

## Fleeing for Protection: Forced Recruitment and Displacement from Guerrero, Mexico

### Huir para protegerse: el reclutamiento forzado y el desplazamiento desde Guerrero, México

Nohora Niño Vega,<sup>1</sup> Gabriela García-Figueroa,<sup>2</sup>  
Rebecca Maria Torres,<sup>3</sup> & Edith Herrera Martínez<sup>4</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how organized crime in Guerrero uses the forced recruitment of individuals under the age of 18 as a strategy to strengthen its armed structures and exert social and territorial control. It further examines how families respond by resorting to displacement to northern Mexico and asylum requests in the United States as protection mechanisms. The research is based on a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with Mexican families sheltered in Nogales, Sonora between 2019 and 2022. The analysis of testimonies identified different modes of recruitment and use of children and adolescents within criminal dynamics, as well as their link to processes of forced displacement and the search for international protection. This research offers empirical evidence of the under-explored relationship between recruitment and forced mobility, providing an original perspective on contemporary forms of violence and territorial control in Guerrero.

*Keywords:* 1. violence, 2. internal displacement, 3. recruitment, 4. organized crime, 5. Mexico.

#### RESUMEN

El crimen organizado en Guerrero utiliza el reclutamiento forzado de personas menores de 18 años como una estrategia para fortalecer su aparato armado y ejercer control social sobre el territorio. En respuesta, las familias recurren al desplazamiento hacia el norte del país y a la solicitud de asilo en Estados Unidos como mecanismos de protección. Desde un enfoque cualitativo, se realizan entrevistas a profundidad con familias albergadas en Nogales, Sonora, entre 2019 y 2022, cuyos testimonios permiten identificar distintas modalidades de reclutamiento y de utilización de niños, niñas y adolescentes dentro de las dinámicas criminales, así como su vínculo con procesos de desplazamiento forzado y búsqueda de protección internacional. La investigación ofrece una perspectiva poco explorada sobre las formas contemporáneas de violencia y control territorial en Guerrero.

*Palabras clave:* 1. violencia, 2. desplazamiento interno, 3. reclutamiento, 4. crimen organizado, 5. México.

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<sup>1</sup> Investigadora por México SECIHTI-El Colegio de Sonora (<https://ror.org/04habxs80>), Mexico, [nohoranio@gmail.com](mailto:nohoranio@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6654-9536>

<sup>2</sup> El Colegio de Sonora (<https://ror.org/04habxs80>), Mexico, [ggarcia@colson.edu.mx](mailto:ggarcia@colson.edu.mx), (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2134-6364>)

<sup>3</sup> The University of Texas at Austin (<https://ror.org/00hj54h04>), United States, [rebecca.torres@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:rebecca.torres@austin.utexas.edu), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8634-6894>

<sup>4</sup> Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (<https://ror.org/023m5rq87>), Mexico, [edith.nasavi@gmail.com](mailto:edith.nasavi@gmail.com), <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8033-4956>



## INTRODUCTION

With the growing reach of cartels competing for territorial control, an ever-increasing number of internally displaced Mexican families flee from violence, arriving at the southern border of the United States seeking asylum. Simultaneously, border authorities in both countries collaborate to restrict access by Mexican citizens and prevent them from filing their applications in the immigration courts in the United States (Torres et al., 2023). Those who manage to enter are faced with abysmal asylum granting rates—such as 4% of decisions from the EOIR in 2023 (Executive Office for Immigration Review [EOIR], 2023)—even though there is evidence that internal displacement in Mexico is feeding migration and increasing asylum applications in the United States (the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights [CMDPDH, for its acronym in Spanish], 2022; Ríos Contreras, 2014).

In 2024, Mexico registered 33 241 homicides—25.6 per 100 000 inhabitants—a higher rate than the 24.9 registered in 2023 (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2025). Data from the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP, 2025) reveal that in the last decade the homicide rate in Mexico grew by 54.7%, while crimes committed with firearms increased by 71.2%.

Regarding forced displacement, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC, 2025) estimates that over 390 000 people have been internally displaced within Mexico, with approximately 26 000 new displacements occurring in 2024 alone, attributed to criminal violence. Morales Viana and Vadillo Polo (2025) registered around 28 000 displacements in 2024,<sup>5</sup> of which the state of Guerrero took the 5th place with 4.8% of the total population displaced that year. According to data provided by the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights (CMDPDH) (2022), Guerrero has historically held first place in episodes of mass displacement due to violence—with 26.4% of the 178 cases registered between 2016 and 2021—and second place in total displaced persons, after Michoacán.

Even with increasingly extensive literature on forced displacement to the north (Salazar Cruz, 2014; Coubès et al., 2020; Silva Hernández, 2020; París Pombo, 2022, Fernández Casanueva & Lizárraga Ramos, 2024), the crucial role of forced recruitment (FR) in displacement and asylum-seeking in the United States, has been scarcely addressed. Accordingly, based on the field work conducted in Nogales, Sonora with displaced families from the state of Guerrero, this article seeks to establish the existing relationship between FR of children and adolescents and the displacement of families compelled to escape their communities in order to protect their children from the constant threat of being recruited.

