



# RESEARCH GUIDE CENTRAL AMERICA

PREPARED BY

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# BELIZE • COSTA RICA EL SALVADOR • GUATEMALA HONDURAS • MEXICO • NICARAGUA • PANAMA

*This research guide follows the regional division defined by the United Nations Statistics Division*

*Continental North America includes countries of Northern America, the Caribbean, and Central America. Central America is geographically a part of North America but politically and culturally its own distinct region.*

*Intergovernmental organizations include the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Organization of American States (OAS), Caribbean Community (CARICOM), Association of Caribbean States (ACS), Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), Central American Parliament, Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), Central American Integration System, Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and Pacific Alliance.*

## MAJOR FORMS OF TRAFFICKING:

- Migrant smuggling/ trafficking
- Forced labor/ forced domestic work
- Child labor/ child labor trafficking
- Child soldiers (Colombia)
- Sexual exploitation/ sex trafficking
- Sex tourism
- Commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents

## SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY:

**Migrant Smuggling:** The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime defines smuggling as the “facilitation, for financial or other material gain, of irregular entry into a country where the migrant is not a national or resident.” Smuggling is distinct from trafficking as the participant has given their consent to be transported. However, migrants

who originally agreed to be smuggled can be exploited and trafficked against their will during their journey. Migrants' increased vulnerability to trafficking during transport makes the line between human trafficking and migrant smuggling harder to define. Smuggled migrants are often held in debt bondage or sold on to traffickers on arrival in the destination country. Central American countries, particularly Mexico, serve as both an origin, transitory site, and destination for migrant smuggling..

**Trata de personas y explotación sexual de niñas, niños, y adolescentes (ESNNA):** The commercial sexual exploitation of children is the exploitation of minors for sexual or erotic purposes in exchange for money, gifts, or benefit. In Central America, ESNNA is particularly pervasive in the field of tourism and travel. Children are frequently exploited in resort and tourist areas by local intermediaries and Western European, Canadian, and American tourists. Commercial sexual exploitation of children also occurs online through the Internet or the use of ICT (information and communications technology).





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**“Polleros”:** The slang Spanish term “pollero” is used for a person who smuggles migrants often into the United States. The term “coyote” is also used; however, according to the Office for Victims of Crime, “coyote” appears to refer more specifically to border smuggling which occurs over more rural areas.

**“Enganchadores”:** The Spanish term “enganchadores” is used to refer to intermediaries who serve as recruiters for either laborers or customers of exploitative labor or sex work. The term “reclutadores” is at times also used to refer to a recruiter of trafficking victims.

**“Padrotes”:** The Spanish term “padrotes” is used for a person who recruits victims, often women and girls, into sex trafficking. The term is comparable to that of “pimp” in English. “Lenones” is also used in a similar manner.

**“Caifanes”:** The Spanish term “caifanes” typically refers to men who recruit young women from indigenous families for sex trafficking. They travel to impoverished states in Mexico, particularly Chiapas, or to other Central American countries in order to find indigenous families. After building a relationship with the father of the family, they offer to purchase their daughters.

**Forced/Exploitative Begging:** This recently identified form of trafficking occurs across the globe. Regionally it is connected mainly to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua. Victims are forced to beg through threat of severe violence or torture. With many migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers passing through or resettling across Central America there remains a large number of victims to exploit as forced beggars, including children.

**Irregular Migration:** Movement of persons that takes place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements governing the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit or destination. This type of migration can render migrants vulnerable to abuse, trafficking and exploitation as a result of the migrants' irregular status. The irregular routes that are used are often precarious and can be deadly. Additionally, irregular migrants may have arrived in a state through regular pathways but become an irregular migrant for reasons, such as denied asylum claims, becoming a victim of trafficking, etc. Please also refer to the note below on the Irregular Migration.

*Note on Irregular Migration from the International Organization on Migration (IOM): Although a universally accepted definition of irregular migration does not exist, the term is generally used to identify persons moving outside regular migration channels.*

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*The fact that they migrate irregularly does not relieve States from the obligation to protect their rights. Moreover, categories of migrants who may not have any other choice but to use irregular migration channels can also include refugees, victims of trafficking, or unaccompanied migrant children. The fact that they use irregular migration pathways does not imply that States are not, in some circumstances, obliged to provide them with some forms of protection under international law, including access to international protection for asylum seekers fleeing persecution, conflicts or generalized violence.*

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*In addition, refugees are protected under international law against being penalized for unauthorized entry or stay if they have traveled from a place where they were at risk (Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137, Art. 31(1)).*

## TIP REPORT:

The U.S. State Department releases an annual Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP), which ranks countries on a three-tier system based on their efforts to combat human trafficking. TIP Reports can be found on the State Department's website and the HTS database.

