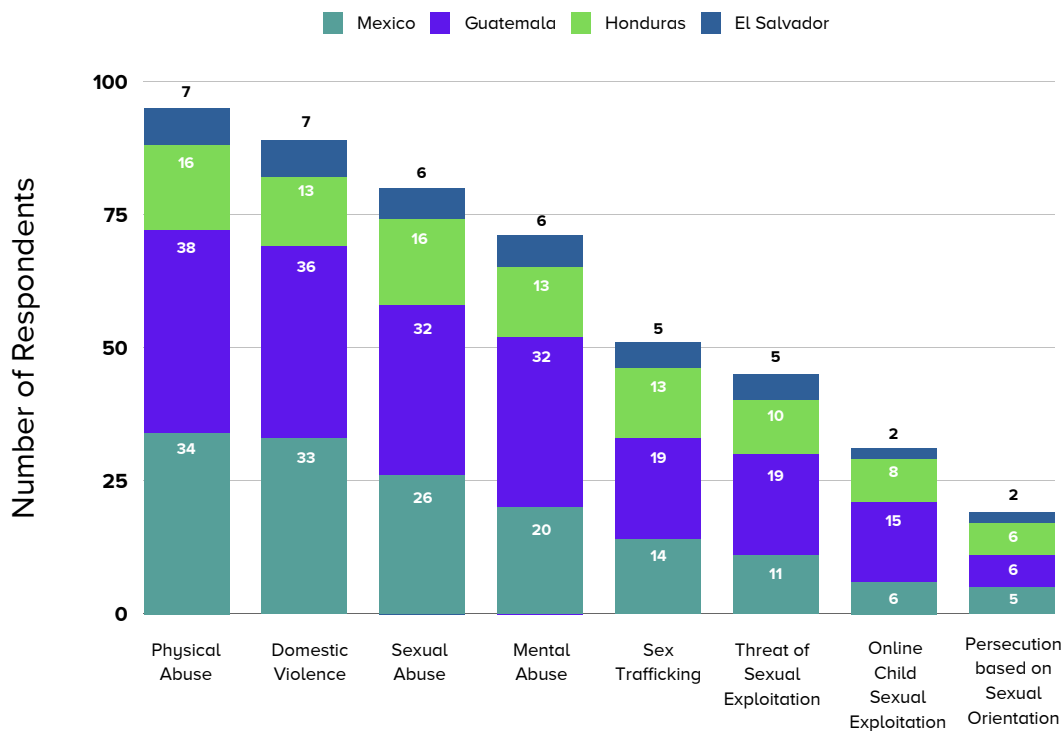
Questions in Area 1 of the survey asked respondents to identify various vulnerabilities of children currently receiving services. The survey questions sought to establish children's exposure to various forms of violence and access to basic necessities and resources. An aggregate of the four countries surveyed appears in the graph below, and country-specific details appear in the following paragraphs.

Have any of the children served by your organization been affected by the following issues and/or forms of violence?



A significant amount of children served experienced various forms of violence and abuse, including physical, domestic, sexual, and mental abuse, sex and labor trafficking, sexual exploitation, and sexual orientation and identity persecution. It is noteworthy to mention that most of the respondents from Guatemala (96%), Honduras (86%), and El Salvador (75%) addressed these questions, while only 53% of Mexican respondents answered.

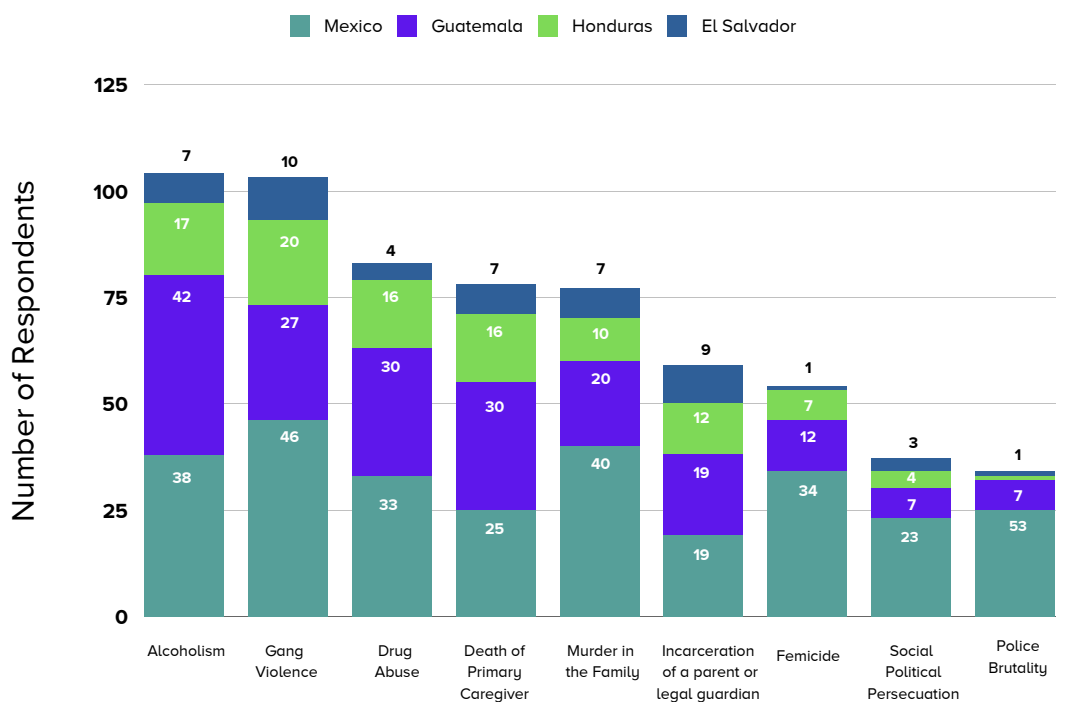
Have any of the children served by your organization been affected by the following issues and/or forms of violence?



In the survey, respondents also identified multiple forms of violence as a primary push factor for migration, as well as a risk factor for child trafficking. Most qualitative responses agreed that domestic violence increased during COVID-19 due to mobility restrictions, lack of access to protective services and resources, school closings, and unemployment, which collectively increased children’s time at home with their abuser.

Respondents were also asked to identify forms of substance abuse or violence that were most prevalent in children’s lives. The top three household issues for all four countries combined were alcoholism with 104 responses, gang violence with 103 responses, and drug abuse with 83 responses. While most respondents mentioned in their qualitative responses that organized crime increased, a few posited that it actually decreased because of pandemic-related mobility restrictions.

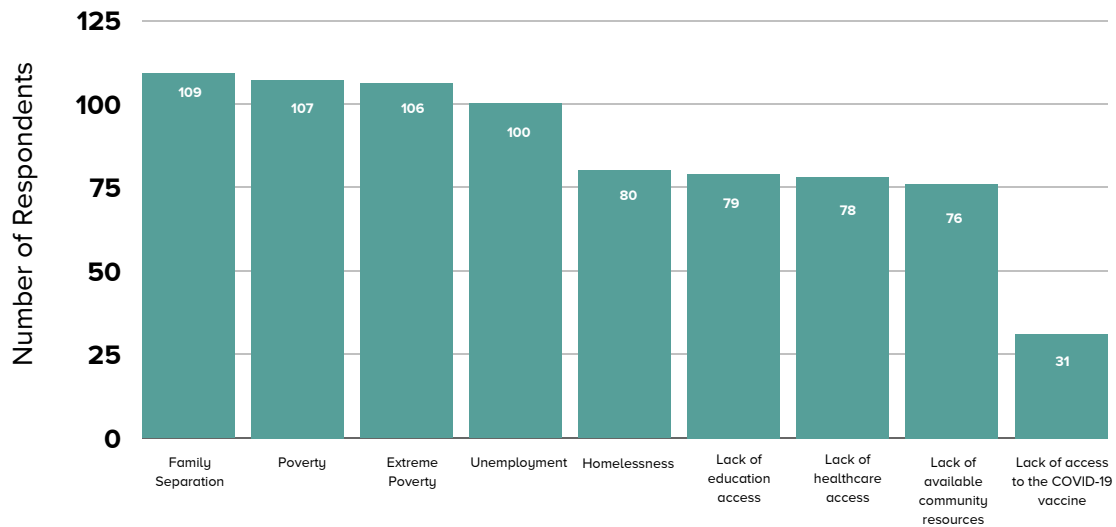
Have any of the children served by your organization been affected by the following, either directly or in their household?



Another question provided a view of socioeconomic conditions for the children served by respondents. The top three responses of which issues children face were family separation with 109 responses, poverty with 107 responses, extreme poverty with 106 responses, and unemployment with 100 responses.⁵ Responses regarding lacking government service provision, especially access to COVID-19 vaccines, were not the top responses of survey respondents as issues affecting the children under their care.

⁵ The survey drafters utilized the World Bank’s definitions for “poverty” and “extreme poverty” as included at the top of this report. However, it appears that respondents were not uniformly given this same definition prior to answering Question 16, so both answers are provided here.

Have any of the children currently served by your organization been affected by the following issues?



The data reveals that exposure to violence for children in Mexico and NCA countries is pervasive and systemic. Children commonly face significant physical, sexual, and mental abuse in addition to domestic violence. Approximately half of the respondents who answered this question identified sex and labor trafficking as impacting the children they served. Further, many of the children have dealt with very difficult issues either directly or within their homes, including gang violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, the death of a primary caregiver, femicide, and incarceration. Domestic violence, gang and cartel dangers and a lack of protection from the government reflect instabilities that create a lack of safety and security for children. Children were more vulnerable in Mexico and NCA countries, which face significant levels of violence and poverty, compounded by a lack of resources or services. These various forms of violence correspond with family separation, significant poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and a lack of access to resources, healthcare, and education. These socioeconomic factors were aggravated by the pandemic.