The article is organized as follows: first, a general perspective of the historical and structural factors that contribute to the current circumstance of violence and forced displacement is

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<sup>5</sup> The numbers disparity can be attributed to the ways of counting displacements, as well as to the fact that the data provided by the IDMC refers to displacements produced by crime. Nevertheless, Mexico has an institutional void regarding the tracking of internal forced displacement.

presented, particularly in Guerrero, emphasizing the role played by organized crime, state abandonment and community defense dynamics. Next, the specific phenomenon of forced recruitment is examined as a tool of control exercised by armed groups and as a primary factor in displacement of families seeking refuge and alternative futures. Subsequently, the dimensions of gender in FR are analyzed, highlighting how risks and impacts differ for girls and boys. Finally, the broader implications of FR and displacement are discussed for policy and humanitarian responses, emphasizing the need for interventions that are nuanced and specific to the context.

Commencing with the exploration of intersections between FR and displacement, this article makes several unique contributions: a critical void in the literature is filled by focusing on FR as the cause for displacement and asylum-seeking. This dimension is often overshadowed by other forms of violence, and currently in Mexico, it has gained great relevance in the public agenda. Furthermore, this study is based on rich qualitative data obtained from interviews with displaced families, which offers a perspective based on their experiences and survival strategies. Finally, the findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the different dynamics that drive forced migration from Guerrero and offer essential perspectives for developing more effective responses to protect vulnerable populations.

#### FORCED RECRUITMENT IN CONTEXTS OF PROLONGED VIOLENCE

Drawing on the report by Graça Machel (United Nations, 1996) on the situation of children in armed conflicts, a number of studies have emerged that highlight the problems facing children and adolescents living in war zones throughout the world; the violation of their human rights, and in particular, their FR (Andvig & Gates, 2007; Denov, 2010; Blattman & Beber, 2013). According to Richards (2025), the literature addresses FR from the perspective of armed groups and has focused inquiry on the social, economic, and political conditions that make it possible, without looking into the agency of the affected communities or how they act to avoid it.

On one hand, contemporary studies in Latin America have focused their analyses on the particularities of forced recruitment in the Colombian internal armed conflict (Aranguren Romero, 2011; Chamorro Caicedo, 2012; Niño Vega, 2016); and on the other hand, the linkage with organized crime dynamics emphasizing the Central American maras (Martínez D'Aubuisson, 2013; Martínez Reyes et al., 2019; Moreno, 2019), the Brazilian favelas (Dowdney, 2003), and criminal groups in Mexico (Vera & Simón, 2006; Emmerich, 2011; Scherer García, 2013; Cisneros, 2014; Azaola Garrido, 2020). With the exception of the Colombian case, these studies are focused mostly on the social, economic, and cultural contexts that lead children and adolescents to get involved, notably examination of the internal decision-making leading to enrollment, and not the constraints that limit decision-making possibilities within their environments.

In Mexico, non-government organizations such as the Red por los Derechos de la Infancia en México (Redim, 2011) and Observatorio Nacional Ciudadano de Seguridad, Justicia y Legalidad (ONC & Redim, 2021), have documented the number of forced recruitments, as well as the number

of other types of violence inflicted upon children and adolescents by the State and different organized crime groups. Also noteworthy are some studies that describe the conditions of poverty, exclusion, and vulnerability in which the forced recruitment phenomenon develops (Jiménez, 2016). Emmerich (2011) analyzes the structural violences (social, criminal, institutional and governmental) that affected the lives of children and adolescents in Mexico during the decade of 2001 to 2011. They report that from 2006 to 2010, 1 300 minors were murdered and 27 000 adolescents became victims of drug trafficking.

Salomón (2019) points out that there is an ever-increasing number of adolescents detained for serious charges and adds that “10% of the 50 000 children and adolescents from across Mexico who took part in an official survey in 2012 indicated criminal groups tried to recruit them” (para. 9). She reports that, in the state of Guerrero, “children as young as eight are recruited to lance the poppy bulb (to extract the sap which is then used to make opium) because their hands are small, which helps with the very fragile bulbs” (Salomón, 2019, para. 11). De la O and Flores Ávila (2012) argue that Guerrero is one of the states where the Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional (Sedena) has detained the greatest number of children and adolescents in operations against organized crime between 2007 and 2010.

According to Lee-Ko (2017), forced recruitment involves “war dynamics” that include four elements: a) the deliberate attack against civilians as a central goal; b) the proliferation of militant actors within conflict zones; c) the network of local/global interconnections that allow swift movement of arms, assistance, and funding; and d) the emergence of illegal economies that sustain said wars. Additionally, the author argues that the violence emerging from these wars invades both the domestic and public space of children and adolescents, as it unfolds in their homes, fields, and streets. She also maintains that the widespread attacks against them demonstrate their political and military significance: murder or recruitment serves to instill fear and obedience in territories where violence is carried out and to destroy children and adolescents, as armies or political activists of their enemies,<sup>6</sup> insofar as they are objectified and discarded amid ongoing confrontations.