## MAJOR TRAFFICKING ROUTES:

- El Salvador/Honduras/Guatemala → Mexico, United States, Belize
- Mexico → United States
- Colombia/Ecuador/Peru → Central America
- Nicaragua → Central America/Europe
- Africa/Asia → Mexico
- Southeast Asia → Costa Rica

Tip Report rankings for 2022 are listed below, followed by more detailed descriptions broken down by country, with strategic information pulled from the 2022 TIP Report.

## TIP REPORT 2022

- None of the Countries of Central America are Tier 1
- Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama are all at Tier 2
- Belize moved up from Tier 2 Watchlist to Tier 2
- El Salvador moved from Tier 2 down to Tier 2 Watchlist
- Nicaragua is remained the only country in Central America on Tier 3

## COUNTRY BREAKDOWN:

**Belize:** The Government of Belize did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Belize was upgraded to Tier 2. These achievements included convicting two traffickers and applying adequate sentences; expanding the size of its Anti-Trafficking (A-TIP) Police



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Unit, which increased investigations; improving data collection and case monitoring; opening a shelter for unaccompanied children at risk for trafficking in cooperation with an international organization; and prioritizing anti-trafficking funding and implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP). However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not adequately address official complicity in trafficking crimes, reports of which remained common; did not adequately oversee labor recruitment or investigate allegations of trafficking; and did not take measures to reduce demand for commercial sex. Authorities reportedly did not consistently screen migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers for trafficking and may have deported or arrested unidentified trafficking victims due to weak victim identification and a lack of formal identification procedures such as frontline officer guidelines.

Groups considered most at risk for trafficking in Belize include migrants, children, individuals experiencing economic difficulties including pandemic-related unemployment, and LGBTQI+ persons. Sex traffickers exploit Belizean and foreign adults and girls and LGBTQI+ persons, primarily from Central America, in bars, nightclubs, hotels, and brothels. Due to the pandemic, sex trafficking has mostly moved to more tightly controlled, illegal brothels rather than bars and clubs—which were closed from March 2020 to March 2022—and involve a network of taxi operators who provide a connection between individuals in commercial sex and patrons; the change has made reporting more difficult as the commercial sex trade moves further underground. Tourism-related industries lure laborers through the offer of legitimate service jobs and exploit them in sex trafficking. These illicit operations are typically small in scale and unconnected to organized transnational trafficking rings.

Family members facilitate the sex trafficking of Belizean women and girls, including through an arrangement where a wealthy male will offer payment or gifts to a family in exchange for sex from a young, usually female, family member. This practice has expanded to Guatemalan victims unable to pay school fees in Belize. Although most victims in the country are Belizean, foreign adults and children—particularly from Central America, Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, and Asia—migrate voluntarily to Belize or stop en route to the United States in search of work, and traffickers often exploit victims using false promises of relatively high-paying jobs or take advantage of migrants' illegal status and exploit them in forced labor in restaurants, shops, domestic work, and agriculture. The law does not provide asylum seekers with work permits, placing them at constant threat of deportation that could increase their vulnerability to trafficking.

The number of labor trafficking crimes and scale of labor trafficking operations likely decreased in 2021 as a result of pandemic-related border closures and increased patrols that also limited illegal crossings. PRC nationals and Indian nationals may be exploited in Belize in domestic service. PRC nationals may be vulnerable to forced labor on fishing vessels registered in Belize. PRC nationals working in construction in Belize, during





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previous reporting periods, may have been forced to work, including by PRC-affiliated enterprises. Cuban workers in Belize may be forced to work by the Cuban government. In tourist regions, foreign child sex tourists, primarily from the United States, exploit child sex trafficking victims. NGOs report some police and immigration officers take bribes in return for ignoring trafficking, facilitating illegal entries, failing to report suspected victims and perpetrators, and failing to act on reported cases under their jurisdiction.

**Costa Rica:** The Government of Costa Rica did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Costa Rica remained on Tier 2. These efforts included prosecuting more traffickers, implementing a new national action plan to combat trafficking, and establishing new regional task forces to promote law enforcement coordination on trafficking cases. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not adequately fund its anti-trafficking efforts, reducing the allocation for victim services and not providing funding for campaigns to raise awareness of trafficking. The government investigated far fewer trafficking cases than in the previous reporting period and did not prosecute or convict any labor traffickers for the second consecutive year.