Area 2: COVID-19’s Impact on Access to Critical Items

“ [The lack of] biosafety measures, such as adequate equipment, make it impossible to carry out permanent monitoring in centers where migrant children are sheltered, including a shelter for victims of trafficking.

~ Public Official, El Salvador

“ The COVID outbreaks that occur mean that the spaces where children and adolescents are housed are closed, and it is not possible to follow up on their cases.

~ UN Worker, Mexico

"

[Due to] a lack of information about the pandemic and its effects on health, migrants are not aware of its impact and do not attend to health measures, thus putting the personnel who can attend to them or provide support at risk.

~ Independent Consultant, Guatemala

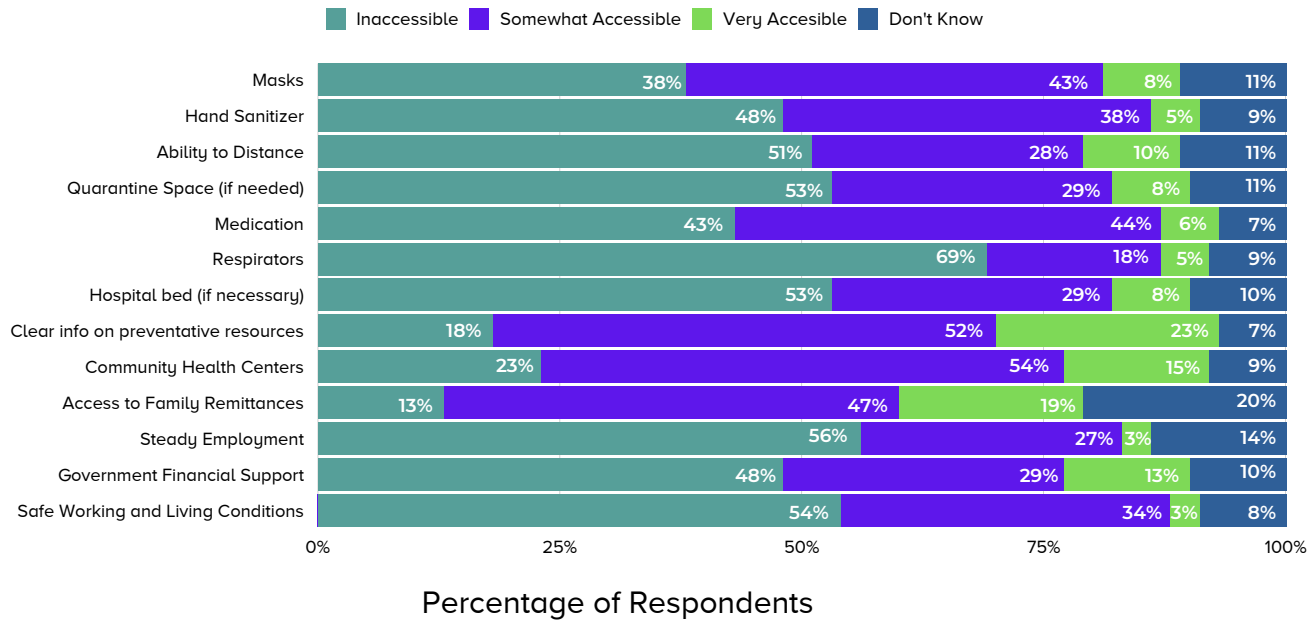
"

[There are] limited spaces to maintain distance in reception shelters for migrant children. [There is also] slowness in the [arrival] processes due to the need for rapid tests that the institutions do not have.

~ Public Official, Honduras

Respondents provided insight into the accessibility of critical items, basic needs, and safety measures for low-income communities in their respective countries or region during the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative responses below reflect the difficulties that the pandemic has created, including shutting down support centers due to infection, safety and exposure issues for service providers, a slowdown in processing, and challenges surrounding safe practices.

Did low-income communities in your country or region have access to the following items when the COVID-19 pandemic began?



Quantitative responses reveal that essential needs and supplies in low-income communities were not readily available at the start of the pandemic. Cumulatively, only 3% of respondents indicated that steady employment was “very accessible” and 3% indicated safe working and living conditions were “very accessible.” Respondents (74%) from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras reported that respirators were the item most inaccessible when the COVID-19 pandemic started. In addition, most respondents indicated that the following essential items needed to protect communities during the pandemic were also “inaccessible” or not “very accessible” to low-income communities at the onset of the pandemic: masks, hand sanitizer, ability to distance, quarantine space, and hospital beds.

In El Salvador, respondents indicated that the ability to socially distance was the most inaccessible when the pandemic began.

Respondents were also asked qualitative questions on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and families. Respondents from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador cited the following factors increased significantly:

- | <u>Mexico</u> | <u>Guatemala</u> | <u>Honduras</u> | <u>El Salvador</u> |
|---|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Loss of job • Lack of work opportunities • Corruption • Uncertainty • Violence • Lack of access to services | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Food crisis • Lack of resources and opportunities, • Negative economic Impact • Unemployment • Massive layoffs • Violence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment • Massive layoffs • Violence • Limited access to health services • Inability to pay for food and housing • Limited access to education • Massive layoffs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poverty • Loss of income • Lack of access to opportunities and resources • Violence • Massive layoffs. |

Area 3: COVID-19 Response & Child Migration

”

The pandemic is just one more factor that adds to the multiplicity of reasons to migrate.

~ NGO Worker, Mexico

”

Lack of opportunities in [Guatemala] forces entire families to migrate in order to obtain better possibilities.

~ Public Official, Guatemala

”

Some steps in the reception protocol for returned migrants have not been carried out due to the prevention of COVID-19. [...] They do not have the possibility of receiving medical consultations, filing complaints with the El Salvador police, or learning about job placement options, among others.

~ NGO Worker, El Salvador

”

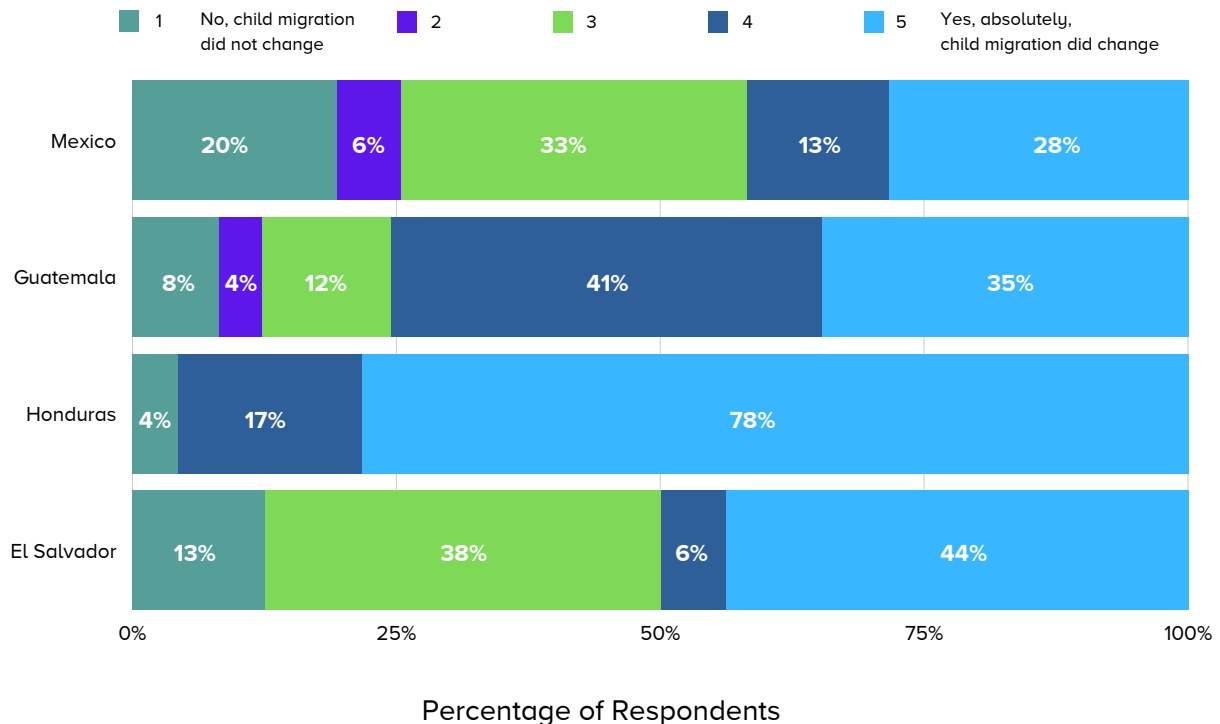
The crisis caused by the pandemic has contributed to an increase in the rates of violence in the environments of children and adolescents, which in turn has led to an increase in internal displacement that ultimately translates into new migratory movements at the international level.

~ Immigration Official, Honduras

The survey also focused on how each country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to social, economic, and political circumstances, affected child migration. Respondents were asked to rank their answers from 1 to 5, where 1 meant “No, child migration did not change,” and 5 meant “Yes, absolutely, child migration did change.”

While the rates of correlation varied among countries, a clear pattern emerged linking the impact of the pandemic to child migration. In Mexico, 74% of 67 respondents chose at least “3” or above. In Guatemala, 88% of 49 respondents chose at least a “3” or above. In Honduras, the impact was most significant with 96% of 23 respondents choosing at least a “4” or above (none selected “3”), and in El Salvador, 88% of 16 respondents chose at least a “3” or above.

In your professional opinion, has your country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and its current social, economic, and political status affected child migration?



Overall, respondents believed their country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic had an intensifying effect on child migration patterns. In the qualitative portion of the survey, many cited that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated poverty rates, widespread violence, very low participation in education, and extreme lack of access to employment or steady employment. Due to these factors, many children and families considered or already had begun migrating to other countries. Unfortunately, the migration journey is one that imposes considerable risks for children, including sexual exploitation.