The link between forced recruitment and displacement is a function of criminal groups enforcing social control over a territory,<sup>7</sup> and can be exercised in coercive, normative, or symbolic ways (Kalyvas, 2010; Lessing, 2021). In the coercive dimension, these groups instill terror through cruel practices that generate a space of felt and anticipated death. In doing so, they drive the population towards either defense—as when communities arm themselves to resist—or flight, resorting to displacement to avoid real or latent danger (Castillejo, 2016). This cruelty configures a “spectacle of power and prerogative of sovereign arbitrariness” over bodies and territories (Segato, 2014, p. 61), while also signaling the inability of the State to provide security and protection (Kalyvas, 2010). Thus, the young body stolen and recruited for criminal motives

<sup>6</sup> Recruiting children and adolescents means preventing them from joining the ranks of rival groups, or even wiping out generations of activists and defenders of rights and territory in a particular area.

<sup>7</sup> Seen as the ability of an armed actor to dominate physical space and simultaneously impose rules, regulate behaviors, and manage relations among the population.

becomes the medium where fear is inscribed and transmitted at the same time, triggering actions of defense or escape from the communities.

A comprehensive framework of the violence in Mexico reveals, on the one hand, a prolonged internal war between the State and criminal actors, and on the other, disputes among the latter for territorial control, exposing dynamics of social and political violence that impact the civilian population (Kalyvas, 2005; Illades & Santiago, 2014; Segato, 2014; Schedler, 2015). This allows us to understand that the children and adolescents who are recruited by armed groups—whether criminal organizations, community police,<sup>8</sup> or self-defense brigades—are direct victims of violence. Consequently, effective mechanisms of care and protection are needed to prevent the continuation of their victimization.

Lastly, even though literature on the link between internal displacement and organized crime in Mexico is increasing, there is still a lack of research analyzing the forced recruitment of children and adolescents as a main factor of displacement leading to asylum claims in the United States (Cantor, 2014). To fill this gap, this study argues that recruitment operates not only as a strategy to reinforce armed groups and exploit young bodies—even to the point of extermination in the context of persistent armed disputes—but also as a fundamental mechanism for producing fear. This fear, inscribed in the bodies of those taken and transmitted into the communities, leads to the forced displacement of families and the children and adolescents themselves, who view it as an inevitable action taken to protect themselves from constant threats and state abandonment.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is derived from two interrelated research projects. The first focuses on analyzing the migratory patterns of forced displacement among Mexican children and adolescents seeking asylum in the United States (2019-2021). In this project, interviews and focus groups were conducted with displaced adolescents, mothers, and fathers—mostly from the state of Guerrero—who were staying at a shelter in Nogales, Sonora. Key informants were also interviewed, including public officials, shelter managers and staff, lawyers, and specialists in migration and public safety. In total, 186 interviews were carried out between 2019 and 2020, mostly via Zoom video calls or telephone during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of these, 65 involved mothers, fathers, and young participants between 12 and 17 years old, 70% of whom were originally from Guerrero. An additional 21 interviews were conducted in communities in the Sierra de Guerrero with local young adults and key informants who had experienced displacement or migration due to violence. During this same period, we carried out 100 interviews with key interlocutors on both sides of the US-Mexico border, including shelter staff, lawyers, human rights defenders, and humanitarian non-governmental organizations, among others.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to clarify that community police exist not only as expressions of communities' customs and traditions, but also as forms of organization in response to the lack of State protection experienced by the population. For this reason, the children and adolescents are direct victims of this state abandonment.

The second research project focused on understanding the violence that is (re)produced in the state of Sonora (2021-2024). Fieldwork continued with new displaced families who were waiting to begin their asylum applications to the United States. Within this framework, 8 focus groups were carried out between February and December of 2021: 4 with children and adolescents over 12 years old, and 4 with mothers and fathers. These spaces allowed for the identification of FR as the most recurrent threat that prompted escape. From this finding, the research redirected its focus toward analyzing the social and territorial conditions in which this threat emerges and the ways in which families experience it.

Fieldwork made it possible to document a wide spectrum of violence in Guerrero: the proliferation of armed groups, the ambiguity of their motives, and the deep damage they inflict on the population. This article does not address all these forms of violence but focuses specifically on the relationship between the threat of FR and the displacement of families. This dynamic can be understood as a form of power exercised by armed groups—facilitated by institutional weakness or the complicity of local authorities—that generates fear, controls territories, and forces the communities to flee as an act of survival and protection.

#### TO NAME THE UNNAMED: FORCED RECRUITMENT IN GUERRERO

The state of Guerrero has a long and complex history of violence rooted in colonialism, racial capitalism, accumulation by dispossession, repression, state abandonment and extractivism, among other factors (Mora, 2017; Martínez Hernández, 2021). It is well known that contemporary Guerrero is marked by a convergence of structural, political, and criminal violence perpetrated by various groups in constant dispute (Hernández & Argüello, 2023). Given its intensity and effects on the civilian population, this violence can be interpreted as an escalation that the State is neither capable of confronting nor politically willing to address. This is due to the fragmentation and proliferation of armed groups, the difficulty of clearly defining the multiple motivations behind these armed actions, and collusion between criminal organizations and state authorities.

