

Migrant Kidnapping in Nuevo Laredo During MPP and Title 42

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INTRODUCTION

Every day, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers send individuals into Mexican border cities, including the city of Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, across the border from Laredo, Texas. These individuals leave the United States through deportations, Title 42 expulsions via the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) COVID-19 order, or as part of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which sends people to Mexico to wait during their U.S. immigration proceedings. Immediately upon entering Nuevo Laredo, these individuals are at high risk for kidnapping and serve as a source of income for organized crime.

Migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo are not a new phenomenon. For more than a decade, organized crime in the city has made migrant kidnapping a component of its income generating activities. Members of organized crime kidnap both migrants traveling north for a chance to enter the United States and people sent back to the city. However, recent U.S. policies that return individuals and families to Nuevo Laredo—such as MPP and Title 42—have added new, lucrative populations for the criminal activity.

This report focuses on migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo due to the crime's high frequency and its systematic nature. Migrant kidnappings are largely concentrated in a few sites around the city, and kidnappings follow a similar modus operandi. In fact, the practice is so common that members of organized crime in Nuevo Laredo allegedly refer to migrant kidnappings as “passing through the office.”¹ Migrant kidnappings also commonly take place in other cities along the U.S.-Mexico border, but none follow quite the same systematic pattern as in Nuevo Laredo.²

To analyze migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo, this report uses a mixed methodology. The analysis is based on an original dataset of 154 separate kidnappings in the city between 2018 and 2021, involving 352 people.³ This dataset was compiled through open-source records and legal intake forms. It includes 65 kidnapping cases (139 people) that occurred in Nuevo Laredo after CBP returned the individuals through MPP and 16 kidnapping cases (39 people) that occurred after CBP returned the individuals through Title 42. The additional cases involve people who were kidnapped prior to being returned to Mexico and cases where it was not specifically stated that the person was expelled under Title 42 or placed in MPP.

The dataset does not attempt to be a comprehensive account of migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo. Rather, it attempts to shed light on recent migrant kidnappings in the city, particularly as U.S. policies continue to send people back. The dataset was supplemented by information obtained through content analysis and semi-structured interviews with civil society members, legal service providers, and journalists who are familiar with recent migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo.

METHODOLOGY

This report uses a mixed methodology to attempt to analyze migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo. It primarily relies on an original dataset that includes 154 kidnapping cases (352 people) that occurred between 2018 and 2021. The report also draws on content analysis and semi-structured interviews with members of civil society, legal service providers, and journalists with direct knowledge of migrant kidnappings in the city.

The dataset used in the report was compiled through several sources: Human Rights First's MPP dataset,⁴ Human Rights First's Title 42 dataset,⁵ redacted legal intake notes from Vecina, and redacted legal intake notes from the Asylum Seekers Assistance Project (*Proyecto de Ayuda para Solicitantes de Asilo*, PASA). The dataset was also supplemented with kidnapping cases discovered through targeted online searches, often in Central American media outlets. These additions are labeled as Author Additions in Table 1.⁶

The two Human Rights First datasets are compilations of kidnapping cases collected from news articles, Twitter, and staff member's interviews and court observations. Human Rights First provided these datasets in excel spreadsheets to allow for easier coding. For the other sources, representatives from Vecina and PASA provided redacted legal intake notes and an anonymized dataset on client kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo, respectively.

Table 1: Dataset Kidnappings by Source

Source	Kidnapping Cases	Kidnapped People
Human Rights First MPP Dataset	61	131
PASA Dataset	46	116
Author Additions	20	42
Human Rights First Title 42 Dataset	14	28
Vecina Dataset	13	35

Source: Report Dataset

The Vecina data was collected between May 14, 2021 and September 1, 2021, by approximately 60 volunteers located around the United States. This data was collected to assess eligibility for the Title 42 humanitarian exception processes and facilitate participants' entry into the United States. As part of this eligibility screening, the volunteers received referrals from civil society organizations in Nuevo Laredo, filled out forms, and asked any necessary follow up questions. Attorney Taylor Levy organized this process, reviewed every request, and was the attorney of record for these cases. She was also the primary individual who anonymized and provided the data that was used in this report.

The PASA data was collected between September 2019 and July 2021 by staff attorneys and legal assistants, as they screened potential clients in Nuevo Laredo and Monterrey. Many of these individuals had been returned to Mexico through MPP and Title 42. Cindy Woods, an attorney with PASA, compiled the anonymized data from

PASA intake forms into an excel spreadsheet.

However, not all the kidnappings provided through these sources are included in the dataset. The dataset only includes cases where the kidnapping location was explicitly stated as Nuevo Laredo and when the incident fit the standard kidnapping description used in this report.⁷ To avoid repetitions, each kidnapping was also added to the dataset only after ensuring that there were no other cases with identical demographics or stories. If a case appeared to be repeated, only one incident was included in the dataset.

The dataset collected the information at the person level and documented a range of variables for each person. These variables included the date, city, crime (kidnapping or attempted kidnapping), sex, the number of kidnapped people in the group, age, nationality, whether the kidnapping took place before or after being put in MPP or expelled through Title 42, the kidnapping location, criminal modus operandi, stash house information, ransom amount requested and paid, length of time held, and any additional violence that occurred during the kidnapping. The overwhelming majority of the cases included information for only a handful of the variables.