Traffickers subject Costa Rican women and children to sex trafficking within the country, with those living in the Pacific coastal zones and near the northern and southern borders being particularly vulnerable. Government officials report many traffickers operate independently, without a connection to organized crime, to exploit Costa Rican victims. Many victims are related to or otherwise know their traffickers. Authorities suspect that adults use children to transport or sell drugs; some of these children may be trafficking victims. Traffickers exploit LGBTQI+ persons, including transgender persons, in sex trafficking. Women and girls from Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, and other Latin American countries have been identified in Costa Rica as victims of sex trafficking and domestic servitude. Traffickers subject migrant adults and children, primarily from Nicaragua, to forced labor in agriculture and domestic service or to sex trafficking. Criminal organizations recruit and coerce individuals experiencing homelessness to smuggle contraband into prisons for the purpose of further criminal activity. Traffickers prey on migrants, some en route to the United States, from other Central American countries, the Caribbean, the People's Republic of China, and South America. Child sex tourism is a serious problem, with child sex tourists arriving mostly from the United States and Europe.



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**El Salvador:** The Government of El Salvador did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. These efforts included convicting more traffickers and identifying more victims. However, the government did not demonstrate overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti trafficking capacity. The government significantly reduced its number of specialized prosecutors. Fewer than half of all identified victims received government services or referral to outside care providers. The government did not implement procedures to identify potential trafficking victims among children apprehended for illicit gang-related activity or persons forcibly displaced from their homes. The government did not initiate any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of officials allegedly complicit in human trafficking crimes or report progress on investigations from previous years. The government's anti-trafficking council was inactive and did not draft a new national anti-trafficking action plan (NAP), publish a report on the government's 2021 efforts, or compile data from across different agencies. Therefore El Salvador was downgraded to Tier 2 Watch List.

Traffickers exploit adults and children in sex trafficking within the country; children without parents, adolescent girls, and LGBTQI+ persons, especially transgender persons, are at particular risk. NGOs reported sex trafficking occurs in the tourism industry. Traffickers often exploit victims within their own communities or homes, sometimes their own children or other family members. Traffickers exploit Salvadoran adults and children in forced labor in agriculture, domestic service, and begging. Traffickers exploit adults and children from neighboring countries—particularly Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua—in sex trafficking and forced labor in construction, domestic service, or the informal sector. Traffickers recruit victims in regions of the country with high levels of violence and capitalize on existing fears to coerce victims and their families through threats of violence. Limited government presence in gang-controlled territory exacerbates trafficking risks among vulnerable groups and limits their access to justice and protection. Many victims of forcible displacement are families fleeing the exploitation of children by gangs in their communities.

Gangs that have appropriated Indigenous land threaten Indigenous children for crossing gang territory, compelling them to drop out of school or leave home and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation. Gangs use the pretense of domestic employment to lure women into forced labor. Transnational criminal organizations and gangs including MS-13 and Barrio 18 recruit, abduct, train, arm, and subject children to forced labor in illicit activities, including assassinations, extortion, and drug trafficking—often within children's own communities. These groups subject women and children, including LGBTQI+ children, to sex trafficking and forced labor in domestic service and child care. Traffickers exploit Salvadoran men, women, and children in sex trafficking and forced labor in Belize, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States. Traffickers exploit some Salvadorans who irregularly migrate to the United States in forced labor, forced criminal



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activity, and sex trafficking en route or upon arrival. Traffickers exploit some Central and South American, African, and Asian migrants who transit El Salvador to Guatemala, Mexico, the United States, and Canada in sex and labor trafficking. Individuals without personal identification documents are highly vulnerable to trafficking. Traffickers increasingly use social media and messaging platforms to lure victims, including through false employment or educational opportunities abroad, and facilitate their exploitation; traffickers accelerated this trend as a means to reach potential victims in their own homes during the pandemic. Endemic corruption and complicity, including within law enforcement, the judiciary, the prison system, and local government, remained significant obstacles to anti-trafficking law enforcement efforts.

**Guatemala:** The Government of Guatemala did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Guatemala remained on Tier 2. These efforts included prosecuting and convicting more sex and labor traffickers, expanding justice sector presence and educational outreach for underserved communities, referring more victims to public and NGO shelters, and increasing training for frontline officials to identify and assist trafficking victims. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not provide sufficient specialized victim services given the scope of the problem, and monitoring and oversight in government shelters remained weak. Some criminal justice officials outside urban areas lacked sufficient knowledge of human trafficking elements and indicators or victim-centered methods. The government arrested officials suspected of complicity in trafficking crimes but did not prosecute or convict any complicit officials.