Within the context of violence in Mexico, the absence of a declaration of internal armed conflict or civil war renders the disputing actors impervious to the principles of International Humanitarian Law, particularly those distinctively and proportionately aimed at protecting civilians from hostilities and harmful methods of warfare (Convenio de Ginebra de 1949; Protocolo I de 1977). This legal vacuum is precisely why armed forces, both licit and illicit, inflict irreparable damage on the civilian population (Lee-Ko, 2017; Illades & Santiago, 2019).

In Guerrero, the structural violence—materialized through historical rural marginalization, limited access to basic services, the absence of productive alternatives, and inequality in land distribution—has shaped conditions in which large sectors of the population lack the economic means to guarantee their subsistence. This has led a portion of the population to participate in the cultivation of marijuana and poppies as part of a survival economy (Kyle, 2015; Fuentes & Ortiz-

Rojas, 2021), or to migrate to other regions of the country or the United States (Gaussens, 2018). Furthermore, criminal violence is linked to Guerrero's dual position as Mexico's main poppy-producing region and as a corridor for the illegal traffic of drugs coming from South America through Acapulco's sea port (Ernst, 2020). Over the last decade, this has drawn various groups to contest territorial control over crops and trafficking routes, while also fueling other criminal activities, such as kidnapping and extortion (Illades & Santiago, 2019).

Recently, these armed groups have lacked the capabilities and/or political networks to sustain the production and trafficking of drugs. This is attributed to the fragmentation of organized crime and consequent loss of hegemonic actors previously able to coordinate these structures. This dispersion weakened their control over territories, routes, and local authorities (Kyle, 2015). In response, they diversified their criminal activities at the local level and resorted to more intense violence to compete with other groups and the State, while also forcing the civilian population into submission and cooperation. At the same time, this facilitated the emergence of an armed civil society—community police and self-defense groups—as a response to the insecurity and the lack of state protection (Illades & Santiago, 2019).

Ramon, a young 15-year-old born in Texas, whose family returned to Guerrero after his father was unable to re-enter the United States, explained:

Yes, we moved back there, but everything was going fine during those years. It was exactly last year when everything started to go wrong. The small towns started to rise up in arms against the drug trafficking happening there. Every town in the area began forming their own police groups and living by their own rules, according to each place. It was really hard, both for people with small businesses and large ones, since they were the main victims. (Ramón, personal communication, August 19, 2020)

Within this context, the circle of the victims encompasses not only those with social and economic ties to armed actors, but also people entirely unconnected to them, producing disappearances, extortion, torture, recruitment, and forced displacement within the general population. The State itself generates structural violence, whether through negligence or complicity with organized crime (Martínez Hernández, 2021). Thus, Guerrero emerges as a territory where violence from the State, criminal groups, and armed civil society converge and feed one another, leaving its inhabitants exposed to a wide range of rights violations.

Among people affected are a significant number of women heads of households, whose minor children flee these territories to other places in the country or to the northern border seeking asylum in the United States. Fieldwork conducted at a shelter in Nogales from 2020 to 2021 confirmed that approximately 90% of the shelter population originated from Guerrero. In the majority of these families' accounts, forced recruitment emerged as one of the main motives for fleeing (N. Niño Vega, field journal, February 12, 2021).

In conversations, families revealed that their home communities were marked by multiple forms of violence, including armed conflicts, massacres, disappearances, murders, kidnappings, and

extortion. A particular threat hung over the bodies of young people, who could become targets of recruitment. Recruited children and adolescents were exposed to forced labor across different facets of the criminal economy: poppy cultivation, territorial surveillance, integration into armed groups, and the transport of illegal substances between disputed areas. In this way, minors constitute a strategic labor force within the global supply chain of the illegal drug market, which in turn sustains the violence and armed confrontations that operate as mechanisms for instilling terror in Guerrero's communities.

## RESULTS

As will be seen below, based on the narratives of the families, it is possible to identify five tactics that armed actors have implemented to gain strength and control territories through the recruitment of children and adolescents, resulting in the displacement of families that view fleeing as the only strategy for survival.<sup>9</sup>

### *Family Cultivation and the Global Trafficking Chain of Illegal Substances*

In Guerrero, families have worked in poppy cultivation for at least 40 years (Le Cour Grandmaison, 2021; ZonaDocs, 2021). According to Margarito, the journalist who has covered this phenomenon in the state, in the mountain region family dynamics typical of rural Mexico converge with the production of raw material for illegal substances. The participation of children and adolescents in these tasks, which typically take place within family and/or community labor contexts, reveals the “complex interplay of tradition, conflict, and poverty and are almost always linked to the child's survival” (Barrett, 2015, p. 8).