This report created a standard description of a kidnapping to determine whether to include certain cases. Kidnappings were defined as incidents where 1) individuals were apprehended by force or against their will; 2) they were held in a secure location and not allowed to leave; and 3) the kidnapers demanded ransom money to secure their release.⁸ In cases where one or more of these factors could not be adequately determined, the report also included those cases where individuals self-described their experience in Nuevo Laredo as a kidnapping.⁹

CRIMINAL LANDSCAPE IN NUEVO LAREDO

In Nuevo Laredo, the recent kidnappings have their roots in the early 2000s. At this time, the Zetas—a drug trafficking organization that began as the armed enforcement wing of the Gulf Cartel (*Cartel del Golfo*)—broke away from the Gulf Cartel and began controlling their own territory. As the Zetas solidified their grip on smuggling corridors, they also expanded into ever more diverse income generating activities, including migrant smuggling and kidnapping.¹⁰ According to Simón Pedro Izcará Palacios, a scholar based in Tamaulipas, the state's criminal groups began to move into the migrant kidnapping business in 2007.¹¹

Currently, the criminal group that controls Nuevo Laredo—the Northeast Cartel (*Cartel del Noreste*)—is one of the factions from these early Zetas. In 2015, amid the capture of its leaders, the Zetas splintered into two groups: the Northeast Cartel, which is the rebranded group of the old Zetas, and the Old School Zetas (*Los Zetas de la Escuela Vieja*), which is the breakaway group.¹² The Northeast Cartel now controls the stretch of the border from Ciudad Acuña to Falcon Lake, with Nuevo Laredo as its center of power.¹³ The Old School Zetas control northern Veracruz and have a smaller presence in other states.¹⁴ This latter group took the name Old School to show that they would remain true to the Zeta's original focus on drug trafficking.¹⁵

Today, the Northeast Cartel has a tight hold on migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo. The group appears to be directly involved in the kidnapping business in the city, as opposed to taxing local kidnapping groups for the right to operate in their territory. However, the people carrying out migrant kidnappings are specialized in their criminal activity and are separate from the Northeast Cartel's enforcement arm, which is named the Hell Troop (*Tropa del Infierno*).

The Northeast Cartel requires individuals who are migrating through Nuevo Laredo to pay a fee for safe passage through their controlled territory. In 1997, criminal groups in Tamaulipas began to charge these fees to some smugglers, and, by 2008, they were requiring them for all smugglers.¹⁶ For people traveling with smugglers, the fee is wrapped into the total smuggling cost and the smuggler provides the individual with a cartel password. However, if people do not have smugglers or are returned from the United States without having previously paid a fee to the Northeast Cartel, they become targets for kidnapping.¹⁷

These criminal groups operate with high levels of impunity in Nuevo Laredo. The U.S. Department of State recognizes these security risks in its Travel Advisories. It notes that U.S. citizens should reconsider travel to Tamaulipas and U.S. government officials “may only travel within a limited radius around and between the U.S. Consulates in Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros, their homes, the respective U.S. Ports of Entry, and limited downtown sites.”¹⁸ It also cites the specific risk of organized criminal activity, including kidnappings, and notes that “heavily armed members of criminal groups often patrol areas of the state and operate with impunity particularly along the border region from Reynosa to Nuevo Laredo. In these areas, local law enforcement has limited capacity to respond to incidents of crime.”¹⁹

RECENT MODUS OPERANDI OF MIGRANT KIDNAPPINGS

Since at least 2018, migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo have had a distinct structure and pattern. The first stage of a migrant kidnapping is when the kidnappers detect and capture the individuals. The kidnappers identify migrants based on their non-Mexican nationality, their status as a migrant, or their status as someone recently returned from the United States. For example, individuals returning from the United States are often sent across the border in a group, lack shoelaces (since they are taken away once an individual is in CBP custody), show foreign identification cards or Mexican humanitarian visas (*Tarjeta de Visitante por Razones Humanitarias*, TVRH) when purchasing inter-city bus tickets at the bus station, or may check in with Mexico’s National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM) to receive paperwork, all of which mark them as being migrants.

Within the dataset, three fourths of the kidnappings or attempted kidnappings took place in three locations within Nuevo Laredo: 1) at or outside of a port of entry, 2) at the Nuevo Laredo bus station, or 3) on a bus (generally arriving to the city).

Table 2: Kidnappings and Attempted Kidnappings by Location in Nuevo Laredo (2018-2021)²⁰

Place	Total Cases	Total Kidnapped Persons	Percent of Cases
Bus station	25	54	35%
At or outside the port of entry	24	57	33%
Bus	7	15	10%
At shelter or shelter vehicle	6	15	8%
Street	4	8	6%
Taxi	3	5	4%
Other	3	5	4%

Source: Report Dataset

Many of the testimonies around being captured sound remarkably similar. Individuals leaving the port of entry report making it only a few feet or several blocks down the street before vehicles—generally SUVs or pick-up trucks—pull up next to them and armed men jump out and attempt to force them inside. For people at the bus station, the stories are also similar. People who were kidnapped or who faced an attempted kidnapping while arriving to Nuevo Laredo often report that armed men approached them inside the bus station and asked them where they were from and for a password. If they did not have a password, they were taken outside and put into trucks. While those people who were attempting to leave Nuevo Laredo report that men approached them as they were entering the bus station or purchasing tickets and escorted them outside into waiting trucks.

Once the kidnapers have taken physical control of the individuals, they move them to a secure location. Within the dataset, these locations are most commonly described as being a house, sometimes described as an abandoned house.²¹ In the July 2019 kidnapping of a Salvadoran family of four, the father described the stash house as lacking furniture and noted that the whole family slept on the ground. After an August 2019 kidnapping of a Honduran mother and her son, the mother stated that they slept on the floor and received two daily meals of mostly rice and beans. A Honduran migrant kidnapped in 2021 reported receiving one burrito a day.