Traffickers exploit Guatemalan adults and children in sex trafficking within the country and in Mexico, the United States, Belize, and other foreign countries. LGBTQI+ persons are at particular risk of sex trafficking. Foreign child sex tourists, predominantly from Canada, the United States, and Western Europe, as well as Guatemalan men, purchase commercial sex acts from child trafficking victims. Traffickers exploit women and children from other Latin American countries and the United States in sex trafficking in Guatemala. Traffickers exploit Guatemalan adults and children in forced labor within the country, often in agriculture or domestic service. Traffickers subject Guatemalan adults to forced labor in other countries, including Mexico and the United States, in the garment industry and domestic service. Experts identified the coffee, broccoli, sugar, stone quarry, and fireworks manufacturing sectors as at risk for the potential use of forced child labor. Some women in forced marriages are subjected to domestic servitude. Traffickers particularly target Indigenous Guatemalans, including children, for forced labor, including in tortilla-making shops in Guatemala and foreign countries. Traffickers exploit Guatemalan children in forced labor in begging, street vending, and as street





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performers, particularly within Guatemala City and along the border with Mexico. Child victims' families are often complicit in their exploitation. Criminal organizations, including gangs, exploit girls in sex trafficking and coerce and threaten boys and young men in urban areas to sell or transport drugs or commit extortion. Traffickers exploit some Latin American migrants transiting Guatemala en route to Mexico or the United States in sex trafficking or forced labor within the country or upon arrival at their destination. Traffickers increasingly used online recruitment methods to reach victims, particularly children, in their own homes during the pandemic. Traffickers have exploited victims in migrant shelters. Authorities have investigated police, military, and elected officials for paying children for sex acts, facilitating child sex trafficking, accepting bribes from traffickers, or protecting venues where trafficking occurs. Government officials in the national banking system allegedly assisted traffickers in committing money laundering crimes. The government reported 416 Cuban medical workers in the country; these individuals may have been forced to work by the Cuban government.

**Honduras:** The Government of Honduras did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared with the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Honduras remained on Tier 2. These efforts included amending the penal code to increase penalties for trafficking crimes, identifying more victims, and nearly doubling funding to an NGO that provides shelter for victims. The government increased efforts to identify victims of forced labor and prosecute suspected perpetrators of forced labor crimes. The government approved a new victim assistance manual and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to strengthen victim identification and referral to services, and the Inter-institutional Commission to Combat Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking in Persons (CICESCT) sustained its efforts to provide immediate protection and coordinate among other providers for additional care. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government did not allocate adequate financial or human resources to effectively respond to trafficking crimes and provide comprehensive victim support throughout the country. The government did not report holding any employers or employment agencies criminally accountable for fraudulent recruitment practices or charging recruitment fees to workers.

Traffickers exploit Honduran women and children in sex trafficking within the country and in other countries such as Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Spain, and the United States. Traffickers particularly target LGBTQI+ Hondurans, migrants, IDPs, persons with disabilities, children in child labor, children whose parents have migrated, and individuals living in areas controlled by organized criminal groups. Officials report the pandemic worsened numerous issues that exacerbate these risks, such as family problems, unemployment, and lack of access to healthcare. Traffickers exploit victims within their own homes or communities, including sometimes their own family members



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or friends. Traffickers exploit Honduran adults and children in forced labor in street vending, forced begging, domestic service, drug trafficking, and the informal sector in their own country, as well as forced labor in other countries, particularly Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States.

Children, including from Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, particularly Miskito boys, are at risk for forced labor in the agricultural, construction, manufacturing, mining, and hospitality industries. Children who are homeless are at risk for sex and labor trafficking. Criminal organizations, including gangs, exploit girls in sex trafficking, force children into street begging, and coerce and threaten children and young adults to transport weapons, sell drugs, commit extortion, or serve as lookouts; these acts occurred primarily in urban areas, but one NGO reported an increase in gang activity in rural areas. Criminals expanded the use of social network platforms to recruit victims, often with false promises of employment, and continued to target vulnerable populations. Honduras is a destination for child sex tourists from Canada and the United States. Migrants from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central America, the Middle East, and South America who transit Honduras en route to the United States are vulnerable to being exploited in trafficking. Corruption and official complicity helped facilitate trafficking crimes.