Poppies are planted in different seasons and the whole family works them. In fact, children are the ones who are most often used for this, but it is not that “they are exploiting the children” [...] it is more of a long tradition of the indigenous rural communities in the mountain, working their land with their sons and daughters [...] children have always worked [...] they adapted very well to the poppies, mostly because it is very similar to a *milpa*, something you have to take care of, clean, and it really is not that different. And, also the communities did not see it as something bad. (Margarito, personal communication, May 17, 2021)

In this sense, one of the interviewed teenagers confirms the above by pointing out the following:

Yes, in my community almost every farmer plants poppies to earn more money, sometimes they sell it for a lot, sometimes cheap. In fact, when I got together with him [her partner], I

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<sup>9</sup> In this article, the use of the terms ‘*tactic*’ and ‘*strategy*’ does not strictly refer to the structural position of the actors, but rather to the practical meaning of actions within contexts of violence. While the former alludes to the concrete exercise of power by armed actors, the latter refers to the survival decisions made by families in response to direct threats, without implying symmetry in the relations of power.

was pregnant with my child, we planted a small plot; I even helped him. In fact, we women know about *rayar* [the lancing of the poppy bulbs to extract the resin], *juntar*—that is what we call it when someone *rayas* [performs the incision] [...] There, everyone sees it as normal. It is only when the soldiers, the military come that it is different, because they grab and cut the plants—for them it is illegal [...] scared and overwhelmed, we told them: “No, all our hard work! The liquids, fertilizer, vitamins, all the money we invested, now we will not make any profit.” (Maite, 17 years, personal communication, July 21, 2021)

Pushed by structural violence—in the shape of rural poverty, the lack of productive alternatives, and the coercive presence of armed actors—children, adolescents, and their families participate in the cultivation of poppies and marijuana as subsistence activities. These tasks, although carried out in conditions of extreme precarity, are inserted into production and distribution chains connected to national and international drug markets, where other actors acquire most of the economic value (Le Cour Grandmaison et al., 2019). Consequently, children and adolescents occupy the most vulnerable links in the marginal chains of a broader illegal market, in which their labor is fundamental but exploited. With few economic options and no guarantee of protection, families remain trapped in a dynamic that reproduces the illicit market and sustains violent economies that, in turn, generate new forms of dispossession and displacement in their own territories.

Beyond exposure to fluctuations in the price of the opium gum due to the recent introduction of fentanyl as a synthetic input in its production, families have also had to contend with intermediaries and local profiteers<sup>10</sup> who seek to control the opium gum market through violence. In this way, children, adolescents, and their families—pushed by poverty and threatened by criminal actors—find themselves drawn into the criminal industry, and to escape it, are forced to flee.

Although participation in poppy cultivation often stems from familial and historical dynamics in the region, there are also records of forced incorporation. In communities such as Totolapan, Tlacotepec, and Coahuayutla, in the Sierra and Tierra Caliente zones, the intensification of criminal violence provoked displacement and led traffickers to install illegal checkpoints to prevent exodus during the 2014 harvest. In this setting, children and adolescents from rural and urban areas of the central, northern, and mountain regions have been kidnapped and forcibly recruited to work in poppy cultivation (Kyle, 2015).

### *Recruitment within Organized Crime*

Various authors have noted that armed groups recruit children and adolescents because they consider their bodies and subjectivities malleable and susceptible to discipline, indoctrination, and the violent pedagogies of paramilitary power (Honwana, 2006; Aranguren Romero, 2011). Guerrero is no exception: facing escalating violence, criminal organizations, community police, and self-defense groups have sought out the youngest men to form and sustain their armed

<sup>10</sup> Term introduced by Álvarez Rodríguez (2021) in her review of the poppy market in Guerrero.

structures, using them for surveillance and protection. Some family narratives also indicate that criminal groups use threats and kidnappings to forcibly recruit men, boys, and young people to participate directly in their illegal activities. In some cases, those who refuse are disappeared.

They took my husband away in December [of 2019], the criminal groups took him. To this day we have not heard anything about him... [They took him] because they wanted him [...] they forced him to get involved with them, but he would not listen to them. [He] did not like that [...] Well, I think that is why they took him away, and his mother still does not know anything about him. (Marcela, 21 years, personal communication, August 14, 2020)

The impunity with which these groups operate is evidenced in Marcela's account: even though she and her family went to the police to file a complaint about her husband's disappearance, the authorities did nothing, either out of fear or because of their ties to criminal actors. Marcela's husband had already been threatened before because he refused to join the criminal group. He thought that since he was not involved with them, nothing would happen to him, yet they abducted him anyway. This group was involved in extorting people: "it is pure delinquency that harms innocent people" (Marcela, personal communication, August 14, 2020). The same happened with Marcela's brother, who was 17 years old when he disappeared in 2012 and was never heard of again.

Other displaced women also recounted that, in their home communities, these groups sought to recruit the youngest to strengthen their ranks. They assert that their sons are seen as young, strong bodies that will serve the defense, protection, and criminal activities of these organizations. For this reason, after adult men, young people are their primary targets for recruitment.

