

## Central American Women Trafficked to Texas

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**Abstract:** The United States is the most important destination country for sex trafficking victims from Latin America. In over 20 states, including Texas, have been identified cases of international sex trafficking. This article, based on qualitative interviews with 9 sex traffickers operating in Texas and 23 women from Central America trafficked to Texas, aims to describe how Mexican sex trafficking networks operate in Texas, and examine the characteristics of Central American women trafficked to this state. We conclude that some of the women transported by sex traffickers know they are going to work in the sex industry, while others, principally underage girls, are deceived into thinking they will work in a different activity.

**Keywords:** Sex trafficking, prostitution, undocumented women, Central America, Mexico, United States.

### INTRODUCTION

The midcontinent region of North America is characterized by a proliferation of sex trafficking networks transporting Central American and Mexican women from south to north. Some of the women transported by sex traffickers know they are going to work in the sex industry in the destination country [1-4]; while others are deceived into thinking they will work as dancers, models or even farm workers [5, 6]. The Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) elaborated by the United States Department of State has pointed out that Honduras and Nicaragua are areas of origin and transit; while El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize, Mexico and the United States are a source, transit and destination countries for women and children subjected to sex trafficking [7-9].

The United States is an exception among developed countries, because as Shelley [10] has pointed out patterns of trafficking in the United States resembles more those of a developing than a developed country. Sex trafficking victims in the United States are younger than in other developed country. Moreover, the United States is a destination and source country for sex trafficking victims and has sex tourism on his territory. In over 20 states (Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, Texas, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky and Arkansas) have been identified cases of international sex trafficking [11]. According to the US Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA): “approximately 50,000 women and children are trafficked into the United States each year” (Public Law 106-386. Sec. 102[b]), primarily from Latin America.

This article, based on qualitative interviews with 9 sex traffickers and 23 women from Central America trafficked to Texas, aims to describe how Mexican sex trafficking networks operate in Texas, and examines the characteristics of Central American women trafficked to this state. We first examine the literature on sex trafficking and prostitution in Texas; then we go on to describe the methodology, and finally we examine sex trafficking networks operating in Texas and describe the characteristics of Central American girls trafficked to Texas.

### Sex Trafficking and prostitution in Texas.

The State of Texas 1856 Penal Code prohibited the keeping of a house of public prostitution. However, this statute was generally ignored [12]. From 1870 to 1910 prostitution mushroomed in Texas. A prosperous sex industry was feed by three elements: the presence of troops at military posts in west Texas and along the Mexican border, the oil boom [13] and the expanding railroad network [14]. Reliable figures about prostitution are not easy to establish. According to Bridges [12] most women in prostitution in Texas were aged between 15 and 26 years old. On the other hand, it can be inferred that from the Civil War to World War I most women employed in the sex trade were US born, both Anglo and black women [14]. On the contrary, the presence of Hispanic women was limited, and they were more common in communities closer to the Mexican border [13]. However, migrant women and women of color were more criminalized. While native-born women in prostitution were seen as victims; on the contrary, non-white and/or immigrant women were blamed for their depravity [15].

In the early twenty century flourished in the United States a campaign to change American attitudes toward sex, prostitution emerging as a major national

issue. Anti-prostitution social reform movements (feminists and purity groups) draw on the rhetoric of abolition to eradicate prostitution through education and the removal of „red light“ districts, the sex trade being criminalized. On the contrary, the medical profession took a pragmatic attitude toward the problem of prostitution. Supporters of regulation maintained that the medical inspection of prostitution not only helped to curtail the spread of venereal diseases, but also prevented prostitution from spreading [16]. Regulationists conceived the prostitute as a “fallen woman” responsible for his position in life. On the contrary, abolitionists reconceived the prostitute as an innocent and agency-less “white slave” tricked into prostitution, who had to be rescued and returned to civilized society [17].

From the Civil War to World War I many Texas communities passed ordinances outlawing prostitution; however, it was condoned under certain conditions [13]. Towns’ budget difficulties and financial woes were the main reason red-light districts were allowed to remain in existence. According to Bridges [12] “prostitution was extralegal and tolerated in late nineteenth century Texas, primarily due to the revenue that could be gained from its continued existence”.

Until the first decade of the 20th century most cities in the United States had „red light“ districts, where the sex trade was tolerated despite anti-prostitution laws. However, from 1909 Red Light Abatement laws were enacted all over the country. These laws began in Iowa and had spread to 41 states in the course of a decade [17]. From the second decade of the 20th century regulationist thought declined while abolitionist thought escalated. Accordingly, one year after the 2010 Mann Act passed, a state law against pandering was approved in Texas. This abolitionist law focused on madams and pimps, and punished anyone who procured a girl, willingly or not, and those who owned a house of prostitution [12].

After the World War I the Anti-prostitution movement spread all over the country and „red light“ districts started being abolished. As a result, prostitution was temporarily cut down in Texas larger cities; but never was eliminated. In the many oil boom towns prostitution expanded rapidly, as prostitutes found a ready supply of customers [13,16]. From the 1920’s and 1930’s prostitution entered a new phase in Texas.

