



The Price of a Dream: An Analysis of
the Exploitative Systems Facing Migrants
Trying to Enter the United States

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For migrants, the United States represents the promise of a new life, a dream that fuels what might be the most dangerous journey of their lives. Historically, migrants have traveled in pursuit of opportunity, driven by the hope of securing a better future for themselves and the next generation. However, for the countless individuals unable to secure a legal path to citizenship, the journey to this promised land is not one of opportunity but of exploitation, pain, and betrayal. Many will inevitably face a grim reality, where their pursuit of a better life ends in the grip of exploitative systems that profit from their desperation. This analysis aims to provide a broader understanding of the forces driving migrants into the arms of human traffickers through deceptive promises and the entrenched systems of for-profit detention and cross-border human trafficking.

Origin of the Journey: Why Migrants Seek a New Life

The journey that draws a migrant to the U.S. results from a broad range of reasons, from financial desperation to threats on their life or for political asylum. People from all over the world are pushed to leave their homes due to economic instability, violence, or political persecution. What compels them to take the dangerous and uncertain route toward the U.S. is often the belief that there is no other choice. Poverty, crime, and oppression act as catalysts, pushing migrants to make the journey. However, the hope of a better life is often clouded by a critical question: who profits from their suffering? Whether corrupt government officials back home, criminal networks that control migrant routes, or seemingly legal yet deceptive agents promising “safe” and “legal” alternatives, these individuals and groups exploit the dire need of the migrant. What has been created is a false promise working to sell the idea of a better life but in reality, ensuring that the migrant’s pursuit of safety and prosperity is obstructed at every turn. It would not be fair to call this simply an “American problem,” as if the horrors begin and end with American lawmakers.

Interestingly, globalization and the advent of social media have resulted in a shift in the demographics of the type of migrants not typically seen taking these dangerous routes. Platforms like WeChat, Instagram, and Facebook have become essential tools for both traffickers and legitimate organizations, offering a space where promises of opportunity and success are easily made, and broken. The global nature of these platforms has expanded the reach of dishonest actors seeking to exploit anyone they can. Social media is becoming a

true marketplace where vulnerable individuals are lured by the false hopes of a better life. Larger nations like Indian and Chinese migrants now represent anomalies in the broader migration trends reaching a global audience and are no longer a simple cross border issue. Despite the two nations having some of the world's fastest and largest growing economies, recent data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection shows a dramatic spike in undocumented people of Indian and Chinese nationals migrating crossing U.S. borders on foot. Historically, illegal migrants from these two nations were more commonly seen in the category of visa overstays, but the changing global paradigm of what used to be simple cross border migrant movements has drawn some to Latin America in an airplane and then take the foot route to the United States. What might be contributing to this is the extreme visa backlogs making legal pathways increasingly inaccessible, leading more individuals to seek dangerous routes.

Those Who Profit from Desperation

Like the old saying goes “never let a good tragedy go to waste”, the systems in place that migrants interact before reaching the United States is one shaped by a system that often turns a blind eye to their suffering. We now lay witness to a complex international network of people and systems that profit from the migrant's journey from the day they decide to make the trip, to the day they arrive at the border. Some of these exploitative groups are entirely illegal smuggling networks that operate in the shadows, using human trafficking as their primary source of income that use stolen ID and fake passports. These criminal organizations not only endanger the lives of migrants but also take advantage of their vulnerability, charging them exorbitant fees for what is often a journey fraught with danger and deceit. In particular, the Indian student visa system offers a prime example of this predatory behavior. Many recruitment agencies and consultants' prey on students seeking education abroad by charging exorbitant fees for university placements and visa processing, while often offering little to no real assistance. These agents promise students a better future, only for them to find themselves stuck in a cycle of debt, working long hours in exploitative conditions to pay off the fees. Employers in countries like the U.S. or Canada might hire these international students under the guise of

offering "career-building" opportunities, frequently take advantage of the students' vulnerable status by offering low wages or imposing excessive working hours. While it may be legal to sell services that promise opportunities for a better life, the ethical implications of profiting from the dreams of the vulnerable cannot be ignored. In some ways, these groups show little regard for the humanity of the migrant, prioritizing financial gain over their well-being.

Those migrants that understand the nature of their journey is going to be illegal are a different story. They are people who understand that what they have to do is by law criminal, yet it is something they must accept out of desperation. These are the migrants that are forced to cross through the southern border from Mexico to the United States. These are individuals that either depart from economically unstable nations like Venezuela, or fly into countries with loose visa restrictions like Ecuador as their launching point. These migrants have chosen to undertake one of the most dangerous foot routes on the planet for the sake of a better life. Inadvertently This journey itself is where dreams can turn into nightmares. Along the route there are countless entities that see these migrants not as people but as commodities to be exploited. The dangers are vast and multi-layered. Corrupt border officials in countries along common migration routes often see the movement of people as an opportunity to demand bribes or impose fees for safe passage, forcing migrants to deplete the little money they have. Human traffickers, posing as guides or "coyotes," promise safe passage but often abandon migrants in life-threatening conditions or sell them into forced labor or sexual slavery.