Paula, a mother displaced with her family from the Tierra Caliente region, recounts that criminal groups would forcibly take middle school students to work for them. Others were given weapons and were recruited to perform daily and "domestic" tasks necessary for the reproduction of criminal activities. In other words, they were used for legal activities that strengthened the criminal group, such as delivering food to the hills where their partners were guarding the area. Their job was to stock up on food and sodas at local shops and sometimes transport mules loaded with fuel. Paula also describes that on one occasion a man refused to join an armed group and, in retaliation, they took his two daughters—one aged 22 and the other 13—as well as his 15-year-old son (Paula, personal communication, August 19, 2020).

Mauricio, a 24-year-old man from the municipality of Heliodoro Castillo, recalls that children no longer played in the streets because they feared being recruited by the groups terrorizing their communities. If they did not agree to work for them "they would threaten you or kill you." He describes how these groups observe children and select them based on characteristics they consider useful and according to their age: "around 13 years old, 13 and up, so they can send them to other places, to gain more territory" (Mauricio, personal communication, May 5, 2021).

Ramón also recounts how in his village they recruited children aged 7 and older, both for work in the cultivation of plots and to participate in confrontations against other armed groups. Because

of this, even schools became danger zones. According to Amalia, another mother originally from Heliodoro Castillo, families were afraid to send their children to school due to the risk of being kidnapped—most likely with the objective of making them work for the organizations controlling the area. Faced with these situations of extreme danger, families developed their own defense mechanisms to protect their children. Such is the case of Peter, a 17-year-old originally from the Tierra Caliente region, who explains that in his community they protected themselves by hiding their children:

Well, they arrive to your village and they say: “That is it, you will come with us,” and you go, and if you don’t want to, they take you anyway. Sometimes the local community leaders there would hide the boys [...] almost always they would send me somewhere else, and I didn’t know why. There, they used radios to warn when the *sicarios* were coming and without telling me anything they would say ‘go over there and come back later’—and when I returned, they were gone, the *sicarios* were gone, and I was clueless. (Peter, personal communication, November 7, 2020).

Peter remembers that when he was 10, he would go with his uncles to the caves and “play” there. In that place, he would see cans of tuna and sometimes they had to stay there for days before returning home. At the time, the cave experience seemed like an exciting game. When he turned 15, every time they were warned via radio about the *sicarios* arriving, his mother would send him to the cave and he would stay there for a couple of days to avoid being recruited. His family would send word when it was safe to return. In this way, he came to understand that the “cave game” was really a protection mechanism to prevent the recruitment of the young men in their family (Peter, 17 years, personal communication, November 7, 2020; N. Niño Vega, field journal, May 8, 2021).

In addition to hiding them, other families also sought to remove their children and adolescents from their communities to save their lives. These strategies included seeking support from family members living abroad, as well as going into debt to hire guides or coyotes to help them cross the United States border. In these cases, forced recruitment drove displacement that has largely gone undetected within the broader historical migration flow of people from Guerrero and Mexico to the United States. Ultimately, the displacement of the whole family to other states or to the northern border seeking asylum became a last resort protection strategy.

Beyond the use of violence and threats, recruitment also occurs through peer persuasion. Children and adolescents convince others their age to join by idealizing the power that comes from carrying weapons, driving vehicles, and having access to material goods through the income these groups provide. For many, the power and social status conferred by the terror instilled in the local population, is also a crucial factor in the decision to join an armed organization (N. Niño Vega, field journal, July 30, 2021).

Likewise, in the midst of an everyday war, belonging to one of these groups is itself a survival strategy, as it provides “protection” and “security” that no other authority can give families. In fact, recruitment is closely tied to family bonds: in some cases, it is relatives who are already members of the group that end up convincing and recruiting young people. In these cases, some

children and adolescents are able to leave the group when their family members accrue enough power within it to authorize their departure. However, they remain under the constant threat of being pursued, tortured, or murdered by rival groups (N. Niño Vega, field journal, June 7, 2021).

### *Kidnapping and Forced Labor as Modern Slavery*

Mariano, a 15-year-old, recounts that in his municipality in the central region of Guerrero, adolescents are forcibly recruited to work in the transfer of opium gum from one territory to another. While he was selling food in a plaza with his mom, a man approached him and asked him to help take some things to his house in a faraway area. When Mariano arrived, the woman of the house invited him to rest, then two men approached him and forced him into a vehicle. The man who had initially asked for help was driving. He was taken to another location and forced into a house, where his captors told him he would be held for a while. Throughout all of this, he did not know if he would ever see his mother again (Mariano, personal communication, November 10, 2021).

Mariano was held captive for 10 days. In the same safe house, there were eight other young people his age—they were not allowed to talk to each other and were threatened to prevent any interaction. Everyone had to sleep on cardboard on the floor, locked in a very small room with little food. Mariano believes that he and the other adolescents were kidnapped because of their young age and for them to transport merchandise that he thinks was drugs from a remote location in Guerrero to somewhere in Michoacán. He remembers that this transport was done partially on foot and partially by car.