Once the captured migrants arrive at the safe house, the kidnapers document the individual's name, demographic information, and take a photo of each person.²² They also request telephone numbers for family members who would be able to pay a ransom, with a particular focus on individuals who live in the United States. There are accounts of individuals who were released when the kidnapers determined that they did not have any contacts who could pay the ransom. For example, in April 2021 a Salvadoran mother reported that she and her daughter were released after a short period when the kidnapers decided that they really did not have

any U.S.-based contacts.

When the kidnappers call family and friends, they request a ransom amount that is generally between US\$7,000 to US\$10,000 per person. Family members are then requested to break up the total ransom amount into smaller quantities and to make deposits into a range of accounts in Mexico. A *Washington Post* article from August 2019 documented a case where one family was provided with 16 different bank accounts and told to deposit US\$500 in each one.²³ Another April 2021 *Los Angeles Times* article noted that the kidnappers requested US\$1,000 be deposited into ten separate accounts.²⁴ In this latter case, the kidnappers added more specific instructions and told the family members not to send any money through either Western Union or Elektra.²⁵ Once the kidnappers receive the money, they generally release the migrants and provide them with a password.

However, if the individuals' families and friends do not pay, the victims may face a different outcome. In August 2019, the kidnappers put a Venezuelan man on a bus heading out of Nuevo Laredo and warned him not to return, after he convinced them that he did not have contacts who could pay a ransom. In September 2019, a Honduran family with no contacts in the United States reported being dumped on the streets and told that they had one hour to leave the city. There were also limited accounts of kidnappers never releasing the kidnapped individuals, and these individuals' whereabouts remain unknown.

According to civil society in Nuevo Laredo, kidnappers in the city may stop someone again and ask them to provide the password that they had previously received. During these incidents, the migrants may even be detained a second time, as the kidnappers verify through cartel ledgers and photographs that the person did indeed pay a fee or ransom and is not using a borrowed password from another migrant. If the cartel finds out that the person is using a borrowed password, there will be a consequence.

KIDNAPPINGS IN NUEVO LAREDO DURING MPP

On January 29, 2019, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) launched MPP in San Ysidro, California. Through this program, individuals who sought asylum in the United States at a port of entry or who were apprehended in U.S. territory between ports of entry were placed in immigration proceedings in the United States and then returned to Mexico. The individuals returned to Mexico under MPP included non-Mexican Spanish speakers and Brazilians. They included single adults and families but exempted unaccompanied minors from the program. On July 9, 2019, DHS, in collaboration with the Mexican federal government, expanded MPP to Laredo, Texas and began sending people back to Nuevo Laredo.

MPP's expansion to Laredo came after then-President Donald Trump threatened Mexico with tariffs if Mexican officials did not lower the number of migrants arriving at the United States' border.²⁶ After subsequent bilateral negotiations in Washington, DC, U.S. and Mexican officials hammered out an agreement to avoid tariffs. As part of this agreement, Mexico agreed to allow the United States to "immediately expand the implementation of the existing Migrant Protection Protocols across its entire Southern Border," which included along the South Texas-Tamaulipas border.²⁷

On July 9, 2019, the first ten individuals were returned to Nuevo Laredo.²⁸ INM picked up the individuals in vans and drove them to a parking lot outside the INM offices. Within the parking lot, individuals returned

through MPP received a legal document—the Multiple Migratory Form (*Forma Migratoria Múltiple*, FMM)—to remain in Mexico. INM officials told the individuals in MPP not to leave the parking lot for their own safety, and chartered buses to drive them to other cities.

At first, INM buses took these individuals to the city of Monterrey, which is approximately 135 miles south of Nuevo Laredo, but then discontinued the buses. By August 2, 2019, INM only offered free buses to Tapachula, Chiapas, which is roughly 1,275 miles to the south of Nuevo Laredo and is on the border with Guatemala.²⁹ If the individuals in MPP wanted to stay in Nuevo Laredo, the Mexican government did not provide any support.³⁰ In August 2019, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that INM officers told individuals in MPP that if they wanted to reach Monterrey, they would need to purchase the tickets themselves and pay US\$1,200 each to the cartel for safe passage.³¹

Eventually, INM stopped providing free buses to Tapachula, and all migrants returned to Nuevo Laredo through MPP were on their own within the city. In August 2019, a local pastor began driving individuals from the INM office at the port of entry to a local shelter and, once the shelter was overcrowded, he also began transporting individuals to Monterrey. However, in general, individuals had to organize their own transportation if they wanted to leave the city.

Between July 2019 and January 2021, more than 11,500 people were returned to Nuevo Laredo as part of MPP.³² Another 4,500 people were returned to Piedras Negras, Coahuila, across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas, and told to attend their court hearing in Laredo, which meant traveling through Nuevo Laredo.³³ These numbers included both individuals who presented at ports of entry to seek asylum and those who Border Patrol apprehended after they had crossed between ports of entry. It also included both parents with minor aged children and individuals traveling alone.

Individuals returned through MPP were at risk of kidnapping at various stages of their U.S. immigration process: 1) upon being returned to Nuevo Laredo, 2) when they traveled to the Laredo port of entry to be admitted back for their master calendar and merits hearings,³⁴ and 3) when they traveled to INM offices to renew their migratory documents. If these individuals were kidnapped en route to their court hearings and therefore unable to be present in court, U.S. immigration judges would order these individuals to be removed in *absentia* or would terminate their immigration case.