Area 4: COVID-19’s Impact on Online and Offline Sexual Exploitation of Children

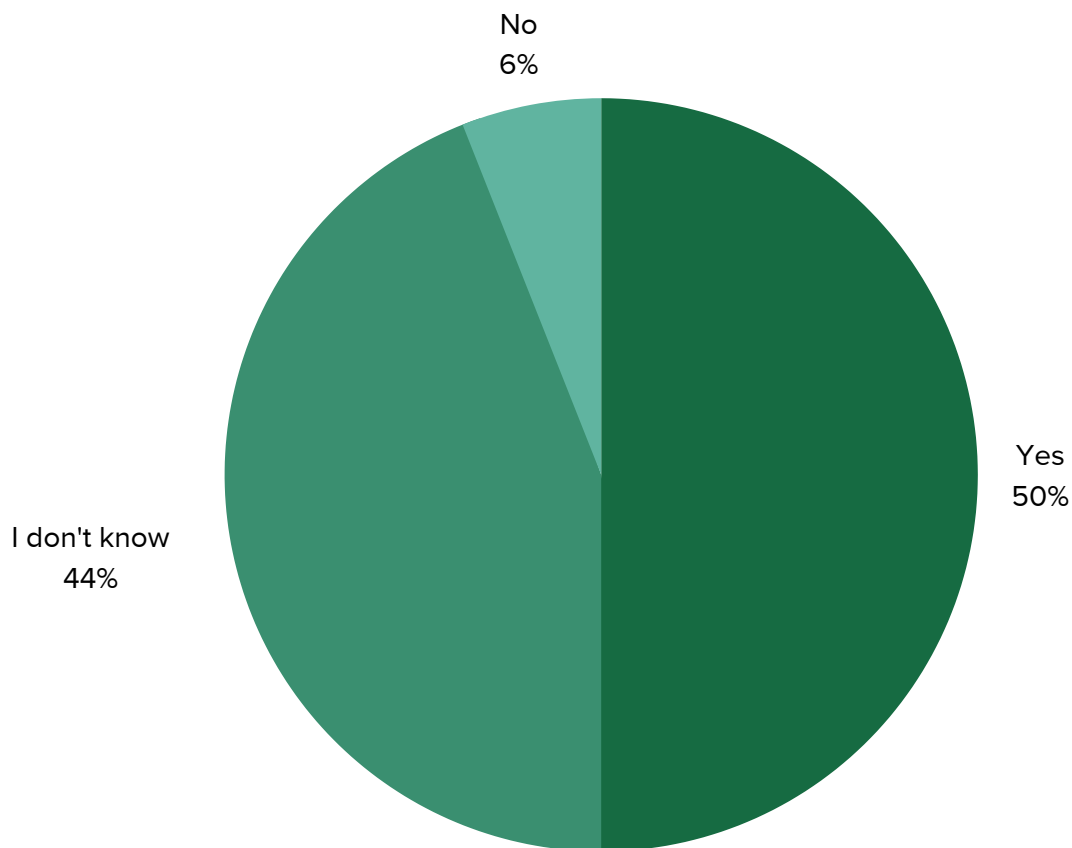
“ In El Salvador, the situation of sexual violence is alarming since, in the last year, more than five children and adolescents were victims of sexual violence each day, according to data from the complaints registered by the Attorney General's Office.
~ NGO Worker, El Salvador

“ Parents' lack of employment and psychological effects of the [COVID-19] confinement has led them to exploit their children more.
~ NGO Worker, Honduras

“ Traffickers have been innovating ways to be able to exploit children and adolescents, which is why there has been an increase in the cases of grooming of adolescents online.
~ Public Official, Guatemala

Part of the study focused on the intersection between the online and offline sexual exploitation of children and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses to both quantitative and qualitative survey questions indicate that the pandemic affected child migrant trafficking, specifically by exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and increasing exploitation rates. The qualitative responses relating to child migrant trafficking demonstrate the overlap between the risk factors that increase a child’s likelihood to migrate and simultaneously increase their vulnerability to trafficking.

Has there been an increase in the sexual exploitation of children since the COVID-19 pandemic began?



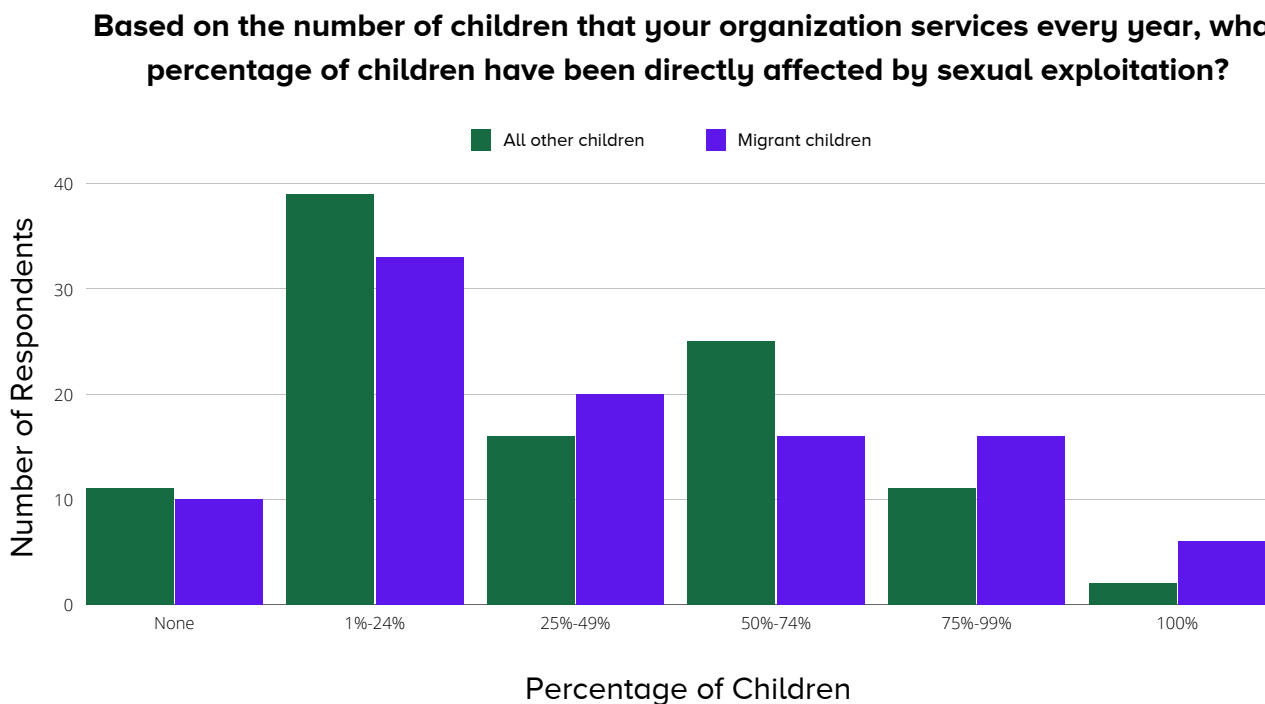
At the same time, the survey revealed significant gaps in the ability of many respondents to answer such a question. While in the quantitative response section only 6% answered that there had not been an increase in child sexual exploitation, 44% of respondents indicated that they were ‘unsure’ how child sexual exploitation changed during COVID-19. This high degree of uncertainty – often attributed in the qualitative responses to a lack of data from low reporting rates – is a key takeaway from the survey that will be explored further in a later section.

Survey respondents believed the most common locations of the trafficking of migrant children are in the child’s country of origin (75%), in transit (79%), and at the US-Mexico border (48%). This data indicates migrant children face the significant danger of trafficking throughout their journey.⁶

Drawing on the qualitative survey data, the section below explores trends in child migrant trafficking in their country of origin, in transit, and at the U.S.-Mexico border in more depth. Subsequent sections highlight low reporting rates and examine the role technology plays in migration.

Trafficking Trends

To isolate the prevalence of trafficking among child migrants, the survey asked respondents to estimate the percentages for both migrant children and for all other children they serve who are directly affected by child sexual exploitation. Since the sample size is especially small for these two questions (51 and 56 respondents, respectively), given the large number of respondents who answered either “N/A” or that they did not have the relevant data, these responses provide insights but not definitive answers.



Although the quantitative data from the survey was inconclusive, the qualitative survey responses provided some insight into trafficking trends. Respondents identified financial insecurity among migrant children and families as one of the most common migrations and trafficking risk factors. Specifically, survey respondents most often listed factors including poverty, job insecurity, access to skills training,

⁶ The survey drafters utilized the World Bank’s definitions for “poverty” and “extreme poverty” as included at the top of this report. However, it appears that respondents were not uniformly given this same definition prior to answering Question 16, so both answers are provided here.

and access to entrepreneurial opportunities.⁷ The pandemic exacerbated poverty by making goods and services more costly and difficult to obtain while simultaneously decreasing many families' incomes. As a result of COVID-19, many people lost their jobs, which – survey respondents noted – increased the pressure on their children to search for jobs. With diminished access to education, skills training, capital, and other entrepreneurial resources during the pandemic, children were at an increased risk of joining the informal economy and being trafficked for labor or sex. Likewise, children experiencing financial insecurity were more likely to migrate – either alone or with family – to search for better living and working conditions. Several respondents wrote that the pandemic did not directly impact migration, but instead had an indirect impact by exacerbating vulnerability factors. By acknowledging migration push and pull factors such as job insecurity and violence, these responses align with those that draw a more explicit link between COVID-19 and migration; labeling the pandemic as an indirect factor is simply a different way of emphasizing that migration factors are multifaceted.

