

Violence and Vulnerability of Female Migrants in Drop Houses in Arizona: The Predictable Outcome of a Chain Reaction of Violence

Violence Against Women

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Abstract

This qualitative research study examines the experiences of immigrant women crossing the U.S./Mexico border and the proliferation of “drop houses” in Arizona as a new phenomenon, one that is often marked by kidnappings and sexual assault. Little research has been published on the violence women face on their journey, and the drop houses have almost completely escaped scholarly analysis. We argue that the drop houses must be seen as a consequence of a “state of emergency” declared by policy makers that led to changes in U.S. national and local immigration policies that fueled what we call a “chain reaction of violence.”

Keywords

gender and migration, sexual violence, states of exception, U.S./Mexico border

Phoenix, Arizona, received much attention from public officials and the media, as it has been portrayed as one of the worst kidnapping locales in the world. These claims were rightfully subject to critique, as existing data does not allow for such comparisons. But lost in the furor over rankings and statistical reports were the identities and experiences of the victims. The media rarely reported that the vast majority of those

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kidnapped were undocumented migrants held in drop houses for ransom after making the journey across the U.S./Mexico border. Conditions in the drop houses could be isolating and severe, with multiple layers of violence coalescing on the individuals being held, in addition to the kidnappings. According to Simmons and Téllez (2014), a number of these victims—female and male, adults and children—were subject to sexual assault.

This violence is not isolated to Phoenix. Dozens of drop houses have been raided throughout South and Central Arizona and other major migrant transit cities around the United States, such as Houston, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Atlanta, as well as numerous locations in Mexico.¹ Indeed, it appears that organized crime syndicates move drop houses from city to city in response to attempts by law enforcement officials to crack down on the activity. For example, after crack downs in Phoenix, parts of Southern Texas reported spikes in the number of drop houses (Fernandez, 2012).

While exact numbers of kidnappings and sexual assaults in the drop houses will prove elusive, the numbers are likely greater than those reported by law enforcement. Crimes such as kidnappings (Alvarez, 2007) and sexual assaults are often grossly underreported (Bachman, 2000; Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000), as are crimes where the victims are migrants, especially the undocumented (Menjívar & Bejarano, 2004).

Undocumented migrants from Mexico, Central America, and South America have been migrating to the United States for decades, but the proliferation of drop houses marked by kidnappings and sexual violence appears to be a new phenomenon. We argue that their emergence must be seen as a consequence of a “state of emergency” declared by policy makers that led to changes in U.S. national and local immigration policies that further fueled what we call a “chain reaction of violence.” The rise of border security operations in California and Texas in the 1990s, followed by increased security and the militarization in and near the main towns along the Arizona border, has led the migrants to take circuitous and hazardous routes into the Southern Arizona deserts and mountains (see Dunn, 2009).

In Arizona, the major, and easiest, crossing points have now seen enormous increases in Border Patrol equipment and personnel. Successfully navigating past this militarized border enforcement zone and the unyielding terrain requires advanced human smuggling operations resulting in a lucrative business with individual migrants paying upward of US\$5,000 each for the services of a coyote or guide, thus attracting organized crime elements seeking a profit (Cornelius, 2007; Fuentes, Perez, Perez, & White, 2007). Border crossing today has been transformed from the crossing of individuals who used to hire more seasoned guides to large and highly organized operations resembling human smuggling rings (Spener, 2009). Within this new context, a new group has appeared near the border, called *bajadores* (bandits) also known as “rip-off crews,” which are groups of armed men who often ambush groups of migrants, robbing them, and in many cases stealing the migrants from the coyotes (O’Leary, 2009; Simmons & Téllez, 2014; Spener, 2009). The passage of federal laws, as well as local and state policies in Arizona that have further stigmatized immigrants, has created an atmosphere where victims of the violence that takes place during the journey

are reluctant to come forward and this has substantially increased the impunity for a wide range of violent acts.

With increased militarization and the resulting cartel-like control of migrant traffic, in our research, we found that many migrants' experiences reflected constant vulnerability, where they were at the mercy of coyotes, gangs, cartels, and bajadores. They were often disoriented along the journey, fearful of being left behind, split from family members or friends, and held against their will. Once they reached the drop houses in Phoenix, Tucson, and other "distribution" points, it is not unusual for them to be kept until family members agree to pay additional monies for their release. The migrants often even get taxed for housing and food. In short, their entire journey traverses a series of *states of exception* (see Agamben, 2005; Simmons & Téllez, 2014), where they are subject to lawless conditions.