Other groups have also documented the kidnapping risks for individuals in MPP in Nuevo Laredo. In October 2019, Doctors Without Borders reported that 75 percent (33 of 44) of its new patients in Nuevo Laredo who were in MPP had been recently kidnapped.³⁵ Similarly, 26 percent of the Laredo Project and the National Immigrant Justice Center’s clients in the Laredo MPP court reported being kidnapped at least once after being sent back to Mexico.³⁶

On December 2, 2021, DHS announced that it had reached an agreement with the Mexican government to reinstate MPP. In its updated policy guidance, DHS noted that CBP would once again return people to Mexico through the Laredo port of entry but did not include an official start date.³⁷ The guidance also noted that some of the individuals returned to Nuevo Laredo “may be moved to the interior of Mexico to await their hearings.”³⁸

MPP Kidnapping Data. This report’s dataset includes 65 kidnapping cases (139 individuals) that occurred in Nuevo Laredo after CBP returned the victims through MPP and an additional 14 cases (37 people) who reported an attempted kidnapping. The following data analysis will focus on the combined total of 176 people who were

kidnapped or faced an attempted kidnapping in Nuevo Laredo after being returned to the city through MPP.

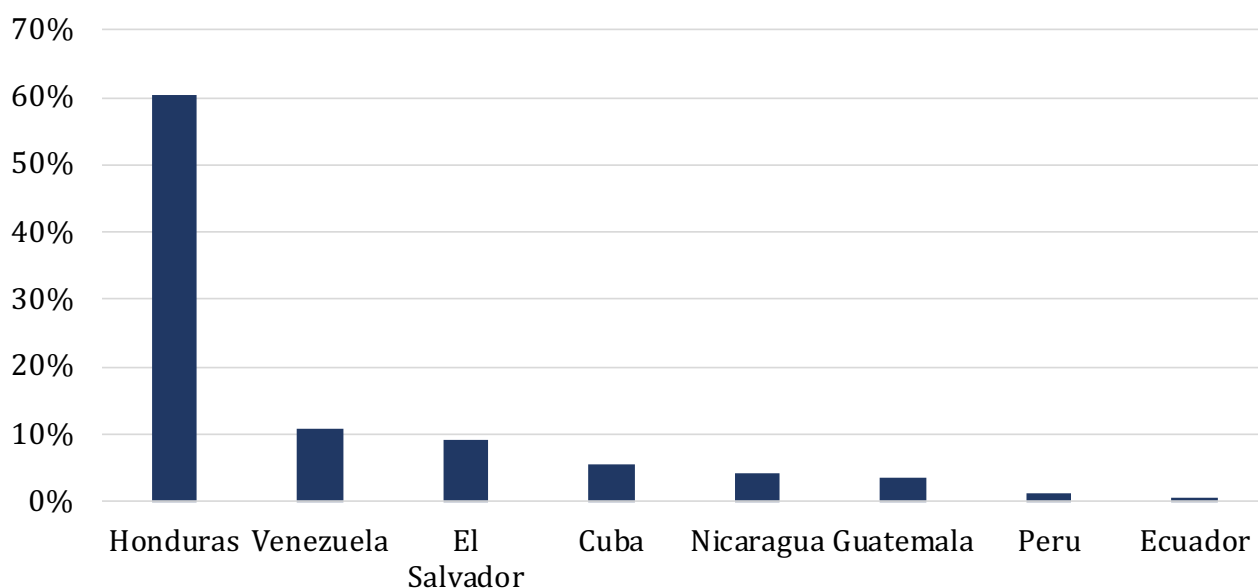
Table 3: Kidnappings and Attempted Kidnappings of Individuals Placed in MPP

Situation	Cases	People
Kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo prior to being placed in MPP	9	20
Kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo after being returned via MPP	65	139
Attempted kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo after being returned via MPP	14	37

Source: Report Dataset

Individuals who were kidnapped or who faced an attempted kidnapping after being returned to Nuevo Laredo through MPP had a varied demographic profile. Fifty-one kidnapping cases involved a family (most commonly a parent with one child), five cases involved a group of two or three adults traveling together, 19 cases involved a single adult, and two cases involved single minors (a 16-year-old male and a 17-year-old male).³⁹ The kidnapped victims came from a range of countries, including Honduras, Venezuela, El Salvador, Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Peru. While for individuals with a listed sex, 54 percent of individuals were female and 46 percent were male.⁴⁰

Graph 1: Nationalities in Dataset of Kidnapped and Attempted Kidnapping Victims in MPP