Prostitutes worked in hotels, apartments and rooming houses, and customers were contacted by telephone, making police detention more difficult [13, 16]. Although, in some cities, like El Paso, prostitution continued flourishing in „red light“ districts until the 1930s [17]. Accordingly, by 1952 Galveston had the only „red light“ district of the United States [18]. Red-light districts became more resistant to attack in Texas than in other parts of the country; however, after the 1950s many brothels were forced to close, and the volume of prostitution was set on a downward trend [13, 16].

Texas has been characterized by weak prostitution and commercialized vice law enforcement during the last decades of the twentieth century. However, things changed with the enactment of the TVPA. Texas was one of the first states to pass human trafficking legislation. Consequently, after the passing of the federal law prostitution enforcement increased [19]. Prostitution is a crime in Texas; but the law does not adequately discriminate between adults and minors, who are subject to criminal penalties for engaging in prostitution. Native and foreign victims of sex trafficking are frequently arrested for prostitution in the United States [20-22]. In 2010 the State Supreme Court reversed the conviction of a thirteen-year-old girl for prostitution under the argument that children are the victims, not the perpetrators [23, 24]. This example indicates that in Texas victims continue being punished for crimes of which they are victims.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research is based on a qualitative methodology. Data were collected by means of in-depth interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. Contact with interviewees was made via social networks and snowballing in different Mexican states

Between 2015 and 2017 were interviewed nine sex traffickers who transported women from Mexico and Central America to Texas. Interviewees were originating from: Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, Chiapas, Guanajuato, Tabasco, Tamaulipas and Veracruz (see table 1). Most sex traffickers (88.9%) transported women from Mexico and Guatemala. More than three-fourths (77.8%) carried women from El Salvador and Honduras, while only one of the interviewees (11.1%) transported women from Nicaragua, Belize, Colombia or Cuba (see table-2).

**Table-1: Place of origin of sex traffickers interviewed**

	Coahuila	Nuevo Leon	Chiapas	Guanajuato	Tabasco	Tamaulipas	Veracruz	Total
n	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	9
%	22.2	22.2	11.1	11.1	11.1	11.1	11.1	100

Source: Compiled by the authors from data recorded in the interviews

**Table-2: Place of origin of women transported by sex traffickers**

	Mexico	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Belize	Colombia	Cuba	Nicaragua	Total
n	8	8	7	7	1	1	1	1	9
%	88.9	88.9	77.8	77.8	11.1	11.1	11.1	11.1	100

Source: Compiled by the authors from data recorded in the interviews.

On the other hand, between 2015 and 2017 were interviewed twenty-three women from Central America who had been transported to Texas by sex trafficking networks. All had been deported from the US and were interviewed while in transit through Mexico. Two-fifths (39.1%) of the women interviewed

originated from Guatemala, almost one-third (30.4%) were born in Honduras, near one-fourth (17.4%) came from El Salvador, while two of the interviewees (8.7%) were born in Nicaragua and one (4.4%) in Belize (see table-3).

**Table-3: Country of origin of women interviewed**

	Guatemala	Honduras	El Salvador	Nicaragua	Belize	Total
n	9	7	4	2	1	23
%	39.1	30.4	17.4	8.7	4.4	100

Source: Compiled by the authors from data recorded in the interviews.

The methodological rigor of this study is anchored in the following elements: (i.) the recording and literal transcription of all qualitative material; (ii.) the use of a guide that included a few minimum information requirements; (iii.) the selection of informants willing to talk extensively about their experiences; (iv.) the continuation of data gathering to the point of saturation; (v.) prolonged residence in the field; (vi.) guaranteed anonymity regarding the information collected, and (vii.) the selection of a large number of locations for fieldwork.

**Sex trafficking networks operating in Texas**

Sex traffickers' age ranged from 33 to 42 years and they became involved in sex trafficking between the ages of 25 and 36 years old. Therefore, all interviewees had considerable experience in the business of sex trafficking, ranging from 5 to 8 years. Respondents started working in sex trafficking between the years 2007 and 2012. They had 0–12 years of schooling, and the age at which they started working ranged from 6 to 14 years old (see Table-4). Interviewees' low level of education was the result of needing to work from childhood to sustain the family financially [2, 25, 26].

**Table-4: Selected characteristics of sex traffickers interviewed**

	Average	Mode	Median	Min	Max	Standard deviation
Age	38.3	40	39	33	42	3.12
Years of schooling	6.3	9	8	0	12	4.21
Age when started working	9.9	--	9.5	6	14	2.90
Year when started working in sex trafficking	2009	2008	2009	2007	2012	1.54
Age when started working in sex trafficking	31.7	33	33	25	36	3.54
Number of years involved in sex trafficking	6.7	8	7	5	8	1.22

Source: Compiled by the authors from data recorded in the interviews. (n = 9)

Sex trafficking networks studied are differentiated by the number of women transported per crossing but not by the number of times they operate per year, for which there are very similar values across all networks. Accordingly, the number of times sex trafficking networks operate per year ranges from 2 to 4 times. On the other hand, the number of women transported per crossing ranges from 8 to 20 people; although, networks transporting approximately ten women are more prevalent. These networks transport very young girls [1, 2, 27]. While the minimum age of the girls fluctuates from 14 to 17 years of age, the maximum age ranges from 18 to 25 years of age (see table-5). Therefore, all of the sex trafficking networks studied transported underage girls to be prostituted in Texas. On the other hand, undocumented women over

25 years old were not demanded by the Texas prostitution industry.