Our data document this increasing violence and, in this article, we argue that these productions of violence are linked to the larger context in which the state both produces violence and condones it by creating an environment that facilitates criminality (Kil & Menjívar, 2006; Menjívar, 2011). In other words, this violent context is facilitated by a legal regime (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012) that focuses on border enforcement, but also increasingly relies on a vast array of technology for interior social control (see Kanstroom, 2007). These state policies, by increasing militarized enforcement and creating conditions for the mistreatment of immigrants, led to the productions of violence that emerged in drop houses, as those who were in charge of these operations mimicked state practices, constituting a chain reaction of violence from the state to the individuals who were smuggled. Understanding these links and this type of violence as a chain reaction offers a new perspective on the question of who possesses and exercises power, and the possibilities of ending the states of exception that make migrants vulnerable. Thus, the task at hand, theoretically and practically, is to establish the links that make up the chain reactions of violence (Bourgois, 2004; Menjívar, 2011). And although we acknowledge that women and men, girls and boys suffer various forms of violent treatment, in this article, we focus on the experiences of women so as to expose how state power, through this chain of violent acts, intersects with gender (and other social positions).

Background: Crucial Elements in the Chain Reaction of Violence

Increased border security emerged as a hot political topic in the 1970s, spurred by sensationalistic portrayals of undocumented immigration, drug trafficking, and occasionally even the threat of terrorism (Dunn, 1996). These portrayals argued for the need of serious security measures to repel an invasion of "illegal aliens," to win the "war on drugs," and to counter terrorism. In effect, the military rhetoric created the space for "low-intensity conflict" in the region (Dunn, 1996).

Nativist political rhetoric in the 1990s, followed by the War on Terror after 9/11, led to well-publicized increased border security measures in California and Texas. As a

result, the Arizona–Sonora, Mexico border has become the largest transit route of undocumented migrants into the United States. The Tucson sector alone (the eastern two thirds of the Arizona border) has accounted for more border apprehensions than any other sector since 2000, and for 43% of the apprehensions along the entire border (Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2010). The resulting migrant traffic flows led to increased security in and near the main towns along the Arizona border so that the traditional and easiest crossing points have now seen enormous increases in Border Patrol equipment and personnel. This has led the migrants to take circuitous and hazardous routes into the Southern Arizona deserts and mountains, where extreme temperatures and rough terrain pose life-threatening risks for the migrants. Thus, the most tragic “unintended consequence” of increased border enforcement has been the increase in deaths at the border (Cornelius, 2007; Eschbach, Hagan, Rodriguez, Hernández-León, & Bailey, 1999) with a total of more than 2,000 migrant bodies found in the desert in the last decade (Hagan, Rodriguez, & Castro, 2011; Phillips, Hagan, & Rodriguez, 2006; Rubio-Goldsmith, McCormick, Martinez, & Duarte, 2007).

It is important to note that the increased risk of apprehension and the additional danger of crossing do not deter migrants from intending to cross (Fuentes et al., 2007). The increasingly harsh socioeconomic conditions in the sending communities as a result of neo-liberal economic policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Central American Free Trade Agreement, together with rising levels of violence and common crime there and family separation resulting from previous crossings and deportations (see Slack, Martínez, Whiteford, & Peiffer, 2013), outweigh the risks of the journey. The recent downturn in migrant crossings from Mexico is probably due as much to the weakened economy in the United States and, particularly in Arizona, where immigrant labor makes up a significant portion of the labor force, as stepped-up enforcement policies (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzales-Barrera, 2012). However, crossings of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador have not shown signs of decreasing, pointing to specific conditions in the contexts of exit in Central America, where weaker and smaller economies, high rates of violence, and various natural disasters coexist to shape continued high rates of emigration.

According to a report by the Center for American Progress, in 2010, 55% of all people obtaining a green card were women, and in the same year, there were more immigrant women than immigrant men arriving in the United States (Kelley & Wolgin, 2012). Given the intersecting power relationships present at the U.S./Mexico border crossing, female bodies from Mexico and Central America become the most vulnerable to violence across multiple scales via human smugglers, via the state through representatives who implement policies, and via a culture of patriarchy and misogyny that allows violence against women to continue with impunity. For instance, in her study of border militarization, Falcón (2007) equates the situation along the U.S./Mexico border with low-intensity conflicts around the globe (see also Andreas, 2002; Dunn, 1996; Spener, 2009). This militarization brings with it and exacerbates “hyper-masculinity, colonialism, and patriarchy” (Falcón, 2007, pp. 203–204; cf. Enloe’s [2000] work on the general effects of militarization on women through which women’s

bodies are targeted for sexual assault and other attacks). Thus, with the increase in female migration, we now also see dramatic increases in violence against women during the crossing experience (Slack et al., 2013). The immigrant women who cross the border are already experiencing multiple vulnerabilities due to poverty, racism, discrimination, and legal status, and often feel that they are to blame for the sexual assaults because they did not do enough to resist or they were forced to consent. This situation reveals how multiple forms of violence coalesce in the women's lives (see Menjívar, 2011). Thus, structural, symbolic, and gender forms of violence make migrant women vulnerable in the sending country, during their journeys, at the border, and inside the United States (see Menjívar, 2011; Simmons & Téllez, 2014). In this article, we will highlight these connections so as to understand the violent acts that the women experience as part of their border crossing and drop houses experiences.