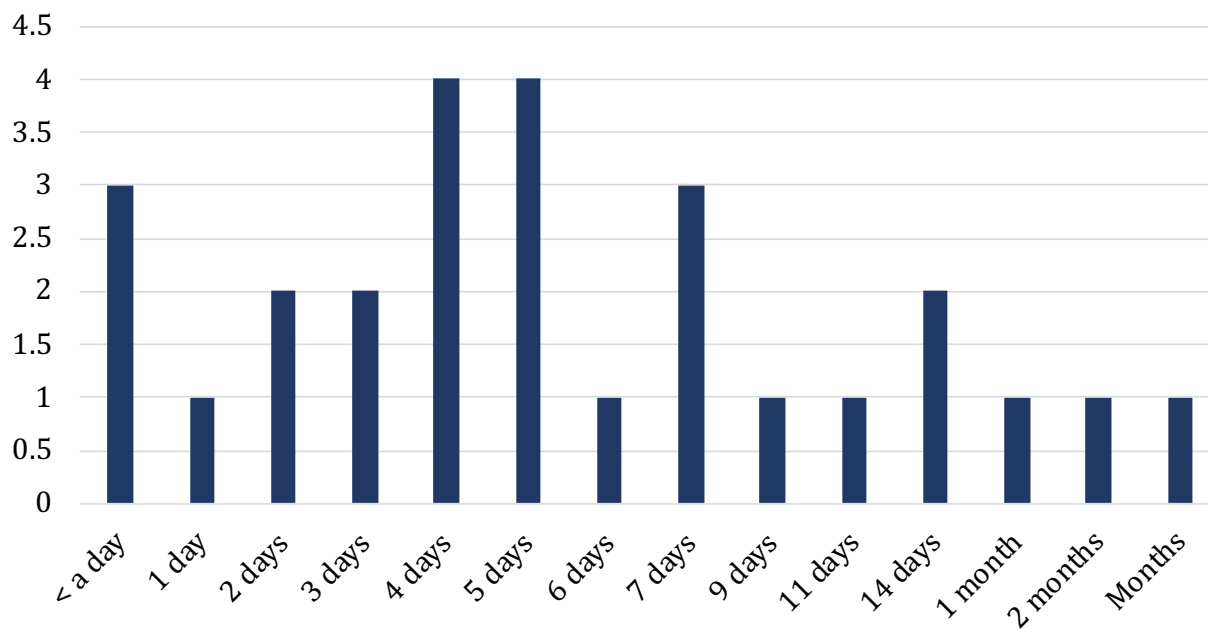
Source: Report Dataset

There also was a wide range of ages, including an infant and at least five individuals who were older than 35 years old. Most individuals did not have listed ages, but the narratives made it possible to determine whether the person was an adult or a minor.⁴¹ Within the dataset, 56 percent were adults and 44 percent were minors. This included at least 22 children who were 12 years old or younger. Although, the true number of young children is likely higher, since 50 minors were not listed with a specific age.

At times, the kidnapers also committed additional violent crimes against the kidnapped victims while they were held in the safe houses. Between September 2019 and April 2020, the dataset records six women who reported that they had been raped during their kidnapping. This number includes both a Honduran mother and her teenage daughter. Another Venezuelan woman reported that she was molested. Additionally, five men and one woman reported that they were beaten during the kidnapping, and one middle-aged Nicaraguan man reported that he had lost several teeth as a result of being beaten.

There was no specific length of time for the kidnapping. The cases varied, with victims reporting that they were held from several hours to multiple months. Although, the average kidnapping length of time was eight days. The most commonly reported amount of time that individuals were held during a kidnapping was four to five days (30 percent of the cases).

Graph 2: Kidnapping Length of Time



Source: Report Dataset

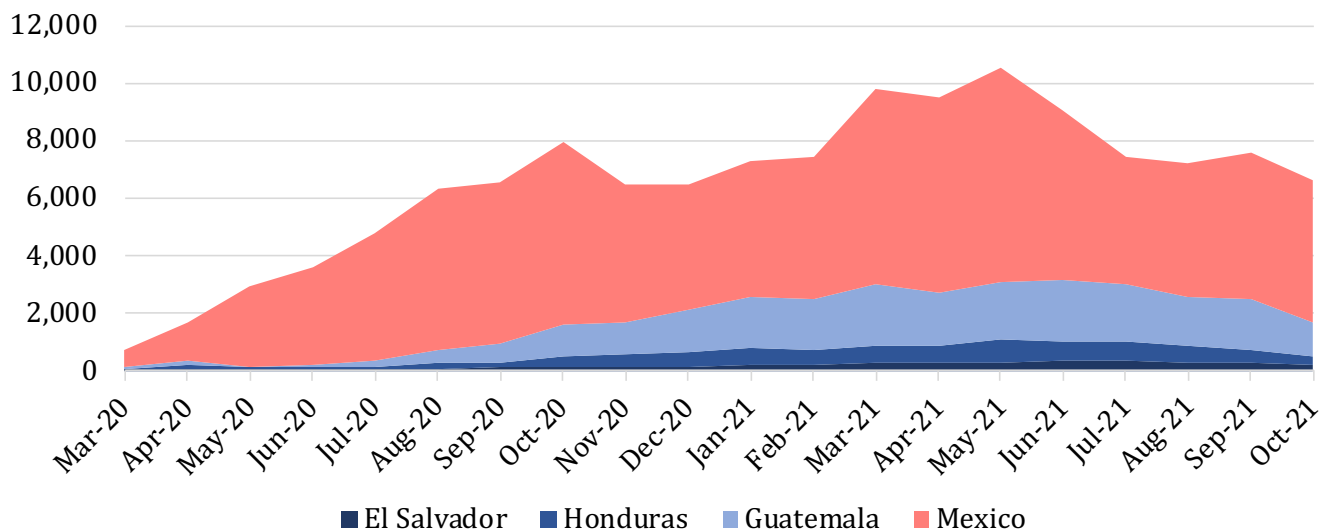
There also was not a set ransom amount that needed to be paid to ensure an individual’s release. While some families paid the full requested amount, others were released after paying only a partial amount. Within the dataset, nine kidnapping cases included the ransom amount that was paid to ensure the individuals’ release. The average paid ransom per kidnapping case was around US\$8,000, but the total payments ranged from US\$200 each for a Venezuelan man and a Cuban man, US\$1,000 for a group of four, and US\$21,000 for a Honduran woman and her daughter. This average did not include the four cases where individuals stated that they did not pay any ransom.