Conversations with civil society organizations that serve migrants in San Diego supported these trends. The service providers interviewed for this report agreed that the impact of COVID-19 on child immigration factors was primarily financial: children arriving in the United States were seeking jobs to make up for increased poverty, crop failures, and decreased adult job opportunities at home. One director of a community health center described assisting a four-and-a-half-year-old child who walked from Guatemala to the United States with her grandmother as “not know[ing] how to play. The only thing she knows is work, finding food for her mother” (personal interview, October 20, 2021). This narrative is not unique; an attorney representing unaccompanied minors explained that many migrant children feel social pressure to work since increasing numbers are seeking employment to support their families. The attorney noted, however, that migration factors sometimes divide along urban-rural lines: urban children are more likely to migrate in response to gang violence while rural ones migrate primarily due to poverty and starvation (personal interview, October 22, 2021).

“The crisis caused by the pandemic has contributed to an increase in the rates of violence in the environments of children and adolescents, which in turn has led to an increase in internal displacement that ultimately translates into new migratory movements at the international level.”⁸

~ Honduran Immigration Official

“El Salvador needs systems that protect threatened youth. Currently, national child protection systems are underfunded and uncoordinated. Focus on communities...while national systems are needed, violence is often driven at the community level, specifically by maras and youth gangs. [We need] [v]iolence prevention programs tailored to communities to restore the social fabric at home, in schools, and on the streets.”⁹

~ Salvadoran NGO Worker

⁷ The category applies both when children are experiencing one or more of these situations directly, as well as when their families are experiencing them. Poverty included both financial –from a lack of income– and lacking access to basic resources such as food, health care, and housing.

⁸ Original Spanish text: “La crisis ocasionada por la pandemia ha contribuido al aumento de los índices de violencia en los entornos de los NNA, lo que ha ocasionado a la vez, un aumento en los desplazamiento internos que finalmente se traducen en nuevos movimientos migratorios a nivel internacional.”

⁹ Original Spanish text: “El Salvador necesita sistemas que protegen a la juventud amenazada. Actualmente, los sistemas nacionales de protección de la niñez tienen insuficiente financiamiento y descoordinación. Centrarse en las comunidades... Si bien se necesitan sistemas nacionales, la violencia es a menudo impulsada a nivel de la comunidad, específicamente por las maras y pandillas juveniles. Programas de prevención de la violencia que se adapten a las comunidades para restaurar el tejido social en el hogar, en las escuelas, y en las calles.”

Political corruption was another major factor respondents identified that affects migration. Although many responses did not specify what form of corruption, those who did almost exclusively referenced governmental inaction and inappropriate spending. In particular, the respondents noted that government officials did too little to address the pandemic's economic and health impacts on their populations. They also criticized authorities for not doing enough to combat organized crime, including trafficking. The above quote from a Salvadoran NGO worker not only calls on governments to increase funding for child protective services, it also recognizes the link between political corruption and organized crime. Even in the absence of explicit political collusion, inaction and impunity enable criminal organizations to thrive, which results in an indirect risk factor for child trafficking.

Trafficking Trends: In Transit and at the Border

According to survey respondents, the trafficking of child migrants in transit most commonly occurs in two types of locations: (1) regions with little oversight from law enforcement, community members, or service providers, and (2) locations where there is a high concentration of vulnerable people, increasing opportunities for traffickers. The first location – regions with little oversight – can refer to the lack of physical protective resources, such as the presence of law enforcement or a shelter along the migration route. However, multiple respondents noted a culture of inaction or discrimination against migrants in transit decreases the likelihood of crimes being reported or investigated, thereby enabling traffickers. This culture of inaction could also help explain the low reporting rates that many respondents identified, which will be elaborated upon in the next section.

Most migrant women, girls or adolescents suffer from this humiliation, but the networks that do it are much more structured than the government and [the traffickers] are never caught.¹⁰
~ Guatemalan NGO Program Manager

Similar to how a lack of oversight increases trafficking by expanding opportunities for traffickers to evade detection, a high concentration of vulnerable people can create increased opportunities for recruitment and exploitation. The quotation below highlights this vulnerability, specific to large flows of child migrants.

The people who engage in this type of criminal actions take advantage of the great need that adolescents have due to the circumstances that push them to seek migration, and as that flow is growing, the possibilities of having access to this group of vulnerable people is increasingly greater.¹¹
~ Guatemalan Civil Servant

¹⁰ Original Spanish text: “La mayoría de mujeres, niñas o adolescentes migrantes sufren de esta vejación, pero las redes que la hacen son mucho más estructuradas que el gobierno y nunca los atrapan.”

¹¹ Original Spanish text: “Las personas que se dedican a realizar este tipo de acciones delictuosas, se aprovechan de la gran necesidad que tienen los adolescentes debido a las circunstancias que los empujan a buscar la migración y como ese flujo está en crecimiento, las posibilidades de tener acceso a este grupo de personas vulnerables es cada vez más grande.”

Child migrants – especially unaccompanied children – were among the highly vulnerable populations identified by survey respondents. Some survey respondents identified migrants experiencing financial insecurity as another highly vulnerable population in light of organized criminal networks’ tendency to recruit and exploit children experiencing poverty.



As people lose their livelihoods due to the pandemic and reports of violence increase across the region, would-be migrants are more vulnerable to smugglers who appear to offer vital access to paid work and escape violence.
~ NGO Worker, El Salvador

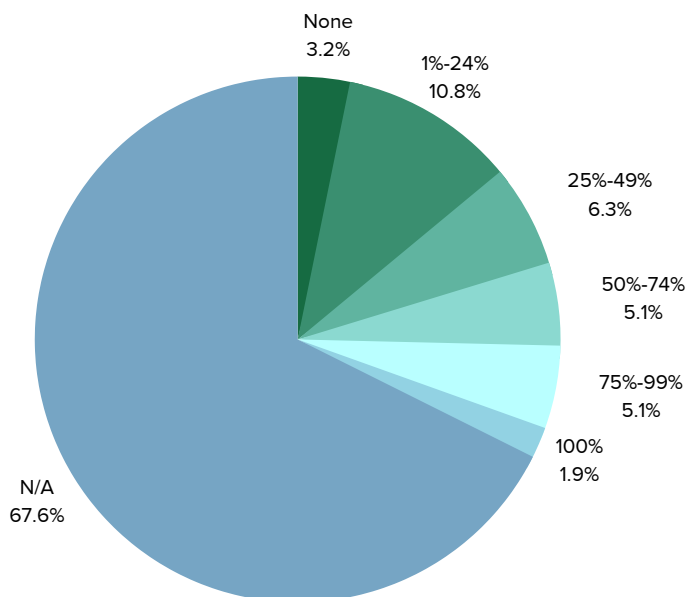
The survey identified the U.S.-Mexico border as a location where traffickers can prey upon both of these vulnerabilities, with both a lack of oversight from government officials and civil society workers and a highly concentrated pool of migrants facing financial insecurity. Advocates working with migrants located along the Tijuana, Mexico border noted that large NGOs and international organizations (such as the UN) are not present in the encampments outside the U.S.-Mexico border. Smaller service providers only enter to offer temporary services during the day. Because of this void, there are many reports of violence and gang activity, including extortion, rape, kidnapping, and murder (personal interview, October 21, 2021). Many migrants fear that the organized criminal networks they are fleeing will follow them to, or even across, the border (personal interview, October 20, 2021). Advocates confirmed this occurred while migrants await their asylum hearing in Mexico under MPP (personal interview, October 21, 2021).

Despite the danger, many migrants remain in the Tijuana encampments because there is no viable alternative; shelters in the city are at maximum capacity. At the time of the investigation in October 2021, the estimated number of people living in the Tijuana border encampment was 2,500-3,000, including 600 children (personal interview, October 21, 2021). Service providers emphasized that irregular U.S. immigration policy enforcement, misinformation, and a lack of information further inhibited migrants from seeking safer alternatives to living in the encampment (personal interviews, October 20-21, 2021). Due to restrictive immigration policies, many immigrants attempt to “enter without inspection” (EWI) between ports of entry, a potentially lethal route because of the desert heat, lack of food and water, and presence of organized crime (personal interviews, October 20-21, 2021). Nonetheless, some desperate families, consigned to a protracted wait along the border, risked sending their children on a solo journey into the desert, hoping that they would be admitted to the United States as unaccompanied minors (personal interview, October 21, 2021).

Gaps in the Ability to Identify Child Sexual Exploitation

Survey respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of migrant children served by their organization who had been directly affected by child sexual exploitation. More than two-thirds were unable to answer the question

Based on the number of migrant children that your organization serves every year, what is the percentage of those directly affected by child sexual exploitation?



The high rate of “I don’t know” or “N/A” answers was apparent in both the quantitative and qualitative survey questions. Uncertainty was especially prevalent in questions regarding trafficking and sexual exploitation among children served, and some respondents explained how low reporting rates on trafficking crimes against migrants contributed to the problem. That so many respondents cited a lack of knowledge about the children whose welfare they are charged with safeguarding raises concerns about their ability to do so.

Some survey respondents attributed their lack of knowledge to a failure on the part of children in reporting the crimes committed against them. Reasons given for low reporting rates included fear of detainment or deportation by law enforcement and retaliation from the perpetrator, especially in cases involving organized criminal groups. Another explanation offered was a culture of victim-blaming that can cause victims of trafficking to remain silent out of shame. Respondents also discussed political corruption and inaction that dissuade reporting by migrant children, believing, with some justification, that nothing would be done to investigate or prosecute the crime.