Government Policies Fueling Impunity and Violence

In this section, we outline how a series of government policies generates impunity and leads to increased violence against women. Indeed, current government policies lead to what we have labeled an extreme form of secondary victimization.

The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 made possible the exponential increase in deportations we have seen in recent years through the delegation of certain functions of federal immigration to selected state and local agencies through various mechanisms, including the better known 287(g) agreement. In addition, local and state policies in Arizona that have stigmatized immigrants have expanded the states of exception as they have created an atmosphere where the general public, and even immigrants and their families, believe that violence against immigrants is justified because "they broke the law" (see Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

The state of Arizona has passed a series of laws that facilitate the identification and removal of undocumented workers from the state. Thus, workplace raids and traffic stops facilitated by these laws have become commonplace measures to identify undocumented immigrants residing in the state. The passage of these laws in quick succession has contributed to expanding a culture of fear in immigrant communities, particularly Latino, in the state.

In addition to the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office's (MCSO) notorious "crime suppression sweeps" that started in 2006, Arizona passed and enacted several laws meant to make the lives of undocumented immigrants so difficult that they would "self-deport." Proposition 200, passed in 2004, requires social service providers to check for immigration status; HB 2008, passed in 2009, requires proof of citizenship to receive federal, state, or local benefits, while making it a class 2 misdemeanor for administrators who do not report violations; and the Legal Arizona Workers Act 2008 (LAWA), or "employer sanctions law," provides civil sanctions for employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers. In addition, the notorious SB1070 was passed in 2010. Although most portions of this law have been struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court, the section that requires law enforcement agencies to ask for proof of legal residence of anyone stopped or detained went into effect in September 2012. The

anti-immigrant rhetoric together with anti-immigrant policies and media images depicting immigrants as criminals have pushed the undocumented population, including those victimized in the drop houses, further underground, and this battery of state laws increased migrants' mistrust of law enforcement personnel and social service providers (Khashu, 2009; Vidales, Day, & Powe, 2009).

In general, Latinos/as are less likely to report those crimes that among other groups are often most reported (Menjívar & Bejarano, 2004; Theodore, 2013), including violence with a weapon and violence committed by a stranger. Indeed, studies have found that Latinos/as are likely to avoid police, even if they are documented (Khashu, 2009; Menjívar & Bejarano, 2004). This underreporting is believed to be tied to language barriers, poor understanding of the system, distrust of law enforcement officials, and in the case of undocumented immigrants, fear of being asked about their immigration status (Davis, Erez, & Avitabile, 2001). In an especially poignant exchange, Menjívar and Bejarano's (2004) study in Phoenix recounts the case of a woman who

explained that she is aware that the police are more helpful here than the police were in Guatemala, but would not call them in case of need because she is still undocumented and fears she may get deported. Her fear is so extreme that once she almost lost her life rather than calling the police. (p. 134)

Moreover, Vidales et al. (2009) found that just the controversy over whether the local police department in a small town in California should enforce immigration laws, a measure that ultimately did not pass, led Latinos/as to hold more negative views of the police, and be less likely to report a crime. A hostile context for immigrants, therefore, exacerbates the unwillingness of migrant victims, especially the undocumented, to report a crime or to trust law enforcement officials because before they are seen as a victim, they will first be categorized as a criminal. In essence, nativism and the hostile anti-immigrant context give officers permission to treat immigrants as criminals and not as victims (Lerner & Goldberg, 1999).

Immigrant women face particular vulnerabilities in cases of violence against them, where issues of gender, race, class, and power differentials become intertwined in a complex web that increases their vulnerability (Crenshaw, 1991; Menjívar & Salcido 2002), a situation that is exacerbated when they are undocumented (Salcido & Adelman, 2004). This is particularly the case when the women's partners are petitioning them for permanent legal residence through family reunification laws (Salcido & Adelman, 2004). However, even when this is not the case, research has found that migration-specific factors (Menjívar & Salcido, 2002), such as new forms of employment and labor force participation for immigrant women (Grzywacz, Rao, Gentry, Marín, & Arcury, 2009) can exacerbate tensions in the home and lead to violence and, in general, Latina and Asian women face significant barriers—political, cultural, social, and economic—when seeking medical and social services in situations of violence (Bauer, Rodriguez, Szkupinski Quiroga, & Flores-Ortiz, 2000).

Thus, the mistreatment that migrants suffer in the drop houses is exacerbated by their precarious undocumented status and distrust of law enforcement (Correia, 2010).

Some migrants are told by the smugglers who hold them in the drop houses that if they do not cooperate or if they report the assaults, they will be returned to the desert to let Border Patrol take care of them, or if they are in Maricopa County, they will be turned over to the notorious MCSO. Migrants know that if they report any abuse, they run the risk of detention and removal, thus undermining everything they did and endured to get to the United States. They might not be able to work, would be removed from the United States, and would be separated from their families.