KIDNAPPINGS IN NUEVO LAREDO DURING TITLE 42

In March 2020, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a public health order based on Title 42 authority. This order allows CBP to immediately expel all apprehended individuals, including asylum seekers, to Mexico or to their home countries. The order claimed that Title 42 was necessary to continue to protect the public from the introduction of COVID-19 into the United States through ports of entry or through crowded Border Patrol stations. Mexico accepts all expelled Mexicans and up to 100 Central Americans a day in Nuevo Laredo.

From March 2020 through October 2021, CBP expelled 136,003 people in the Laredo Sector.⁴² Ninety-six percent of these expulsions were single adults, and Mexicans made up the vast majority.

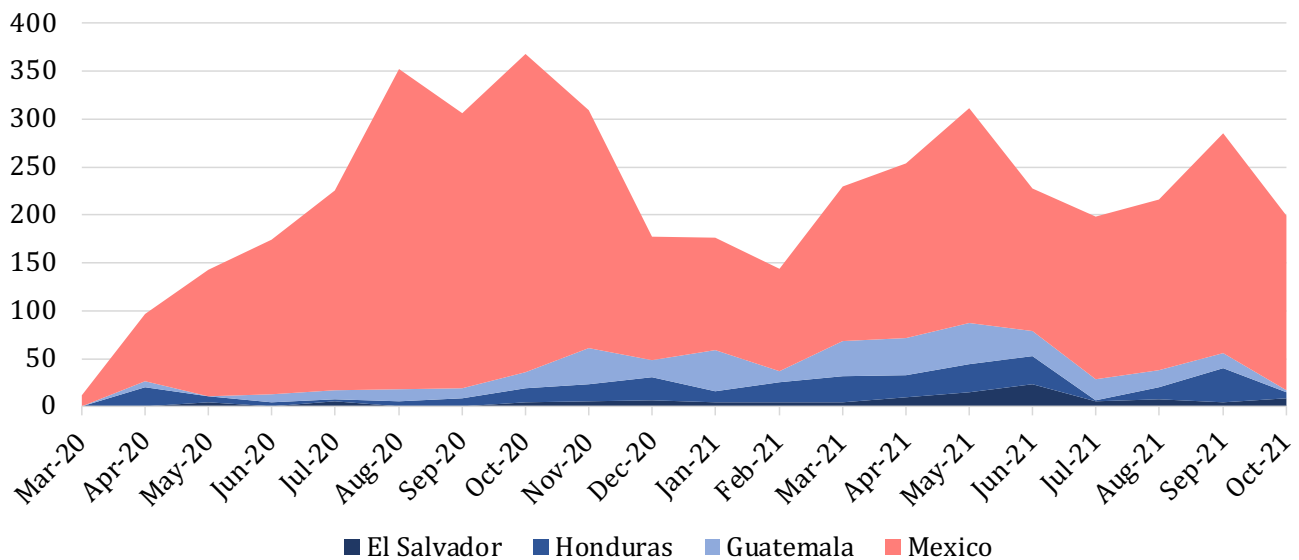
Graph 3: Nationality of Single Adults Expelled to Nuevo Laredo Under Title 42 (March 2020 - October 2021)



Source: U.S. Border Patrol data

From March 2020 through October 2021, the expelled non-Mexican population group included 741 expelled non-Mexican family members and 30,873 expelled non-Mexican single adults. The majority of the expelled non-Mexicans were from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

Graph 4: Nationality of Families Expelled to Nuevo Laredo Under Title 42 (March 2020 - October 2021)



Source: U.S. Border Patrol data

These expelled Central Americans entered the United States both in the Laredo Sector and in the surrounding Border Patrol sectors. In March 2021, CBP officers were looking to relieve overcrowding in the Rio Grande Valley sector of Texas and began bussing up to 350 people per day from McAllen to Laredo. Once these buses reached Laredo, 100 people were expelled to Nuevo Laredo and the rest were released into the U.S. city.⁴³

In March 2021, DHS began accepting humanitarian exceptions to Title 42 through the “Huisha Exception Process,” which was named after the *Huisha-Huisha vs. Mayorkas* lawsuit challenging the expulsion of families under Title 42. Through this exception process, U.S. lawyers could request that certain vulnerable individuals be exempt from Title 42. If DHS approved the request, the individuals would receive a date and time to show up at a port of entry to be allowed into the United States.⁴⁴ In May 2021, DHS began accepting Title 42 humanitarian exceptions through a separate but related NGO consortium process.

With daily Title 42 expulsions, local shelters became overcrowded. In response, a local pastor drove expelled families from Nuevo Laredo to Monterrey to stay at shelters in that city. If these individuals were allowed to enter the United States through one of the Title 42 exception processes, this same pastor would drive to Monterrey, pick up the individuals, and take them back to Nuevo Laredo.

People expelled through Title 42 are at risk of kidnapping once they walk across the international bridge into Nuevo Laredo. Attorney Taylor Levy, who has represented more than 1,200 individuals impacted by Title 42,

wrote in a declaration that approximately 40 percent of the clients that she worked with in Nuevo Laredo had experienced a kidnapping or attempted kidnapping.⁴⁵

Title 42 Kidnapping Data. This report’s dataset includes 16 kidnapping cases (39 individuals)⁴⁶ kidnapped in Nuevo Laredo after being expelled under Title 42 and additional 7 cases (18 people) who reported an attempted kidnapping. The following analysis will focus on the combined total of 57 people who were kidnapped or faced an attempted kidnapping in Nuevo Laredo after being expelled to the city under Title 42.