On the way, they found remains of human bodies. Mariano was afraid because he could hear through the radio carried by their guard that rival groups were in the area and they had to take cover from a possible attack. Mariano points out: “They use us because they don’t want to risk being attacked and murdered” (personal communication, November 10, 2021). Mariano was finally released near the entrance to his village. He narrates that after this he was very frightened and did not want to keep living there. His family in the United States urged him to cross the border, especially since his captors warned him that he would only be released temporarily. His kidnappers said that they needed people to work for them and threatened him not to flee the village. However, Mariano managed to make his way to Reynosa, Tamaulipas with the support of his family in the United States, who paid for a guide to help him cross the border. The attempt was unsuccessful.<sup>11</sup>

Mariano’s story is one of many documented cases from 2012 that evidence the conditions of modern slavery in which people are forced to work for the illegal market (Amapola Periodismo, 2020). His case involves various elements: kidnapping, extortion, physical and psychological damage, bodies exploited for the transport of illegal substances, and exposure to the dangers of executing these activities in a disputed territory. Paradoxically, the best protection strategy that his family could find was to hire a coyote to help him cross the United States border. Extortionate

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<sup>11</sup> For a more in-depth historical analysis, please refer to Niño Vega (2024).

kidnapping, forced recruitment, slavery, and human trafficking are forms of violence that converged in Mariano's life, rendering him a source of revenue for the criminal industry—first through his forced labor and then through the payments his family made in an attempt to help him cross into the United States.

### *Pressure to Participate in Community Policing*

In January of 2020, local and national media published various reports and articles about images of children from Chilapa de Álvarez who had been armed and incorporated into the community police of the Regional Coordinator of Community Authorities of Guerrero<sup>12</sup> (EFE, 2021). This news caused a stir in public opinion and opened a debate about the recruitment of children and adolescents into armed groups in Mexico. Children between 6 and 11 years old sent messages to President López Obrador regarding the insecurity and the lack of protection from the Mexican State—the very conditions pushing them to join the community police. The spectacle of these images, alongside the children's own words, jolted public consciousness, exposing a State that not only exercised violence in these territories but was also incapable of providing security.

Recruitment into armed civilian or “self-defense” groups sometimes takes place in community meetings where men and older adolescents are urged to take up arms to defend their territory. Those who decide not to participate must abandon the community along with their families since they will no longer receive the protection or support of the collective. This is what happened to Juan Pablo, a 33-year-old man who secretly fled his community along with his partner and their two children, aged 13 and 15. Their displacement occurred after he and other men had been summoned by the town commissioner, who was going to ask them to participate in the armed defense of the territory against the imminent threat of a group seeking to take control. The need to flee, and to do so in secret, is a clear sign of the intense pressure to participate in these defense groups.

From the mothers' perspective, this pressure falls not only on adult men, but extends directly to their teenage sons, who are summoned—and sometimes forced—to assume surveillance and territorial control duties. Ana Paula describes how this demand specifically affected her sons Peter (17 years old) and Lukas (14 years old):

They wanted to take them both, but they wanted the 17-year-old more. They would take the oldest one 2 or 3 nights [per week] to keep guard, but all they did was monitor who was coming and going. Since it is quite remote, about an hour away, they would stand guard from 10 at night until 3 in the morning so no one could enter or leave [...]. There were only three his age, and they would send him along with an adult [...] but [...] I hardly let him go. [And] well, yes, they scolded me. My uncle told me that I had to [let them] participate and whoever did not agree had to go somewhere else, and well, how? I mean, he lost his son [he was

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<sup>12</sup> Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias de Guerrero.

murdered at 17] how could he say that? It was not fair. (Ana Paula, personal communication, September 23, 2020)

In interviews, several mothers mentioned that the threat of forced recruitment, not only from organized crime but also from armed civilian groups, was one of the main reasons for their displacement. Ana Paula recounts that her husband was murdered by a criminal group and thereafter the self-defense groups tried to recruit her children. She describes the pressure to participate in these organizations and its implications: either participate and risk being murdered—as happened to her uncle’s son—or refuse and be forced to seek protection elsewhere, since the collective would no longer provide it.

The participation of children and adolescents in community police is a complex phenomenon because it reveals the tension between territorial defense grounded in indigenous autonomy and the protection of children's rights. It is included here because the State militarization that has perpetuated insecurity in the region has driven some children and adolescents into these spaces as part of community responses to violence. While this linkage requires deeper analysis beyond the scope of this article, it constitutes a direct reaction to the dynamics of violence experienced in these territories.

### *Gendered Processes in Forced Recruitment*

From the stories collected through our interviews, it is evident that FR has differential effects based on gender and age. Boys and young men tend to primarily be victims of homicide or FR into organized crime and self-defense groups. Girls and young women under 18 are victims of rape, femicide, trafficking into prostitution networks, intimate violence, and forced disappearance.