Furthermore, migrants who are apprehended by law enforcement officers and subsequently detained are also at risk of abuse. Migrants in short-term custody face a “culture of cruelty” as documented by the human rights organization, *No More Deaths* (2011), in a report issued in 2011. They conclude, based on thousands of interviews with deportees, that many incidents of abuse and neglect by the Border Patrol “plainly meet the definition of torture under international law” (p. 5).

The state of exception that migrants face when caught up in the U.S. legal system is exacerbated by government agencies’ lack of resources and poor training for dealing with migrants. Simmons and Téllez (2014) found that most law enforcement and social service agencies working with the drop houses were markedly understaffed, and they especially lacked qualified Spanish speakers, let alone speakers of other languages such as indigenous languages spoken by Central American or Southern Mexican migrants. Many of the law enforcement agencies reported having few female agents to interview women and girls, and there were few officers who were specifically trained to work with sexual violence victims. Furthermore, tending to the victims of sexual violence did not appear to be an operational priority of any agency. Their priority was investigative work that would lead to capturing the smugglers, especially the kingpins. This tension between conducting an investigation and victims’ welfare is a common theme in the literature. For instance, “prosecutors pressure law enforcement to be aggressive in obtaining physical evidence and conducting ‘good’ interviews with victims, in short to ‘build a good case,’ and these pressures regularly override concerns with victims’ welfare” (P. Y. Martin, 2005, p. 54).

An Extreme Form of Secondary Victimization

The migrants who suffer kidnapping for ransom in the drop houses have little chance to receive social services for the multiple victimizations they faced because they are rarely seen as victims, and instead they are often seen as criminals who must be processed as quickly as possible. This situation can be understood as an extreme example of what has been labeled secondary victimization, that is, “the victim-blaming attitudes, behaviors, and practices engaged in by community services providers, which result in additional trauma for rape survivors” (Campbell, 2005, p. 56). Secondary victimization often occurs when the victims are made to feel blame for their sexual assault through interrogations about their sexual histories, how they were dressed, as well as the failure of law enforcement to consider their claims credible or to minimize their suffering (see also Menjívar, 2011). Rebecca Campbell (2006), for example, concluded that “most women reported feeling violated, depressed, and anxious after their

contact with medical professionals” (p. 31). Secondary victimization is also well documented in interactions with law enforcement personnel. Studies have “found that most survivors of rape report feeling guilty, depressed, anxious, distrustful of others, and reluctant to seek further help after their interactions with legal system personnel” (Campbell, 2006, p. 31).

Migrant women found in drop houses likely face secondary victimization by law enforcement (Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, & Barnes, 2001) as would be manifest by their reluctance to pursue cases, including pressuring victims not to press charges and not filing a report on the case (Campbell et al., 2001). Studies have shown that societal norms affect secondary victimization (Edward & MacLeod, 1999). If the victim does not fit the law enforcement officer’s preconceived notion of what a rape victim should be—usually someone who looks innocent, is hysterical, not under the influence of alcohol, and is badly bruised—he or she will find the victim much less credible, and would be more likely to not file a report or pursue the investigation (Edward & MacLeod, 1999). This suggests that the anti-immigrant attitudes in Arizona could play a major role in the secondary victimization of migrant victims. Furthermore, while several studies have shown that steps can be taken to ameliorate secondary victimization such as the presence of rape victims’ advocates and access to rape crisis centers (Campbell, 2006; Kelleher & McGilloway, 2009), these are highly unlikely to be provided to drop house victims.

We also suspect that the increased emphasis on human trafficking, as evidenced by the passing of an anti-trafficking law in Arizona in 2005, and increased attention from activists, scholars, the media, and law enforcement officials could have had the counterproductive effect of leading law enforcement officials to neglect offenses that they do not classify as trafficking. This is ironic when we consider how much the victimization of migrants in drop houses and on their journeys are similar to those of trafficking victims (Clawson, Small, & Myles, 2003; Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2010). Indeed, the conditions in the drop houses often meet the international definition of human trafficking, but law enforcement officials, even those with training in human trafficking, do not recognize the victims as trafficking victims (Simmons & Téllez, 2014, pp. 59-60). While there is a cottage industry of literature and training on trafficking victims and their needs, very little is known about the violence experienced by migrants, especially in the drop houses.

Data and Method

To better understand the experiences and vulnerabilities of undocumented migrant women, we conducted a qualitative study in the spring of 2009² that consisted of 50 interviews with social workers, humanitarian groups, local and federal law enforcement, consulate staff, and victims’ advocates who had significant direct contact with the migrant population. Law enforcement included border patrol, officials with ICE, and local officials. Consul staff included consuls as well as those working more directly with migrants such as “Protection Officers.” Our sample was initially drawn from contacts identified from previous work on immigration issues in Arizona as well

as a snowball sample to identify other important stakeholders. The interviewees held a range of attitudes toward U.S. immigration policy and the rights of immigrants.