Table 4: Kidnappings and Attempted Kidnappings of Individuals Expelled to Mexico under Title 42

Situation	Cases	People
Kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo after being expelled under Title 42	16	39
Attempted kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo after being expelled under Title 42	7	18

Source: Report Dataset

Similar to MPP, there was no singular demographic profile among those kidnapped or who faced an attempted kidnapping after being expelled to Nuevo Laredo. Mexico currently accepts both single adults and families under Title 42, and this dataset includes two single adults and 21 families. Mexico also currently accepts its own citizens under Title 42 and a limited number of people from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. This was reflected in this report’s dataset, where the victims were from Honduras (46 people), El Salvador (8 people), and Cuba (1 person).

This demographic diversity also continued with regards to sex and age. Within the dataset, 59 percent of the expelled kidnapping or attempted kidnapping victims were female and 41 percent were male. Additionally, the majority of the expelled kidnapped victims were minors (53 percent), including at least 15 children who were 12 years old or younger. Two kidnapping victims were only one year old. In fact, one Honduran mother noted that she and her one-year-old daughter were released without paying ransom after her daughter cried the entire night, noting “I think that is what saved us.”

Notably, there is a mismatch between the dataset’s demographics of kidnapped individuals and those of the broader population that was expelled back to Nuevo Laredo under Title 42. This discrepancy could point to various potential explanations, such as 1) That families and particularly non-Mexican families are more at risk for kidnappings in the city, and/or 2) That these demographics were more likely to be in touch with lawyers for the Title 42 exception processes given their vulnerable status, and are, therefore, over-represented in the dataset.

Some of the kidnapped individuals also reported experiencing additional traumas while they were held in safe houses. One kidnapped family reported that they had been assaulted. While another family stated that the kidnappers had told their 10-year-old daughter that her mother would be chopped up and fed to her if they did not receive the ransom money.

Within the dataset, expelled individuals reported being detained for between one day to eight days, and there was no one ransom amount requested or necessary for being released. Only four cases in the dataset included the requested ransom amounts, which ranged from US\$5,000 to US\$10,000 per person. More specifically, these included US\$10,000 for a Honduran man, two cases of US\$20,000 for families of two (US\$10,000 per person), and US\$20,000 for a Honduran mother and her three children (US\$5,000 per person).

CONCLUSION

With each new U.S. policy that sends individuals back to Nuevo Laredo, there is a new migrant population that is at-risk for being kidnapped. Over the long term, the only way to reduce these kidnappings is for the Mexican government to foster sustainable improvements in the security situation or for the U.S. government to stop returning people to the city. However, in the meantime, migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo are likely to continue.

There are a range of consequences stemming from these migrant kidnappings. First and foremost, there is the trauma for the individuals who are kidnapped and for their loved ones. Additionally, many of these families may end up in debt or with fewer assets, after they sell things or ask for loans to collect the ransom money. The post-traumatic stress from the kidnapping can also persist and affect the victims and their families even after they are released, and this is only compounded if additional violence was inflicted on the individuals during the experience. While, at the same time, the ransom amounts combine to total millions of dollars in revenue for criminal groups and allow them to expand their other violent activities.