According to Redim (2021), although the recruitment and deprivation of liberty of girls and adolescents tends to be associated mainly with violence and sexual exploitation, they are not exempt from incorporation into armed activities. This connects with Segato’s (2014) argument that within contemporary criminal logics, the bodies of women and girls are turned into instruments and messages of war: their violation and appropriation function as demonstrations of power, punishment, and territorial control.

This dynamic is illuminated in Marcela’s narrative. She shared that the armed group that her neighbor refused to join punished him by taking his two daughters, aged 22 and 13. Similarly, Marlene, originally from Guerrero, decided to flee with her sons when a group of armed men broke into her home to take her 15-year-old daughter: “They were breaking the window and I left through the back door” (Marlene, personal communication, September 16, 2020).

Also, four cases were documented in which displacement was motivated by the risk families’ adolescent daughters faced of being kidnapped by members of criminal groups who had been following and surveilling them. In two of these cases, the young girls did not flee with their parents, but with other family members who took them to the United States at their parents’ request. Added

to this are accounts of disappeared girls throughout Guerrero. In some cases, their murdered bodies later appeared on roadsides, while in others, they were kidnapped and never heard from again.

The patriarchal dominance sustained by armed power manifests in practices in which some criminal leaders kidnap young women and girls toward whom they have developed sexual and romantic interest. For instance, inhabitants of a city in Guerrero recounted how the municipal police kidnapped a young girl who had rejected the advances of a crime boss. The agents acted on direct orders from this leader and subsequently threatened the victim's family (International Crisis Group, 2020). Similarly, rival groups routinely threaten to seize the women and girls of the "opposing side," as Marcela recounted of the criminal dispute in her community. Taken together, the collected testimonies show how violence profoundly transformed everyday life, especially for girls and teenagers who feared going out into the street, attending school, or even playing outside their homes.

These testimonies reveal that violence against girls and adolescents not only responds to strategic criminal dynamics, but embodies what Segato (2014) calls the *pedagogy of cruelty*: a form of domination in which the female body becomes a surface upon which power is inscribed, a message of sovereignty, and a mechanism of community punishment. Kidnapping, surveillance, threats, and the disappearance of young women operate as control mechanisms that seek to subjugate families and entire communities, producing displacement as the only option for protection.

## CONCLUSIONS

The climate of exacerbated violence in Guerrero—unfolding among criminal armed actors, legal armed forces, and members of society who have taken up arms for territorial defense—has a direct impact on the lives of children and adolescents through forced recruitment. The young body is appropriated in two ways: to fortify armed forces in the face of the casualties caused by the permanent and brutal dispute, and simultaneously as a tool for building a grammar of fear whose territorial social control engenders displacement as a means of survival and protection.

The participation of children and adolescents in armed and criminal dynamics can be forced through family or community pressure—linked to poppy cultivation—or through inducement to join criminal or self-defense groups to protect their families. They can also be kidnapped and exploited in tasks such as the transport of substances between regions and states. From a gender perspective, girls and young women face additional risks: they can be used as instruments of coercion to recruit the men in their families or be forced into sexual and affective bonds with members of armed groups.

According to their own testimonies and the specialized literature, children and adolescents have stopped playing in the streets out of fear of criminal group members. They have learned to hide in order to survive, and they know that life in their villages and communities holds no better future for them. That must be sought somewhere far away, preferably in the United States where the

groups that rob them of their peace and lives cannot find them. Amid these coercive dynamics, and in their decision to flee in the face of recruitment threats, their families also cultivated active praxis of survival and life. This is undertaken not only to protect the family and resist violence, terror, and daily death, but also to forge alternative futures (Glockner et al., 2023) or as Borzacchiello (2024, p. 61) so aptly puts it, to *rExistir*<sup>13</sup> [to resist/exist] with a “generative hope.”

This analysis contributes to the understanding of recruitment as a phenomenon that is both rooted in the structural violence that pushes children and adolescents into armed groups, and deliberately wielded as a strategy of pressure and control over the population. Such control is sustained through threats, fear, and the State’s demonstrated incapacity to protect the families and communities now ravaged by criminal violence. At times this takes the form of abandonment, state apathy, or collusion to the point where no distinction remains between organized crime and the State.

Acknowledging this reality is essential for acting in accordance with the mandates and responsibilities established within the international framework for the protection of children and adolescents’ rights, as well as international conventions on asylum, trafficking, torture, and exploitation. It should also lead to the development of national measures in prevention, containment, and care, given the reality these children, adolescents, and their families face on a daily basis. Finally, it is important to highlight that the United States, as the primary consumer of illicit drugs produced in Mexico, and the main source of weapons for organized crime groups, has a responsibility to fairly evaluate the asylum claims of Mexican nationals in accordance with international agreements and its own immigration laws.

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<sup>13</sup> In her book *¡rExistimos! El feminicidio y la telaraña de poderes* (2024), Emanuela Borzacchiello defines *rexistencia* (re-existence) as a political and social stance that goes beyond mere survival or opposition to violence.

academics and advocates alike. Her legacy guides us toward a vision of academia as a tool for empathy, dignity, and meaningful change.

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