**Central American women trafficked to Texas**

Central American women's age ranged from 18 to 30 years old. Respondents had 0–9 years of schooling, and their low level of education was the result of needing to work from childhood to sustain their family financially [28]. The age at which they started working fluctuated from 7 to 17. After working in different activities 5.3 years on average, interviewees were prostituted in their home countries or abroad between the ages of 12 and 22 years old, and they were trafficked to Texas between the ages of 13 and 22 years old. Women interviewed were 23.6 years old on average; however, all had been involved in prostitution

for a very long time, ranging from 4 to 13 years (see Table-6).

**Table-5: Sex trafficking networks operation**

	Average	Mode	Median	Min	Max	Standard deviation
Border crossings per year	2.7	3	3	2	4	0.51
Number of women per crossing	11.3	10	10	8	20	2.96
Minimum age of women	15.3	16	16	14	17	1.1
Maximum age of women	23.7	25	25	18	25	2.34
Source: Compiled by the authors from data recorded in the interviews.(n = 9)						

**Table-6: Selected characteristics of women interviewed**

	Average	Mode	Median	Min	Max	Standard deviation
Age	23.6	25	24	18	30	3.05
Age when started working	11.3	10	10	7	17	3.31
Years of schooling	3.3	0	3	0	9	3.20
Age when prostituted	16.6	19	17	12	22	2.59
Age when trafficked to Texas	17.2	19	17	13	22	2.49
Years in prostitution	7.1	9	7	4	13	2.50
Monthly salaries in Texas	5856	6000	6000	4800	6500	496.2
Source: Compiled by the authors from data recorded in the interviews.(n = 23)						

Interviewees' long experience in commercial sex work derived from being prostituted and trafficked at a very young age [1, 2, 3, 29]. As can be seen from table 7 two-thirds (65.2%) of Central American girls were prostituted between the ages of 12 and 17 years old, and only one-third (34.8%) were prostituted between the ages of 18 and 22 years old. Less than one third (30.4%) of respondents were prostituted in their country of origin or Mexico before being trafficked to

the United States, while more than two thirds (69.6%) of interviewees did not have any experience in prostitution before being trafficked to Texas. On the other hand, more than half (56.5%) of the women interviewed were trafficked from Central America to Texas between the ages of 13 and 17 years old, while only two-fifths (43.5%) were over 18 years old (see table-7).

**Table-7: Age when Central American girls were prostituted and trafficked to Texas**

		12	13	14	15	16	17	Under-age	18	19	20	22	18 & older	Total
Were prostituted	n	1	3	1	3	3	4	15	1	5	1	1	8	23
	%	4.3	13	4.3	13	13	17.4	65.2	4.3	21.7	4.3	4.3	34.8	100
Were trafficked	n	0	2	2	2	3	4	13	0	6	3	1	10	23
	%	0	8.7	8.7	8.7	13	17.4	56.5	0	26.1	13	4.3	43.5	100
Source: Compiled by the author from data recorded in the interviews.														

**Fees paid by women from Central America trafficked to Texas**

Central American women had to pay large fees to sex traffickers operating in Texas. Mexican sex traffickers interviewed reported fees similar to those reported by Central American women. According to sex

traffickers fees rose to 4075 USD on average, ranging from a minimum of 2600 USD and a maximum of 6000 USD. On the other hand, Central American women said that fees being paid to traffickers rose to 4025 USD on average, ranging from a minimum of 1500 USD and a maximum of 7000 USD (see table-8).

**Table-8: Fees paid by women from Central America trafficked to Texas (USD)**

	n	Average	Mode	Median	Min	Max	Standard deviation
Reported by sex traffickers	23	4075	3000	4000	2600	6000	1190
Reported by women	9	4025	3000	3750	1500	7000	1705
Source: Compiled by the authors from data recorded in the interviews.							

**CONCLUSION**

The demand for trafficked women in Texas sex industry is significant. Women from Central America are trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation into Texas by Mexican sex trafficking networks because foreign undocumented women are more easily exploitable than native women. Some of the women

transported by sex traffickers know they are going to work in the sex industry, while others, principally underage girls, are deceived into thinking they will work in a different activity.

According to the data collected in this study Mexican sex trafficking networks transport very young

girls. Consequently, all of the sex trafficking networks studied transported underage girls to be prostituted in Texas. Moreover, more than half of the Central American women interviewed were trafficked to Texas between the ages of 13 and 17 years old, while just over two fifths were 18 years and older at the time when they were trafficked.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article present results from Research Project CB-2013-01-220663 entitled “Trata y prostitución en México (Sex trafficking and prostitution in Mexico)”, financed by the National Council of Science and Technology (SEP/CONACYT).

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