Into the hands of Criminals

The Darien Gap, which is a sparsely populated land bridge that connects South America and North America. The area is dominated by powerful Mexican cartels like Los Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel. The Colombian side of the Darien is inhabited by Colombia's most powerful drug cartel, the Gulf Clan, which uses migrants as a key source of income and drug distribution. All these cartels intercept caravans, extort families for ransom, and force migrants to work in drug production or distribution as a condition for their passage. Migrants who cannot pay are subjected to violent attacks, or worse—some are even killed as

warnings to others. These criminal networks exploit migrants' desperation, making an already difficult journey even more dangerous which is enabled by the broader issue of neglecting the wellbeing of migrants

The exploitation does not end with the cartels. Migrants are also targeted by smaller, but equally as vicious groups, and even opportunistic individuals. These bandits patrol isolated stretches of land, robbing migrants of their meager possessions. Moreover, predatory drivers promise transport but leave travelers stranded in hostile environments. In some cases, even local communities further along the Pan-American route, such as Tapachula in Chiapas, Mexico, are complicit in schemes to cheat or harm migrants, selling overpriced goods, false documents, or fake travel services. For many, the perils of being targeted by criminals eventually compound into overlapping systems of neglect and outright hostility from governments who see them as a burden. In transit countries, these people are a burden on local resources. In other regions, such as Tamaulipas, Mexico, there are overcrowded, unsanitary, and violent detention centers. Additionally, in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, local authorities crack down harshly on undocumented travelers, often collaborating with the very criminal networks they are supposed to combat, such as MS-13 or Barrio 18, which are notorious criminal gangs with a presence in Central American countries, who target migrants for extortion, robbery, or forced recruitment. This hostile environment leaves migrants with little choice but to rely on the same exploitative networks they initially hoped to avoid. In some cases, people who are smuggled may become victims of human trafficking or exploitation during their journeys or upon reaching their destination. They may be forced into labor or sex trafficking, or their families may be extorted. They can also be exploited by criminal networks in other ways.

The Coming of the Migrant Detention Industrial Complex

With the election of United States President Donald Trump, facilitating migrant detention has become a profitable endeavor. Companies run detention centers or temporary housing under contract with federal organizations ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). These privately owned contract facilities are infamous for providing substandard care and overcrowded conditions as a cost-cutting measure aimed at appeasing shareholders. As the

migrant crisis intensifies, many detained are left in limbo, further marginalized and vulnerable to exploitation. Private corporations like the GEO Group, CoreCivic, and the Management and Training Corporation (MTC), exploits vulnerable individuals through a system that was designed to generate value, not to perform a civic duty. In fact, with Donald Trump assuming the Presidency, The GEO Group, one of the largest private detention companies in the U.S. made the news which had seen its shares skyrocket by 32%.

Immigrant detention centers demonstrate how private companies are more focused on maximizing profit than ensuring the safety or well-being of detainees. If we say we are people who strive to facilitate human rights, why do we neglect those people who have undergone tremendous trauma and hardship. It feels like We've chosen to shield responsibility via corporate bureaucracy and crony backroom dealings. The GEO Group, CoreCivic, and MTC maintain powerful lobbying influence that has ensured that the flow of detained migrants remains steady and profitable. The government's attempt to manage the flow of migrants has, in effect, turned into a lucrative business venture for private companies, with each detained individual representing a financial asset. This shift in policy from treating immigration as a humanitarian concern to an economic incentive is a clear and egregious display of profiting off misery.

A Step toward Ethical Solutions for Migration Challenges

To address the humanitarian crisis occurring from the migrations we need systemic reform that transcends just laws is imperative, not necessarily allowing open immigration, but confronting the issue of immediate needs for safety. Governments must prioritize ethical facilitation policies that provide humane housing, involving every legal authority involved, which includes the country of origin of the migrant. Social media companies must be held accountable in helping stop trafficking networks who operate on their platforms in addition to international partnerships between social media companies and law enforcement can help dismantle criminal organizations preying on migrants. Perhaps most importantly, policymakers must move beyond viewing

migration as a burden or threat, reframing it as a humanitarian issue requiring collaborative global action, most importantly with the involvement of migrant's country of origin.

A dream should not be exploitation, suffering, or death. Accountability for those who profit from misery, and ensuring the humane treatment of migrants is the ideal vision. A system that balances security with compassion can serve as a model for ethical policy. Achieving this balance requires not only legislative action but also a collective commitment to preserving the dignity and rights of all individuals, no matter their origin or the path they take.

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