Our study encompassed three geographical regions: the vast Phoenix metropolitan area (approximately 120 miles from the border), the Tucson metropolitan area (approximately 60 miles from the border), and Nogales (a border town) and the surrounding areas in the Sonoran desert. The interviews were evenly divided between these three areas. In all interviews but one that involved undercover officers, we recorded the interviews using digital recorders and took copious notes. Several interviewees also provided us with official and unofficial reports from their organization and other data that we consulted in drafting this article.

These in-depth interviews were semistructured with a general set of open-ended questions that centered on three areas: the interviewees' knowledge of prevalence and types of violence experienced by migrants, prevention and victim support services, and recommendations for addressing the issue. These interviews lasted from 30 min to 2 hr. When the participant was more comfortable in Spanish, approximately one fourth of the time, we conducted the interview in that language. The recordings were transcribed and translated into English if necessary by a team of four graduate students, and then cross-checked with our field notes. All data analyses were completed in English. We used constant comparison and concept coding (Charmaz, 2006) to generate lists of key concepts and develop connections between them that were then subject to revision as we gathered more data. Nodes and subnodes were also created using NVivo software to map connections between main concepts. Data triangulation was done by comparing field notes with transcriptions and official reports, and investigator triangulation was assured by having at least two researchers code the data.

Drop Houses and Their Place in the Migrant Journey

Based on the in-depth interviews conducted for this project, here we describe in detail the course of a migrant's journey that ultimately led them to drop houses in Arizona, marking an overall experience that consists of violence and vulnerability. As we will demonstrate, the increased abuse of migrants is a reflection of the violence inflicted by the state, including the contexts of multifaceted violence within which migrants are forced to leave their homes and countries (see Menjivar, 2011). In the next section, we will use these data to further refine our theoretical framework on chain reactions of violence.

The Borderlands: Intimidation and Impunity

Given increased enforcement along the U.S./Mexico border, human smuggling operations have become more professionalized (see Spener, 2009) with previously informal human smuggling operations now intertwined with more professionalized drug smuggling operations. Several interviewees noted the links with crime cartels as evidenced by the increase in the number of weapons used. Something of an arms race has developed between law enforcement agencies and the cartels that control human and drug

smuggling into the United States (as well as the smuggling of guns and money into Mexico). As more powerful and high-tech weapons are used by the U.S. Border Patrol, the cartels have responded by increasing their use of technology and increase their firepower to maintain their smuggling operations. Migrants are caught in the middle of this conflict.

The crimes against migrants taking place in the desert along the borderlands are almost always carried out with impunity, in part because of the geographic and jurisdictional vastness of the crime scene, with migrants often not sure even in which country they were assaulted. They may be severely disoriented by the perils already encountered along the journey, including the confusing landscape, exhaustion, thirst, and hunger. As border enforcement policies have pushed migrant smuggling to work side-by-side with drug smuggling, it is not unusual to hear reports of coyotes forcing migrants to take drugs, supposedly to provide them with energy but which often are similar to Rohypnol or other “date-rape” drugs that cause disorientation.

Furthermore, law enforcement officials rarely find out about these crimes, as the victims and any potential witnesses are distrustful and fearful of being identified and then removed from the country. When law enforcement officials are informed of a crime, it may often be several days after the incident. In short, there are very few leads for investigators to follow. As one officer in our study said, “I have never had anyone recognize someone in the desert. The women are exhausted, tired, disoriented and they don’t know where they are. There is no frame of reference.” Moreover, there is little incentive for officials to pursue these crimes as their mandated priorities are with large-scale traffickers of drugs, money, and guns—those at the top of the criminal syndicate hierarchy.

Drop Houses in Phoenix and Tucson

After the migrants make it through the gauntlet of the border, which includes law enforcement officials, bruising terrain, and the coyotes and bajadores, they are usually picked up along roadsides at night and shipped by trucks, vans, or cars to either Tucson or Phoenix. Tucson is most often something of a temporary way station, while the vast Phoenix metropolitan area became the main distribution point of migrants to elsewhere in the United States and increasingly a final destination for many of the migrants. Migrants who are smuggled by a paid coyote are often kept in drop houses before continuing their journeys. Many of these houses are gathering places where migrants are reunited with their families or friends. However, as migration has become corporatized and militarized, the drop houses have increasingly become places of involuntary detention where, in some cases, migrants are kept in (near) slave-like conditions. It appears from our data that, in general, the drop houses in Phoenix were much more violent than those in Tucson.