Unfortunately, the networks of sexual exploitation are strongly protected, which makes it difficult to report or identify cases. The increase [in sexual exploitation during the pandemic] is very possible, but it cannot yet be evidenced. Those who have raised their situation did so when they were back in the country far from the exploiters.
 ~ NGO Worker, Honduras

The lack of information about a client’s history of exploitation was not limited to Mexico and NCA survey respondents. Shelter providers and advocates who assist migrant children in San Diego and Tijuana noted in interviews that they do not screen for trafficking indicators since their interactions with migrants

are limited and intended to stabilize immigrants prior to their next destination, which is often their sponsor in the United States. Therefore, they lack the time and resources to screen for non-immediate health and safety concerns, including whether the person has a history of trafficking. Some providers mentioned a concern of triggering an immigrant youth with potentially traumatizing questions. (personal interviews October 20-21, 2021). Consequently, they were unable to identify how the pandemic impacted child trafficking. The only subject interviewed who indicated routine assessments for trafficking was an attorney, who represented migrant youth in removal proceedings over a prolonged period of time and who learned critical details about each child's migration history (personal interview, October 22, 2021). In transit or at the border, the brief and limited interactions between children and the officials and service providers they encounter raise the question: When, if ever, do child migrants have the opportunity to report trafficking crimes against them? The institutions in place do not provide a reliable pathway to report trafficking crimes.

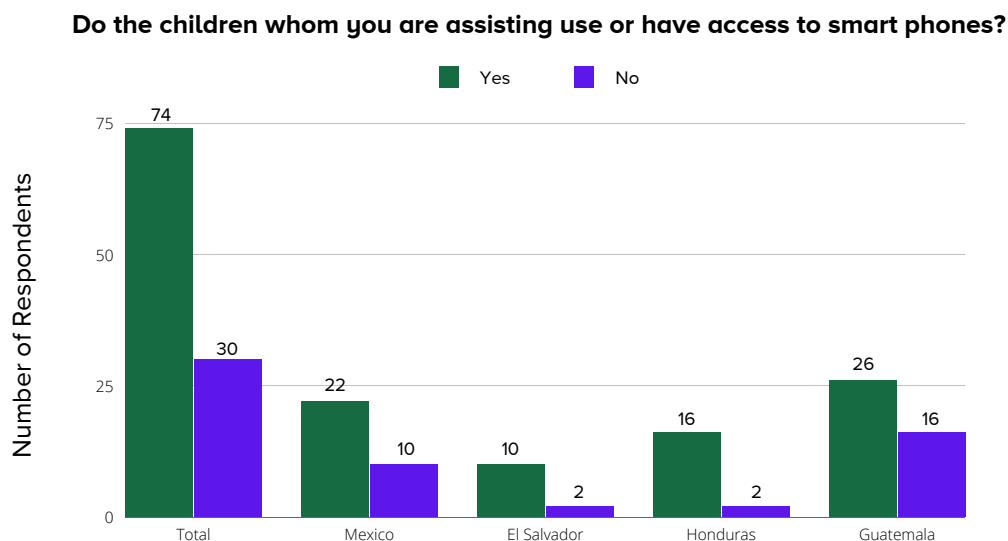
Technology and Migration

Technology affects every aspect of migration. Before embarking on migration journeys, individuals use technology to access information about conditions in possible destination countries and the risks or benefits of migration (Gelb & Krishnan, 2018). During migration journeys, technology assists in the discovery and selection of transport and border crossing options (Gelb & Krishnan, 2018). Technology use continues during the integration process in migrants' destination countries, whether to access information about local support services or to remain in touch with personal networks in both the countries of destination and origin (Gelb & Krishnan, 2018). While there are positive attributes to using technology, including digital connectivity, significant dangers underscore a need to protect children both online and offline.

Social media allows for the dissemination of false and misleading information, which can heighten risks for migrants. As the 2018 IOM World Migration Report notes, "Although many are aware that the information provided may not be accurate, prospective migrants may use social media to locate smugglers. [...] there are groups, on Facebook for instance, where migrants and asylum seekers search for traveling companions and ask for advice on dangers, risks and reliable smugglers" (McAuliffe & Ruhs, 2018, p. 178). Specifically, in the context of migration to the United States, the use of social media by smugglers to disseminate misinformation and fuel false hope of successful entry is growing. Such misinformation likely contributes to surges of migrants at the U.S. southern border, notably influencing the unaccompanied minors in March and Haitians in September of 2021 (Ainsley & Martinez, 2021; Herrera, 2021). In the latter case, misinformation that U.S. Customs and Border Patrol officials were allowing migrants to enter the United States through certain ports of entry and on certain days spread by word of mouth and social media, including WhatsApp, leading thousands of Haitians to travel to the border in Del Rio, Texas (Herrera, 2021).

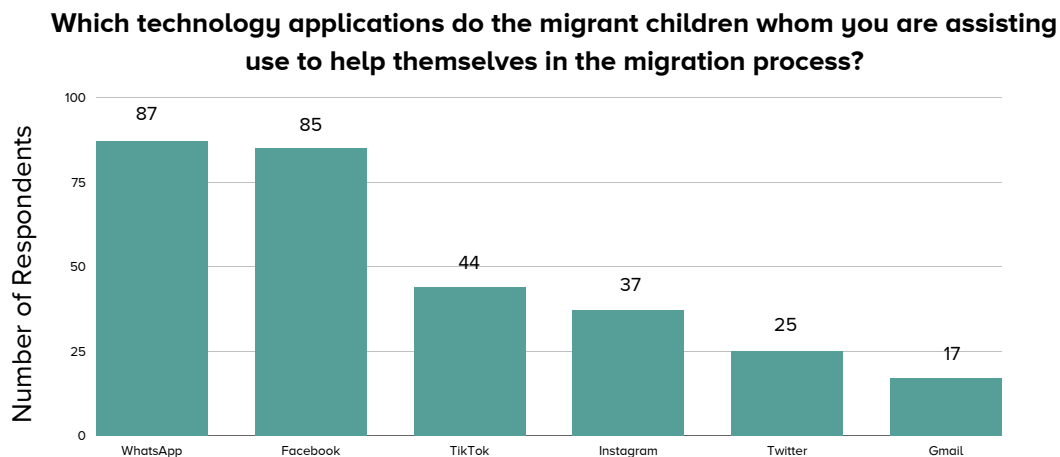
Before exploring the findings of this study as related to technology use by children in migration to the United States, it is worth noting that technology is best described as an "enabling factor" for abuse rather than inherently abusive itself. ECPAT International's 2021 report on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) noted, "While ICTs are an enabling factor, a range of socioeconomic and cultural drivers are at play in amplifying children's vulnerability, including the lack of protective mechanisms available, particularly in developing countries."

Use of Smartphones by Children in Migration



The survey results support the existing literature suggesting that technology use is prevalent among migrant children. Overall, most survey respondents (71%)¹² noted that the children they assist use or have access to smartphones. Honduras had the highest proportion (89%) of respondents reporting that children use or have access to smartphones, and Guatemala had the lowest (62%) (IOM, 2020).¹³ However, few survey respondents reported that the children they work with have temporary mobile internet access (23%) or laptops (18%).

Assistive Technology Platforms

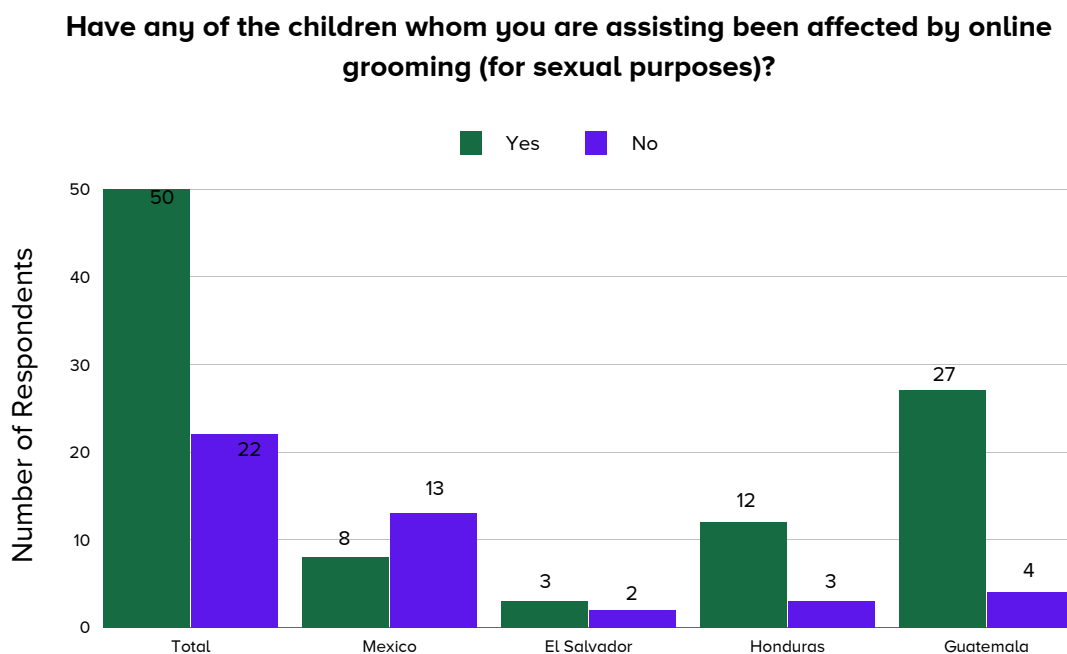


¹² This only includes respondents who answered “yes” or “no” to this question, excluding blanks and “I don’t know” answers. The same holds for the following statistics.

¹³ This finding is lower than another estimate from Guatemala, IOM’s 2020 statistic that 86.1% of surveyed migrants (both adults and children) had used social media in the past 12 months.

According to the survey results, migrant children use a variety of platforms to help themselves in the migration process. Across all four survey countries, the three most commonly cited platforms used by children during their migration journey were WhatsApp (87 respondents), Facebook/Messenger (85 respondents), and TikTok (44 respondents).¹⁴ Survey respondents were able to select multiple platforms. The high usage of WhatsApp and Facebook reflects the magnified impact and power of social media platforms. The social media conglomerate Meta, formerly Facebook, also owns the WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram platforms, reflecting the immense role and impact it plays in migration.