This report barely scratches the surface of migrant kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo or peoples' individual experiences. Most notably absent are the experiences of expelled or deported Mexicans, who are also targeted for kidnapping but who were not accounted for in the collected datasets. However, in aggregating the stories of individuals sent back to Mexico under MPP and Title 42, the report attempts to shed light on the systematic kidnapping of individuals in Nuevo Laredo and the role of U.S. policies in fueling this phenomenon.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Emily Green, “Trump’s Asylum Policies Sent Him Back to Mexico. He Was Kidnapped 5 Hours Later by a Cartel,” *Vice News*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/pa7kkg/trumps-asylum-policies-sent-him-back-to-mexico-he-was-kidnapped-five-hours-later-by-a-cartel>.
- 2 Special thanks to Francisco Alvarado-Quiroz for creating a dataset of kidnappings along the entire border, based on publicly available HRF datasets.
- 3 Twelve incidents did not have a specific year for the kidnappings, but the stories were recorded between September 2019 and July 2021 from individuals who were waiting in Nuevo Laredo or Monterrey. These victims all stated that they were kidnapped in Nuevo Laredo.
- 4 “Delivered to Danger,” Human Rights First, February 19, 2021, <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/campaign/remain-mexico>.
- 5 “Title 42 Dataset,” Human Rights First, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/sites/default/files/Attackso-nAsylumSeekersStrandedinMexicoDuringBidenAdministration.8.23.2021.pdf>.
- 6 The report’s dataset is unlikely to be representative of the kidnapped population. The cases were not randomly selected but rather reflect individuals who were easily accessed by journalists (generally people staying in migrant shelters) or who were in contact with legal service providers.
- 7 The standard kidnapping definition is listed at the end of this section.
- 8 For this report, these kidnappings are viewed as separate from incidents where smugglers may demand additional money from family members to continue the smuggling journey.
- 9 There are other types of kidnapping that take place in Nuevo Laredo that will not be covered in this report. For example, some migrants are kidnapped under the suspicion that they are members of a rival cartel. In one case that is not included in this dataset, members of organized crime in Nuevo Laredo stopped a migrant traveling to the city atop a train and tied him up next to the train track for days while his identity was being questioned. Once they established that he was a migrant and not a rival cartel member, he was put back on a train heading out of town and warned never to return. Since this man was held due to a case of mistaken identity and without any request for ransom, he was not included in the dataset for this report.
- 10 Guadalupe Correa Cabrera, *Los Zetas Inc: Criminal Corporations, Energy, and Civil War in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Jeremy Slack, *Deported to Death: How Drug Violence is Changing Migration on the US-Mexico Border* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).
- 11 Simón Pedro Izcarra Palacios, “Coyotaje y Grupos Delictivos en Tamaulipas,” *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2012.
- 12 “The next generation of criminal groups driving violence in Mexico,” *Insight Crime*, August 13, 2021, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/the-next-generation-of-criminal-groups-driving-violence-in-mexico/>.
- 13 “2018 National Drug Threat Assessment,” U.S. Department of Justice Drug Enforcement Administration, October 2018, <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2018-11/DIR-032-18%202018%20NDTA%20final%20low%20resolution.pdf>.
- 14 “The next generation of criminal groups driving violence in Mexico,” *Insight Crime*, August 13, 2021, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/the-next-generation-of-criminal-groups-driving-violence-in-mexico/>.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Simón Pedro Izcarra Palacios, “Coyotaje y Grupos Delictivos en Tamaulipas,” *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 47, No. 3, 2012.
- 17 This may occur if a migrant enters the United States with a smuggler affiliated with the Gulf Cartel, which controls Matamoros and Reynosa, and then is returned to Nuevo Laredo.
- 18 “Mexico Travel Advisory,” U.S. Department of State, accessed November 19, 2021, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mexico-travel-advisory.html#Tamaulipas%20state>.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 If the individuals were kidnapped or faced attempted kidnappings twice, both locations are included in Table 2.
- 21 In several cases, people referenced being moved among multiple houses during the kidnapping.
- 22 The kidnappers may also take videos of the kidnapped individuals to send to family members.
- 23 Kevin Sieff, “When they filed their asylum claim, they were told to wait in Mexico. There, they say, they were kidnapped,” *Washington Post*, August 9, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the-americas/when-they-filed-their-asylum-claim-they-were-told-to-wait-in-mexico-there-they-say-they-were-kidnapped/2019/08/09/6133c2d6-b95f-11e9-8e83-4e6687e99814_story.html.
- 24 Molly O’Toole, “‘Sitting ducks for organized crime’: How Biden border policy fuels migrant kidnapping, extortion,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2021-04-28/biden-title-42-policy-fueling-kidnappings-of-mi-grant-families-at-border-and-extortion-of-u-s-relatives>.
- 25 Ibid.

26 Ana Swanson, “Trump’s Tariff Threat Sens Mexico, Lawmakers and Businesses Scrambling,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/31/business/mexico-tariffs-donald-trump.html>.

27 “U.S.-Mexico Joint Declaration,” U.S. Department of State, June 7, 2019, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/u-s-mexico-joint-declaration/index.html>.

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31 Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Wendy Fry, “Ante las políticas de asilo de EE.UU, muchos inmigrantes en la frontera optan por volver a sus países,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 8, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2019-08-08/obstaculizados-por-las-politicas-de-asilo-de-ee-uu>.

32 This number comes from an INM response to a transparency request in April 2021.

33 Ibid.

34 These hearings were held in the Laredo Immigration Hearing Facility, which is a tent court adjacent to the port of entry. Immigration judges joined the hearings via video conference from the San Antonio Immigration Court and, occasionally, from the Fort Worth Immigration Adjudication Center. Individuals for the morning court hearings had to arrive at the international bridge by 3:00 am or 4:00am. “Brief for Amici Curiae the Laredo Project and the National Immigrant Justice Center in Support of Respondents,” United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, https://www.supremecourt.gov/DocketPDF/19/19-1212/167002/20210122140606391_19-1212%20Amicus%20Brief%20-%20Laredo%20Project%20-%20For%20Printing%20and%20Filing.pdf.

35 “No Way Out,” Doctors Without Borders, February 2020, https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/sites/default/files/documents/Doctors%20Without%20Borders_No%20Way%20Out%20Report.pdf.

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37 “Guidance regarding the Court-Ordered Reimplementation of the Migrant Protection Protocols,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, December 2, 2021, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/21_1202_plcy_mpp-policy-guidance_508.pdf.

38 Ibid.

39 There was also one case where a person’s age could not be determined.

40 This does not align with the sex breakdown provided by INM in a transparency request. That data showed that 37 percent of the individuals sent back to Nuevo Laredo via MPP were women and 63 percent were men. This higher number of women in the report’s dataset could mean that women are more likely to be kidnapped or could reflect the non-random case selection in the dataset, with potentially more women getting interviewed by journalists or getting in touch with lawyers.

41 Using this coding system, 99 percent of individuals could be grouped by their age bracket.

42 Nuevo Laredo is the only city receiving expulsions in the Laredo Sector.

43 Unlike MPP, none of the non-Mexican individuals expelled to Nuevo Laredo through Title 42 are eligible to receive any legal paperwork to remain in Mexico, nor do they have court dates in the United States.

44 Individuals also needed to provide proof of a negative Covid test.

45 “Supplemental Declaration of Taylor Levy,” *Huisha-Huisha vs. Mayorkas*, August 11, 2021, https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/2021.08.11.0118_declaration_of_taylor_levy_0.pdf.

46 This includes one case of a Cuban man who was kidnapped after attempting to seek asylum at a port of entry. This case was included as a Title 42 expulsion since ports of entry are not processing asylum seekers due to Title 42.