In Tucson, there were two major types of drop houses. The first were smaller in scale and usually run by friends of family members of the migrants. These were places for the migrants to rest and be nourished, and to wash up before continuing on their journey. This first type corresponds to the informal smuggling networks that formerly

predominated in Arizona. The second type was the more securitized drop houses run by organized crime syndicates. These houses are fortified to prevent migrants from leaving, often with plywood screwed to the windows from the inside and doors that lock from the outside. The accommodations are sparse, and weapons are ever present. Frequently, migrants are kept in these houses against their will, only allowed to leave once family members or friends pay an “extra fee” or ransom. Rarely, however, are migrants, even in these organized, structured, drop houses, kept for more than a night or two in Tucson. Therefore, there were only a few reports of sexual assaults in the drop houses in Tucson.

The second type, the more fortified drop houses, is much more prevalent in Phoenix, as are sexual assaults. The overwhelming majority of violent incidents stem from migrants being held against their will in drop houses or from attacks on drop houses by other gangs or cartels where migrants are kidnapped and taken to yet another drop house. ICE officials raided approximately 160 to 200 drop houses per year between 2007 and 2009 with somewhere between 20 and 60 of these involving hostage situations, including a house in the affluent Phoenix suburb of Scottsdale that held approximately 200 migrants. These numbers have dropped sharply in the past year, with 31 drop house raids reported through the first 9 months of fiscal year 2011 (Ross, 2012). While law enforcement officials claim that stepped up policing has led to this drop, it is clear that reduced immigration overall has also played a key role.

The drop houses associated with criminal syndicates represent a state of exception where the smugglers control operations from beginning to end. Although we do not seek to absolve the smugglers from their acts, it is important to take a step back from the acts themselves (often reported in gruesome detail in the media) to establish the links between these violent acts and the violence from state, as these individuals mimic what the state does. With the corporatization and militarization of migrant smuggling resulting from increased border enforcement, smugglers tend to see migrants as commodities, an attitude that represents the other side of the coin of the criminalization of immigrants in the current immigration regime.

The violence reported at these drop houses, as reported by law enforcement officials in our study, includes “murder, pistol whipping, electrocution with lamp cord wires . . . shooting over someone’s head, shooting someone, a lot of verbal abuse, and rape and sexual assault” (Simmons & Téllez, 2014, 56). One agent described what she labeled “sexual torture,” which is sexual assault using inanimate objects and rapes of migrant men. We also heard stories of migrant men forced to rape migrant women or perform oral sex on other migrant men.

Sexual Assault

The sexual assaults³ in the drop houses are routine and take place in the general state of exception in which migrants find themselves under the current immigration regime. As an ICE agent in our study succinctly observed, the total control, including the terror and sexual assaults, is possible “because the smuggler can.” Another law enforcement officer said, “Sometimes the smugglers will take a migrant in the closet and others in

the house can hear them crying out and the other migrants in the house know what is coming. So it sends a message to the group.” The men and women are often kept in separate rooms, with the smugglers choosing women to be assaulted in a special room set aside for that purpose. A social worker related the following story from a female migrant:

They pick and choose, “ok, I want you today, or I want you next, I want you tomorrow” . . . they grab you and they throw you into a room and you cannot leave . . . they keep threatening you that if you don’t do what they say, they are going to kill your family, “I know where your family lives” . . . so on and so on . . . so she said it’s because of that reason she couldn’t fight too hard. She tried to push him away, she tried to say no . . . but neither of those worked.

A law enforcement official in our study reported a story of a girl who was kept in a hotel room who was raped three times a day for a full week by the smugglers. She eventually escaped through the bathroom window to seek help. “When the police found her on the street, she reported that she was raped several times at the hotel. The police went to the hotel and found 60-70 people at the hotel.”

The smugglers see the migrants as commodities, so they do what they can with them as they please, as long as it does not damage the value of the commodity. Another law enforcement official reported that “the young girls, sometimes they want to keep their virginity intact so they violated her orally because they thought they could get more money for her as a virgin.” Other women, after being raped, are told by the perpetrator how to “clean up” to erase any incriminating evidence before they are released. In an ironic nod to traditional gender roles, many of the women are required to cook and clean and take care of the smugglers while held captive in the house.

The length of time migrants remain in the drop houses depends on how long it takes for their family members to come forward with additional payment. While waiting for the family members, “it is an opportunity for them [smugglers] to sexual assault/rape the women” (interview with law enforcement official). We heard stories from law enforcement officials of the smugglers being “on their phone with the relatives in some cases while they are raping the woman . . . it is a power thing, they are not really nice people.” This is how state power, through this chain of violent acts, intersects with gender to recreate vulnerabilities.

Many cases that our study participants described to us seem to have connections to prostitution and meet the legal definition of human trafficking; yet, very rarely are these cases seen by law enforcement as trafficking in persons. One Tucson law enforcement official reported that he had never seen a case of trafficking, even though he had been part of several raids on drop houses. Even law enforcement agents with training on human trafficking did not see these cases as meeting the legal criteria for trafficking. As noted, because of the prevalent anti-immigrant rhetoric and attitudes, these victims tend to be seen merely as illegal immigrants to be processed quickly and removed from the country. In an ironic twist, Arizona’s anti-trafficking law, passed in 2005, has been used to charge immigrants for their own smuggling (and thus bringing

felonious charges against them), rather than against those who victimize the women. Women who experience time in drop houses bear a triple disadvantage that often dehumanizes them and, because as undocumented immigrants they have “broken the law” in the eyes of the public, positions them as deserving the worst treatment (see Menjívar & Abrego, 2012).