Prevalence of Online Grooming

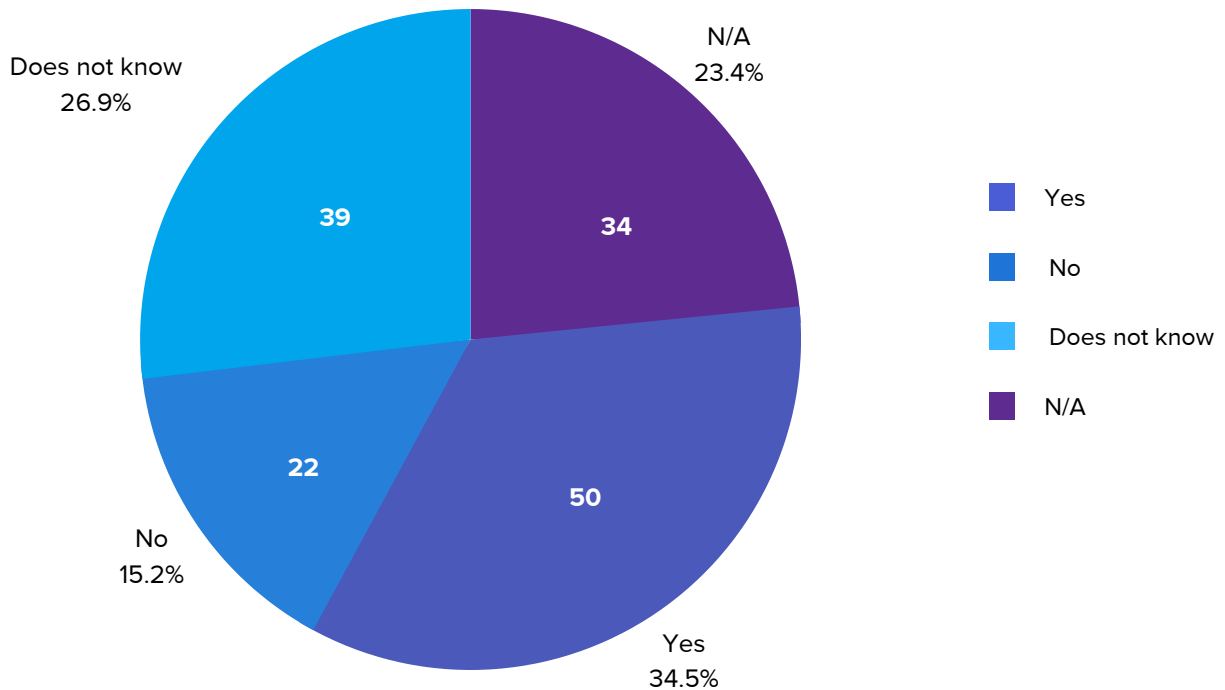


In response to the question, “Have any of the children whom you are assisting been affected by online grooming,” more than two-thirds (69%) answered “Yes.” Across the four countries, the highest total responses and proportion of respondents who noted that the children they assist had been affected by online grooming were from Guatemala (87%) and Honduras (80%). In total, of those who were able to answer the question, the number of those who found that children had been affected by online grooming compared to those who did not was more than double.

At the same time, just over half of all respondents answered “N/A” or “I don’t know” in response to this question, once again indicating many respondents’ lack of information or unwillingness to address this topic.

¹⁴ This only includes respondents who answered “yes” or “no” to this question, excluding blanks and “I don’t know” answers. The same holds for the following statistics.

Have any of the children whom you are assisting been affected by online grooming (for sexual purposes)?



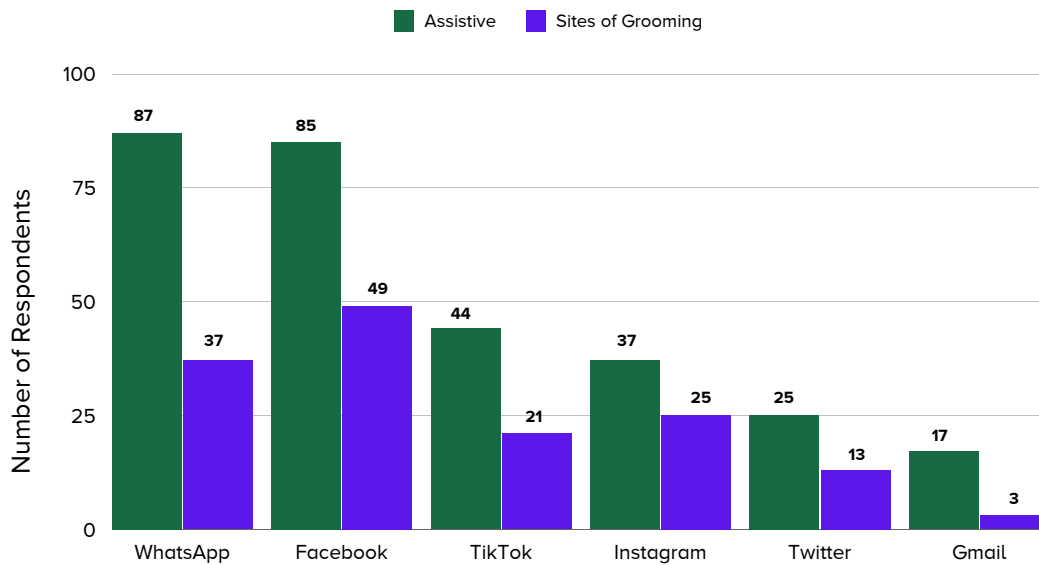
As with a lack of awareness about a child’s potential history of trafficking or sexual exploitation, the inability to identify whether or not a child has been groomed online raises questions about safety mechanisms in place for migrant youth.

Support and Risk to Child Safety

Of the respondents who confirmed that some of the children they assist had experienced online grooming, the vast majority identified Facebook/Messenger as a platform on which the grooming took place. WhatsApp was the next most cited, with 37 respondents noting that the children under their care had experienced grooming through this platform. At the same time, the platforms most commonly identified as assistive in the migration process are also most commonly identified as sites for online grooming, as illustrated in the charts below.¹⁵ Predators appear to identify and engage with children on the platforms they are already using to assist themselves in the migration process. Social media can simultaneously be a beneficial tool and risk-filled platform for migrant children.

¹⁵ Survey respondents were asked to select all of the applications on which the children whom they serve have been affected by online grooming. The options were the same as for the previous question on which platforms are assistive in the migration process: Facebook/Messenger Instagram, WhatsApp, Discord, Google Hangout, Coco - Video Chat en vivo YouTube, Twitter, TikTok, Snapchat, Gmail, Unknown, None.

Do the following platforms operate as assistive tools and/or online grooming sites during the migration process?



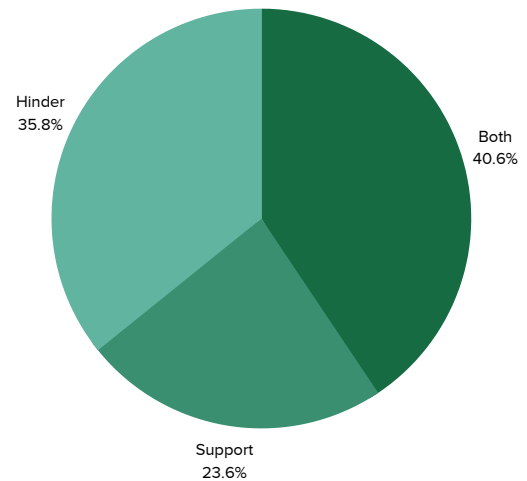
This tension generated by technology’s role as both detrimental and beneficial is well-illustrated by the responses to a qualitative question: “In what way has technology supported and/or hindered the safety of migrant children that you are assisting?”

Of the 106 individuals who responded to this question, more than one-third found that technology hindered the safety of children served. Over 40% noted that technology both supports and hinders the safety of child migrants, including reflections such as:

”

Technology will always be a double-edged sword.¹⁶

~ UN Worker, Guatemala



Does technology support or hinder the safety of the children whom you are supporting?

While technology may assist migrants, respondents acknowledged that it also hinders their safety. While almost a quarter of respondents believed that technology was strictly a supportive tool for migrant children’s safety, 77% of respondents indicated that technology hindered their safety. The most

¹⁶ Survey respondent. Original Spanish text: “La tecnología siempre va a ser una herramienta de 2 aristas.”

commonly cited forms of technologically driven support for children included connectivity with friends and family (26 respondents), location tracking (13 respondents), access to information (10 respondents), and facilitating protection efforts (13 respondents).¹⁷ The latter category refers to technology that allows children to file police reports about violations or connect with supportive service providers.

As for responses about how technology hinders child safety, respondents noted that it can lead to a general increase in vulnerability (18 respondents), allow criminals such as human traffickers and members of gangs to access children (28 respondents), spread false or misleading information (24 respondents), and facilitate deception (25 respondents) or sex trafficking (15 respondents). As one respondent reflected:

Technology is one of the mediums that has put children and adolescents most at risk, not only migrants, since it has allowed criminal groups to attract adolescents in need of economic income, and it is precisely the use of these [technological] tools that favors the proliferation of false information that only seeks to take advantage of the most needy.¹⁸

~ State Prosecutor, Guatemala

Conclusion

Based on survey responses, there are a number of conclusions that can be drawn. For children receiving services in all countries surveyed, physical abuse was selected as the highest form of violence. Survey respondents also reported that domestic violence and sex and labor trafficking were the forms of violence recurring most frequently among children in their care. Other forms of violence such as gang violence and the death of a primary caregiver were also some of the most represented in the data. While multiple risk factors for exploitation increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, four repeatedly surfaced in the survey responses: poverty, violence, unemployment, and loss of education. These were not necessarily new circumstances, but respondents believed the pandemic exacerbated them. In their qualitative answers, many shared descriptions of parents or caregivers losing their jobs and of steady employment becoming more inaccessible, resulting in an inability to pay for food or housing. Consequently, children were forced to drop out of school to find employment and support their families. Respondents also raised concerns about a lack of access to COVID-19 protective equipment and measures, including masks, social distancing, medication, respirators, and quarantine space.

