



Migration in Transit Through Guatemala

Executive Summary – April 2025

INTRODUCTION

This report sheds light on the perilous reality of migrants transiting through Guatemala, exposing a systemic crisis of abuse, impunity, and institutional abandonment. Based on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork, direct observation, and over 150 individual testimonies, the investigation focuses on the southern migratory corridor—from Agua Caliente, on the Honduran border, to Tecún Umán, on the Mexican frontier. It reveals a transit route riddled with extortion, economic exploitation, sexual violence, and profound human rights violations—often committed by the very institutions charged with protecting vulnerable populations.

Guatemala, rather than offering humanitarian protection to people fleeing poverty, violence, and persecution, has become a toll road where migrants must pay to survive. State agents, particularly officers of the National Civil Police (PNC), operate within what appears to be a well-oiled apparatus of corruption. The extortion is not incidental. It is systematic, deliberate, and pervasive. At every turn—checkpoints, bus terminals, health centers, and streets—migrants are met not with assistance, but with demands for cash, threats of deportation, or worse.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Systematic Extortion and Abuse by State Actors

The report documents more than 40 checkpoints, both official and unofficial, where police officers regularly demand bribes of between \$3 and \$25 USD per person. These payments are often framed as a “fee” for safe passage but are, in fact, illegal acts of coercion. On average, migrants pay Q510 (~\$66 USD) during their journey through Guatemala. Considering the over 575,000 migrants who crossed into Mexico from Guatemala in 2023, the total value of these extortions could exceed Q293 million (~\$37.6 million USD). In some cases, migrants were detained in “dark rooms”—unofficial holding spaces where women reported being groped or sexually assaulted by police.

“We were stopped at least 12 times. In one place they took us to a dark room, and the women with us were touched by police,” said Julio, a Honduran migrant.

Cristosal researchers themselves faced harassment by police while conducting fieldwork—an intimidation tactic that mirrors the treatment suffered by migrants daily.

2. Financial Exploitation and Price Gouging



Migrants are subjected to inflated costs for transportation (up to 3 times the regular fare), basic food (where a small meal could cost \$25), and money transfers (with 15% commission rates imposed by informal intermediaries). Local labor opportunities often turn into exploitation, with migrants—especially women—paid a fraction of what Guatemalan nationals earn for the same work.

“We were charged Q300 each just to go from Guatemala City to the border. That’s \$37 for a seat on an old bus with no water, no stops, and constant police threats,” recounted David, from Venezuela.

3. Exclusion from Basic Services

Although Guatemalan law and international conventions guarantee access to health services regardless of migratory status, migrants are routinely turned away from clinics and public hospitals. One woman was denied treatment for a respiratory infection and thrown out of a hotel where she had previously exchanged sex for shelter—ultimately left to recover in the street, without medical assistance.

“She said they wouldn’t even look at her because she had no papers. They said: ‘this center is for Guatemalans’,” reported Mario, who tried to help her.

4. Presence of Organized and Semi-Organized Criminal Structures

The report identifies a web of facilitators, coyotes, transport companies, and corrupt officials who form a criminal economy around migration. These actors benefit from the predictable vulnerability of migrants and the impunity that surrounds abuses. The collusion between public officials and private actors is particularly alarming, especially in regions like Esquipulas and Chiquimula.

“You either pay the coyote, pay the cop, or pay the driver who knows someone. But you pay. Always,” said Manuel, a migrant who spent over Q680 (\$87) in bribes and inflated fares.

5. Impunity and Absence of Institutional Protection

The overwhelming majority of migrants choose not to report the abuses they suffer. This is not due to indifference, but to a well-founded fear: reporting may lead to deportation, reprisal, or further violence. The report notes that even where legal norms exist to protect migrants, there is little to no enforcement. The state's failure to investigate, prosecute, or sanction public officials involved in abuses perpetuates a climate of fear and lawlessness.

Data Highlights

- 575,779 migrants entered Mexico from Guatemala in 2023.
- 29,313 migrants were detained in Guatemala; 22,175 of them were Venezuelans apprehended in Chiquimula alone.
- Q510 (\$66): average amount paid in extortion fees per migrant.



- \$37.6 million USD estimated value of total extortion in 2023.
- Most common extortion strategies include:
 - Intermediaries negotiating with police.
 - Direct bribes to officers at checkpoints.
 - Hiring private transport to avoid controls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Guatemalan State:

- Establish independent oversight bodies to monitor police behavior at checkpoints.
- Investigate and sanction all state officials implicated in extortion, sexual abuse, or collusion with criminal groups.
- Guarantee universal access to healthcare, justice, and protection mechanisms for migrants.
- Publicly disclose the location and legality of all migration control points.

To Civil Society and International Actors:

- Enhance field presence along high-risk corridors.
- Offer legal assistance, health services, and psychosocial support in key transit zones.
- Advocate for structural reform that centers human dignity and international legal standards.

Far from being an invisible or incidental aspect of migration, what occurs in Guatemala represents a systemic infrastructure of abuse. It is not the product of a few “bad apples” but a political and institutional failure that transforms migration into a revenue stream—at the cost of dignity, safety, and human life. This report is both a call to action and an indictment: Guatemala must choose whether to uphold the rule of law or continue profiting from the suffering of those simply trying to survive.