For reasons explained above, the women and the witnesses tend to be reluctant to confide in U.S. law enforcement officials. As one official said, even when “we get a report from a male that a female in the house was being raped/sexually assaulted . . . the female will never admit it.” Agents even described something akin to what psychologists have termed *Stockholm syndrome* in which the women fall in love with the smugglers, or at least get closer to them for protection for themselves and their family members and as a way of coping with a potentially violent situation. If a woman is released by the smugglers and reunited with her family, she will rarely tell anyone what happened, including members of her own family. This may be because the women are afraid to contact authorities for fear of detention and deportation and fear of the smugglers who may take revenge on the women’s families.

What we know from other relevant academic areas of study is that the multiple victimizations that migrants face in the drop houses require special services from law enforcement and social service providers (Finkelhor, Ormrod, & Turner, 2007; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). But as migrants are criminalized in general, women who have endured these multiple violent victimizations are likely subject to secondary victimization that will lead to even more trauma (Alves & Correia, 2009). Precisely, because of the efforts from law enforcement to apprehend, detain, and deport, women will rarely come forward to seek help, and because migrants are criminalized, the traditional means to alleviate secondary victimization, such as through well-trained victims advocates and access to rape crisis centers, will rarely be provided in the drop house context. The migrant victims will not receive the services they desperately need, a situation with substantial impacts on the criminal justice system, leading to under-reporting, failure to file cases, and inability to prosecute perpetrators.

Discussion: Chain Reactions of Violence

Our empirical observations document the multiple vulnerabilities and violence that migrant women face on their journey, especially in the drop houses in Arizona. To better understand how this set of human rights abuses arose and have been perpetuated, we rely on our empirical observations as well as our various experiences working on immigration and gendered violence issues in many contexts (e.g., Menjívar, 2011; Simmons, 2007; Simmons & Téllez, 2014). In this way, we can theorize how government policies have created what we call “a chain reaction of violence.” The policies and practices of the U.S. and Mexican governments have unleashed a set of reactions that seem to have gone beyond their control or at least beyond intended objectives. Think of a chemical or nuclear chain reaction where reactive elements interact and lead to a self-perpetuating and exponential growth in the number of reactions. A nuclear chain reaction can be controlled if there is a delay in the development of some

of the reactive elements; that is, something can intervene and stop or at least slow down the chain reaction. The violent reactions can be harnessed for energy or for other, more destructive purposes.

Applied to the rise of violence in the drop houses in Arizona and the multiplication of violence for Central Americans during the journey in Mexico and for Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States, we see several reactive components coming together into something of a perfect storm (Mueller, 2014). Like a chemical or nuclear chain reaction where the process can be inevitable and self-perpetuating as long as a combination of elements remain in an environment suitable for the initial reaction, the violence involving migrants can be long-lasting and self-perpetuating.

The large wage disparities between the United States and its southern neighbors, mixed with enormous displacements of individuals stemming from the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Central American Free Trade Agreement, and other neo-liberal policies, civil wars in Central America and common crime as well as natural disasters, such as hurricanes and earthquakes, have led millions of Mexicans and Central Americans to migrate to the United States. This continued migration has led to a hyper-partisan and vitriolic, rhetoric-filled atmosphere and to increased militarization of the Mexico–U.S. border that translates into unsettling terrain for migrants. In response, more dangerous and more sophisticated means have been developed to successfully cross the border. Quite predictably, as even the U.S. government foresaw, this scenario would lead to more migrants dying in the deserts and mountains (Jimenez, 2009). And organized enterprises that once focused almost solely on drug smuggling have reacted in a “rational” way (at least in the market sense) and moved operations into the smuggling industry (and criminal activities), thus driving out the traditional, more migrant-friendly coyotes of the past (Spener, 2009).

The increase in the number of undocumented migrants in the country, an increase propelled by border and immigration policies, has led Arizona and other states to enact increasingly draconian measures such as Prop 200 and SB 1070, both of which predictably led to even more migrants being reluctant to come forward to seek help from law enforcement or social services. Law enforcement officials become caught up in the “illegal immigration” rhetoric, and see migrants solely as “illegals” to be dealt with through quick deportation. The number of migrants seeking asylum or other relief from deportation has overwhelmed the immigration courts and the service side of the immigration system (Ramji-Nogales, Schoenholtz, & Schrag, 2007), as the service side of the system receives only a tiny portion of the resources that the enforcement side receives. When migrants are treated beneath dignity by the government and by society at large (see Menjivar & Abrego, 2012), the *bajadores* and smugglers mimic these actions and further commodify the migrants, even injuring them physically. This is dangerous terrain because, as Massey (2007) observes, the dehumanization that this mistreatment makes possible “opens the door for the harshest, most exploitative, and cruelest treatment that human beings are capable of inflicting on one another” (p. 150). Thus, new ways of exploiting migrants have appeared and increased exponentially, including the kidnapping of migrants by *bajadores* and the seeking of ransom from family members when migrants are held against their will in drop houses. After all, the

migrants spend huge sums of money to hire their guides and cannot be exploited further for financial gain without involving family members who might have more resources.