The negative effect on the economy, education, well-being, and safety of vulnerable children and families, and the inaccessibility to critical items and safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic became push factors for children and families to consider migrating to other countries. The migration process, however, compounded a child's vulnerability to trafficking and sexual exploitation. In fact, when identifying the top locations for child trafficking to occur, 79% of respondents identified the period of transit, followed by the child's country of origin (75%) and the U.S.-Mexico border (45%), especially in regions with little oversight from law enforcement and service providers. As policies changed and borders

¹⁷ This category primarily refers to child migrants using technology to pinpoint their own geographic location, but some respondents did mention family members tracking the locations of migrating children as supportive of child safety.

¹⁸ Original Spanish text: "La tecnología es uno de los medios que más en riesgo ha puesto a los NNA's, no solamente a los migrantes, ya que ello ha permitido que grupos delincuenciales capten adolescentes con necesidad de ingresos económicos, y precisamente el uso de estas herramientas favorece la proliferación de de información falsa que solo busca aprovecharse de los más necesitados."

closed, children took “riskier migration routes (David et al., 2019).” Limited shelter capacity puts migrant children in an unsafe situation that could be easily exploited by traffickers.

The data collected in this report helps to illustrate the need for comprehensive policies that help stabilize these countries as they continue to face systemic gaps in child protection that have been intensified by the impact of COVID-19. The following recommendations are based on survey responses and on the larger context of foreign assistance before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendations

Survey Respondents’ Recommendations to Reduce Child Migration and Risk of Exploitation

Government agencies and civil society organizations should work together to generate programs that allow children and adolescents to access fundamental rights such as health, food and education.
– NGO Worker, Mexico.

[We need] violence prevention programs tailored to communities to restore the social fabric at home, in schools, and on the streets.
– NGO Worker, El Salvador

[The government should] promote local development with decent employment, education, access to health and safety services.
– Public Official, Guatemala

Fight violence caused by maras and gangs, decrease the rates of forced recruitment in children and adolescents and create educational opportunities.
– Public Official, Honduras

Using the data gathered in both the qualitative and quantitative questionnaires, the following recommendations include concrete steps for curbing the risks of sexual exploitation and migration of children in NCA and Mexico. Although the Biden administration has reassessed funding for human development, economic development, and specific areas of reporting, data collected from respondents and surveys indicates there is still a need for the restructuring of program assistance (The White House Briefing Room, 2022).

Foster Educational and Social Advancement:

1. Provide greater access to education.
2. Provide opportunities to advance living conditions.

In-person instruction at schools was closed during the pandemic, and while many of them have reopened, improved access to the internet and computers is essential where students are required to continue with hybrid learning. Overall, the educational systems in these countries require significantly greater investment. In the qualitative portion of this survey, respondents called for the construction of new schools and educational scholarships.

To address the vast social and psychological challenges facing students and their families, survey respondents called for psychoeducational programming to identify and support children's needs. Respondents emphasized their governments' obligation to provide opportunities for youth to pursue dignified livelihoods in their home countries. This objective includes tackling broad issues such as corruption, gang violence, and political inefficiencies. In order to promote dignified living conditions, the U.S. government should provide foreign aid to both human development programs as well as facilitate economic development, as recommended by respondents below.

Improve Economic Development:

1. Increase family welfare programs based on increased vulnerabilities.
2. Reduce the cost of basic food items.
3. Improve access to technology.
4. Train community members in new skills.
5. Build and highlight entrepreneurial resources and opportunities.

Supporting economic development in the NCA countries and Mexico was a recurring recommendation to reduce child trafficking and migration. Respondents urged governments should take the lead in developing and funding programs in the five areas above identified by respondents. In light of the severe economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing family welfare programs that reduce immediate extreme poverty, such as cash-and-care programs that also allow families to keep their children in school, can ensure that economic desperation does not become widespread. Government initiatives that cut the cost of basic needs can have a similar effect on poverty reduction. Skills training programs constitute a medium-term solution but are key to cutting two other prevalent vulnerabilities in this report: parental unemployment and family separations. Longer-term, national governments can focus on improving access to technology and entrepreneurial resources for parents and children as avenues for sustainable poverty reduction. Individual governments respectively have an expert and keen understanding of what is required for the safety and prosperity of their citizens.

Improve Reporting Procedures:

1. Develop regionally uniform reporting standards
2. Implement reporting mechanisms to target vulnerable populations
3. Train relevant service providers
4. Address internal corruption

Given the survey data indicated low reporting rates of trafficking crimes, it is critical that the United States supports the governments of NCA countries and Mexico in strengthening existing reporting mechanisms and implementing new ones. USAID missions should coordinate with relevant civil society organizations and government entities in neighboring countries to create a uniform and measurable reporting standards for collecting, sharing, and responding to reports of trafficking. NCA and Mexican officials and NGOs should receive U.S. support in implementing new trauma-informed reporting mechanisms in locations that are most accessible to disproportionately vulnerable populations such as child workers, migrants, returning migrants, and children apprehended for gang-related activity. To encourage reporting, U.S. government agencies should train and partner with local officials and service providers to identify trafficking indicators, engage with victims in a trauma-informed manner, and direct them to reporting resources. Some survey responses also noted that government corruption – including collusion and participation in trafficking schemes – suppresses reporting. By eliminating unnecessary data-sharing between departments, governments can decrease opportunities for corruption and increase public confidence in reporting mechanisms. These efforts would make research assessments such as this one more complete.

Recommendations for U.S. Congress and the Biden Administration:

- 1. Prioritize child protection strategies and protocols among the U.S. government, CSOs, NCA, and Mexico's governments to combat exploitation and trafficking as well as ensure safe passage for children and families during transit.**
- 2. Urge the Congressional Research Service (CRS) to develop a report on the increased vulnerabilities attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on children, specifically in Mexico and NCA countries.**
- 3. Encourage GAO to reassess their 2021 report: The 2019 Suspension and Reprogramming of U.S Funding Adversely Affected Assistance Projects. This report revealed significant information relating to the impact of foreign assistance funding cuts to NCA countries.**
- 4. Assess the status of the stipulated agency strategic plans mandated in H.R. 2615 The United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act, which was signed into the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 (Authenticated U.S. Government Information, 2021). The congressional intent of this legislation is to advance economic prosperity, combat corruption, strengthen democratic governance, and improve civilian security in the Northern Triangle.**
- 5. Request additional appropriation funding to support at-risk youth and families, gender-based violence programs, and food insecurity for migrants originating from Mexico and NCA countries.**
- 6. The U.S. government should prioritize leveraging public and private sector partnerships to promote awareness and understanding in an effort to cultivate international policy solutions with Mexico and NCA.**
- 7. Amend Executive Order (E.O.) 13623, "Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Women and Girls Globally," directing all departments and agencies to implement the United States Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally, to incorporate the impacts of COVID-19 on domestic violence and children vulnerable to trafficking.**
- 8. Create public and private partnerships with social media platforms currently utilized by immigrant children to provide tailored warnings regarding online grooming and potential resources for help.**

Finally, the U.S. government should consider multi-actor engagement, including the private sector (e.g., business, banking), in the prevention and protection of children from the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and trafficking.

The United States has the capability to support policies and protocols that offer opportunities for youth to remain safely in their own countries and prevent their exploitation should migration nevertheless occur. The ongoing impacts of foreign assistance cuts and pre-existing conditions in studied regions underscore the importance of redefining and increasing oversight of the U.S. government's investments in these countries. As mentioned earlier, USAID and DOS were impacted programmatically and faced significant delays while re-administering support. Survey responses provided to ECPAT-Guatemala and ECPAT-México highlighted these program flaws and reaffirmed the negative implications of Trump Era foreign aid cuts.

This report further demonstrates the need to address the root causes of migration, while highlighting the consequences of insufficient CSEC training and subsequent protocols for individuals working with migrant children. These observations are not unrelated and illustrate tremendous causality; their interconnection must be considered to adequately improve child protection strategies.

The results of this study show that there continues to be an alarming lack of data about how COVID-19 affected the safety of children. It is evident that infrastructures in studied countries were unable to withstand additional hardships brought on by the pandemic and instead were met with increased levels of vulnerabilities, many of which lead to a higher risk of exploitation.