We have come to the point where this process seems to be self-perpetuating because the components of the chain continue intact. Importantly, removing just one piece of this chain will not stop the chain reaction. Even when the U.S. economy is in free-fall, the migrants continue to arrive, albeit in smaller numbers, because they have family members in the United States and because conditions in their countries are even worse. The violence may be delayed, but the chain reaction is still in place. Even if law enforcement cracks down on drop houses in Phoenix, the elements that create the demand and forces that lead to abuse are still in place. When a well-publicized crack-down on drop houses was instituted in Phoenix in 2007 and 2008, one ICE official confided that even if the drop houses are stopped there, they will just be moved to other U.S. cities like Dallas or Houston, or to Mexico. Predictably, soon after, violent drop houses sprang up in numerous places within Mexico (BBC News, 2011). Even if a major cartel figure is arrested or killed, the structural elements that led to the emergence of these actors will breed others.

Conclusion

Clearly, the immigration system, composed of federal and state policies, is leading to a series of states of exception. The consequences of these policy failures are not abstract. They are concrete, embodied in the daily lives of migrants, specifically the most vulnerable, such as poor migrant women. While some might argue that the way to address this violence is to increase enforcement policies, we argue that such policies would lead to yet more vulnerability and violence to migrant women. Moreover, efforts to criminalize small-time smugglers neglect the multifaceted structural violence that leads poor people from Mexico and Central America to engage in these activities.

Our analysis suggests that further enforcement strategies by themselves will not stem the tide of migration, but instead will lead to increased militarization, further control by organized criminal syndicates, and exacerbate the vulnerability of migrants, especially women and girls who are treated more and more like commodities. Failure to change immigration policies, or changing them in ways injurious to immigrants themselves, as we have presented here, will expand the state of exception—paradoxically, the more law, the more lawlessness. And in the perception of law enforcement officials and the public, migrant women, men, and children will be seen first and foremost as lawbreakers or commodities and not as deserving of protection.

A state of exception is marked by lawlessness but also by hyper-legality. In either case, governmental or nongovernmental actors possess a large dose of discretionary power over vulnerable populations. The large migration flows, the steep growth in the power of organized criminal networks, and the inability or unwillingness of the Mexican and U.S. governments to address the situation have led to states of exception where already marginalized peoples are made even more vulnerable and are subject to numerous human

rights abuses. Lawless zones exist throughout Mexico and its neighboring regions. Migrants kidnapped by gangs and kept at gunpoint in a drop house are at the mercy of their captors. Migrants caught by border patrol agents in the remote deserts depend on these agents' professionalism to protect their few rights (Falcón, 2007). Towns that have been taken over by the cartels have little opportunity to complain. Undocumented workers in the United States have little recourse when their wages are withheld by exploitative employers. All these are forms of violence that act on one another to affect the lives of migrants, particularly women, in the short and long term.

In the past few years, several changes have been made to immigration policies. Major parts of Arizona's SB 1070 were struck down by the U.S. Supreme Court and the remaining provisions are still being challenged (Téllez, Sanidad, & de la Fuente, 2011). The MCSO, which has been responsible for many of the high-profile migrant sweeps, is facing civil suits from migrants and from the Department of Justice. The Obama administration has implemented a policy to temporarily protect young migrants from deportation (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) DACA, but at the same time has increased deportations to historic highs. Understanding the states of exception as a chain reaction of violence suggests that while tweaks to current laws could improve the lives of many vulnerable individuals, particularly women, the underlying dynamics will remain until more thorough overhaul is achieved. Inequalities in wealth will continue to lead migrants to cross into the United States and the receiving society would be well served by providing a humane place to arrive free from the multiple violent victimizations that create conditions to emigrate.

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Notes

1. The Mexican Human Rights Commission reported that in the first 6 months of 2010, more than 11,000 Central American migrants were kidnapped in Mexico alone (BBC News, 2011).
2. The research team consisted of Dr. Robin Haarr (Eastern Kentucky University), Dr. Michelle Téllez (Arizona State University), and Dr. William Paul Simmons (University of Arizona) and several graduate research assistants.

3. We describe the sexual assault here with some hesitation. We are concerned about revictimizing the victims through this narrative, but we see value in making visible the different sources of violence that assault the lives of women (Menjívar, 2011).

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