The U.S. government must prioritize promoting the accessibility of essential services, child protection policies, and safe migration, and increase efforts to safeguard against the commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking of children as humanitarian needs continue to increase. The 118th Congress will commence in January 2023, which creates an opportunity for House and Senate leadership to strategically convene with the current Presidential Administration to assess capacity building post-COVID-19. In order to develop sustainable and effective policy solutions that adequately address the unique challenges of children and families in NCA countries and Mexico, the U.S. government must comprehensively assess the adverse and lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

References

- Ainsley, J., & Martinez, D. (2021, April 5). *Human smugglers use Facebook to connect with migrants and spread false hope of reaching U.S.* National Broadcasting Company (NBC) News.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/immigration/human-smugglers-use-facebook-connect-migrants-spread-false-hope-reaching-n1262984>
- Aleman, M., & Sherman, C. (2021, November 17). *'Foreign' agents pitch has El Salvador civil society on edge.* Associated Press (AP) News.
<https://apnews.com/article/media-united-states-nayib-bukele-el-salvador-san-salvador-fbc5b491ccbad99289719765e9a7aea1>
- Alvarez, P. (2021, February 10). *Smugglers spread misinformation at the border. The White House says now is not the time to come.* Cable News Network (CNN) Politics.
<https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/10/politics/immigration-biden-misinformation/index.html>
- Cabrera, G. C. (2017, March 8). *Trafficking in persons along Mexico's eastern migration routes.* Wilson Center.
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/trafficking-persons-along-mexicos-eastern-migration-routes>
- Castelló, A. L., Olave, M., Denkers, N., Espejo, A. (2020, June 11). *The COVID-19 pandemic could increase child labor in Latin America and the Caribbean, Technical Note N°1.* United Nations Digital Repository, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).
<https://repositorio.cepal.org/handle/11362/45684?locale-attribute=en>
- Chatzis, I., Nicot, M., Reinke-Schreiber, P., & Davy, D. (2021). *The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on trafficking in persons and responses to the challenges.* United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).
https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2021/The_effects_of_the_COVID-19_pandemic_on_trafficking_in_persons.pdf
- David, F., Bryant, K., & Larsen, J. J. (2019). *Migrants and their vulnerability to human trafficking, modern slavery and forced labor.* International Organization for Migration (IOM)
https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/migrants_and_their_vulnerability.pdf
- ECPAT International. (2021). *Summary paper on online child sexual exploitation.*
<https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ECPAT-Summary-paper-on-Online-Child-Sexual-Exploitation-2020.pdf>

- Fox, B., & Spagat, E. (2021, March 16). *Child border crossings surging, straining U.S. facilities*. Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) News Hour.
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/child-border-crossings-surging-straining-u-s-facilities>
- Garcia, N. M. (2021, June 10). *Human smuggling rampant on Facebook amid border surge*. Tech Transparency Project.
<https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/human-smuggling-rampant-facebook-amid-border-surge>
- Gelb, S., & Krishnan, A. (2018, September). *Technology, migration and the 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. Overseas Development Institute (ODI).
https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl486/files/country/docs/china/r5_world_migration_report_2018_en.pdf
- Geoghegan, T. (2021). *The toughest places to be a child: Global childhood report 2021*. Save the Children.
<https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/advocacy/2021-global-childhood-report.pdf?vanityurl=endofchildhood>
- Herrera, Jack. (2021, September 23). *Why 15,000 migrants ended up in one spot on the U.S.-Mexico border*. Politico.
<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/09/23/del-rio-desperation-dysfunction-immigration-513978>
- Human Rights Watch. (2021, June 22). *Critics under attack: Harassment and detention of opponents, rights defenders and journalists ahead of elections in Nicaragua*.
<https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/06/22/critics-under-attack/harassment-and-detention-opponents-rights-defenders-and>
- Human Rights Watch. (2021, March 5). *Mexico: Abuses Against Asylum Seekers at U.S. Border*.
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/mexico-abuses-against-asylum-seekers-us-border#>
- Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children. (2016, January 28). *Terminology Guidelines for the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse*. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).
https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Children/SR/TerminologyGuidelines_en.pdf
- International Organization for Migration (IOM). (2017). *Migración y trabajo infantil: Guatemala*.
https://mic.iom.int/webntmi/descargas/informes2017/Migraci%C3%B3n_y_Trabajo Infantil_GT2017.pdf
- Jaramillo, S. G. (2020, October 9). *COVID-19 and primary and secondary education: the impact of the crisis and public policy implications for Latin America and the Caribbean*. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Latin America and the Caribbean.
<https://www.undp.org/latin-america/publications/covid-19-and-primary-and-secondary-education-impact-crisis-and-public-policy-implications-latin-america-and-caribbean>

- Office of the Law Revision Counsel (OLRC). *Citizenship and Immigration Services*, 6 USC Ch. 1 § 279. (2002, rev. 2008).
<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title6/chapter1/subchapter4/partE&edition=prelim>
- Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2021). *Trafficking in Persons Report: Guatemala*. U.S. Department of State.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/guatemala/>
- Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2021). *Trafficking in Persons Report: Honduras*. U.S. Department of State.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/honduras/>
- Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2021). *Trafficking in Persons Report: Mexico*. U.S. Department of State.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/mexico/>
- Organización Internacional para las Migraciones (OIM). (2020). *Encuesta de medios de vida a población migrante retornada en Guatemala en el marco del COVID-19*. Organización de las Naciones Unidas (OIM) con el Pueblo de los Estados Unidos de América (USAID).
<https://mic.iom.int/webntmi/descargas/2020/ronda1/DTMCOVID19R1GT.pdf>
- McAuliffe, M., & Ruhs, M. (2018). *World Migration Report*. International Organization for Migration (IOM).
https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/country/docs/china/r5_world_migration_report_2018_en.pdf
- Roser, M., & Ortiz-Ospina, E. (2013). *Global extreme poverty*. Our World in Data.
<https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty>
- Sánchez-Cruz, E., Masinire, A., & López, E. V. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on education provision to indigenous people in Mexico. *Brazilian Journal of Public Administration*, 55(1), 151-164.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-761220200502>
- Shear, M. D., Kanno-Youngs, Z., & Sullivan, E. (2021, April 10). *Young migrants crowd shelters, posing test for Biden*. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/us/politics/biden-immigration.html>

- Office of the Law Revision Counsel (OLRC). *Citizenship and Immigration Services*, 6 USC Ch. 1 § 279. (2002, rev. 2008).
<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title6/chapter1/subchapter4/partE&edition=prelim>
- Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2021). *Trafficking in Persons Report: Guatemala*. U.S. Department of State.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/guatemala/>
- Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2021). *Trafficking in Persons Report: Honduras*. U.S. Department of State.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/honduras/>
- Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2021). *Trafficking in Persons Report: Mexico*. U.S. Department of State.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-trafficking-in-persons-report/mexico/>
- Organización Internacional para las Migraciones (OIM). (2020). *Encuesta de medios de vida a población migrante retornada en Guatemala en el marco del COVID-19*. Organización de las Naciones Unidas (OIM) con el Pueblo de los Estados Unidos de América (USAID).
<https://mic.iom.int/webntmi/descargas/2020/ronda1/DTMCOVID19R1GT.pdf>
- McAuliffe, M., & Ruhs, M. (2018). *World Migration Report*. International Organization for Migration (IOM).
https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/country/docs/china/r5_world_migration_report_2018_en.pdf
- Roser, M., & Ortiz-Ospina, E. (2013). *Global extreme poverty*. Our World in Data.
<https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty>
- Sánchez-Cruz, E., Masinire, A., & López, E. V. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on education provision to indigenous people in Mexico. *Brazilian Journal of Public Administration*, 55(1), 151-164.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-761220200502>
- Shear, M. D., Kanno-Youngs, Z., & Sullivan, E. (2021, April 10). *Young migrants crowd shelters, posing test for Biden*. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/us/politics/biden-immigration.html>

- Sullivan, M. P., & Meyer, P. J. (2022, May 4). *Latin America and the Caribbean: Impact of COVID-19*. Congressional Research Service (CRS).
<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11581/25>
- Taladrid, S. (2022, January 18). *The continued calamity at the border*. The New Yorker.
<https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-continued-calamity-at-the-border>
- The White House Briefing Room. (2022, April 19). *Report on the U.S. Strategy for Addressing the Root causes of Migration in Central America*.
<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/04/19/report-on-the-u-s-strategy-for-addressing-the-root-causes-of-migration-in-central-america/>
- The World Bank. (2022, April). *Measuring poverty*.
<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/measuringpoverty#1>
- The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (2021, March 29). *Surge in violence against children must be addressed with a rights-based approach*. United Nations Human Rights.
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/03/surge-violence-against-children-must-be-addressed-rights-based-approach>
- Transparency International, the global coalition against corruption. (2021, November 17). *El Salvador: Proposed law undermines civil democratic space*.
<https://www.transparency.org/en/press/el-salvador-proposed-law-undermines-civil-democratic-space>
- United Nations (UN). *Ending Poverty*. <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/ending-poverty>
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2020). *Children in monetary poor households and COVID-19: Technical note*.
<https://www.unicef.org/media/69656/file/TechnicalNote-Children-living-in-monetary-poor-households-and-COVID-19.pdf>
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2020, April 3). *Protecting the most vulnerable children from the impact of coronavirus: An agenda for action*.
<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/agenda-for-action>
- United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2020, September 16). *150 million additional children plunged into poverty due to COVID-19, UNICEF, Save the Children say*.
<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/150-million-additional-children-plunged-poverty-due-covid-19-unicef-save-children>

United Nations General Assembly Resolution 55/25. (2000, November 15). *Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons especially women and children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against transnational organized crime*. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2018, April). *Extortion*.
<https://www.unodc.org/e4j/en/organized-crime/module-4/key-issues/extortion.html>

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2020). *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons*.
https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/tip/2021/GLOTiP_2020_15jan_web.pdf

U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). (2021, September). Report to Congressional Requesters: *Northern Triangle of Central America: The 2019 Suspension and Reprogramming of U.S. Funding Adversely Affected Assistance Projects*. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-104366>

U.S. Customs and Border Protection. (2022). *Southwest Land Border Encounters (By Component)*.
<https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters-by-component>

U.S. Department of State. (2021, June). *Trafficking in Persons Report*.
https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/TIP_Report_Final_20210701.pdf

U.S. Department of State. (2022, July). *Trafficking in Persons Report*.
<https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/337308-2022-TIP-REPORT-inaccessible.pdf>

U.S. Embassy in El Salvador. (2021). El Salvador 2021 TIP Report. U.S. Department of State.
<https://sv.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/official-reports/el-salvador-2021-tip-report/>

VanDyck, C. K. (2017, June 30). *Concept and definition of civil society sustainability*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).
<https://www.csis.org/analysis/concept-and-definition-civil-society-sustainability>

Welsh, T. (2021, October 26). *Trump funding cuts hurt 80% of USAID Central America programs: Report*. Devex.
<https://www.devex.com/news/trump-funding-cuts-hurt-80-of-usaid-central-america-programs-report-101936>