**Mexico:** The Government of Mexico did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Mexico remained on Tier 2. These efforts included prosecuting and convicting more traffickers; identifying more victims; and arresting two former public officials for allegedly running a sex trafficking operation. Courts convicted more labor traffickers, including some who exploited children by forcing them to transport illegal substances. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. The government failed to allocate funds to a legally-required victim assistance fund; authorities did not consistently employ a victim-centered approach; and overall services for victims were inadequate. The government did not improve efforts to screen for indicators of trafficking among vulnerable populations and refer possible victims to service providers. Fraudulent recruitment practices continued to be widespread, but the government did not take steps to hold recruiters or labor agents accountable.

As reported over the past five years, human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Mexico, and traffickers exploit victims from Mexico abroad. Groups considered most at risk for trafficking in Mexico include unaccompanied children, indigenous persons, persons with mental and physical disabilities, asylum seekers and migrants, IDPs, LGBTQI+ individuals, informal sector workers, and children in gangcontrolled territories. Traffickers recruit and exploit Mexican women and children, and to a lesser





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extent men, in sex trafficking in Mexico and the United States through false promises of employment, deceptive romantic relationships, or extortion. The majority of trafficking cases occur among family, intimate partners, acquaintances on social media, or through employment-related traps. The online sexual exploitation of children reportedly increased during the year. Transgender persons are particularly vulnerable to sex trafficking. Traffickers increasingly use the internet, particularly social media, to target and recruit potential victims. Traffickers exploit Mexican adults and children in forced labor in agriculture, domestic service, child care, manufacturing, mining, food processing, construction, tourism, begging, and street vending in Mexico and the United States. Traffickers commonly exploit day laborers and their children in forced labor in Mexico's agricultural sector, with most victims coming from economically vulnerable and indigenous populations.

Individuals migrate from the poorest states to the agricultural regions to harvest vegetables, coffee, sugar, and tobacco; many receive little or no pay or time off; endure inhumane housing conditions without access to adequate food, clean water, or medical care; and are denied education for children. Some employers withhold weekly wages to compel agricultural workers to meet certain harvest quotas or continue working until the end of the harvest. Recruiters frequently employ deceptive recruitment practices and charge unlawful fees to place agricultural workers in Mexico and the United States; many workers are promised decent wages and a good standard of living, then subsequently compelled into forced labor through debt bondage, threats of violence, and non-payment of wages. NGOs estimated traffickers increasingly exploited individuals in forced labor in Mexico. The vast majority of foreign victims of forced labor and sex trafficking in Mexico are from Central and South America, particularly El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Venezuela—with Venezuelan victims increasing in recent years; traffickers exploited some of these victims along Mexico's southern border. NGOs and the media report victims from the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa have also been identified in Mexico, some en route to the United States. Among the Cuban medical professionals the government contracted to assist during the pandemic, some may have been forced to work by the Cuban government.

Thousands of Ukrainian refugees, predominantly women and children who are fleeing Russia's war on Ukraine, have arrived in northern Mexican border cities seeking sanctuary in the United States and are vulnerable to trafficking. Organized criminal groups profit from sex trafficking and force Mexican and foreign adults and children to engage in illicit activities, including as assassins, lookouts, and in the production, transportation, and sale of drugs. Experts expressed particular concern over the forced recruitment of indigenous children by organized criminal groups, who use torture and credible threats of murder to exploit these children in forced criminality. Criminal groups exploit thousands of children in Mexico to serve as lookouts, carry out attacks on authorities and rival groups, or work in poppy fields. Observers also expressed concern



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over recruitment of recently deported Mexican nationals and foreign migrants by organized criminal groups for the purpose of forced criminality. Migrants and asylum seekers in or transiting Mexico are vulnerable to sex trafficking and forced labor, including by organized criminal groups; this risk is particularly high for migrants who rely on smugglers. Observers, including Mexican legislators, noted links between violence against women and girls and between women's disappearances, murders, and trafficking by organized criminal groups. Observers reported potential trafficking cases in substance abuse rehabilitation centers, women's shelters, and government institutions for people with disabilities, including by organized criminal groups and facility employees. Trafficking-related corruption remains a concern. Some government officials collude with traffickers or participate in trafficking crimes.

Corrupt officials reportedly participate in sex trafficking, including running sex trafficking operations. Some immigration officials allegedly accept payment from traffickers to facilitate the irregular entry of foreign trafficking victims into Mexico. NGOs reported child sex tourism remains a problem and continues to expand, especially in tourist areas and in northern border cities. Parents are sometimes complicit in exploiting their children in child sex tourism, and children experiencing homelessness are believed to be at high risk. Many child sex tourists are from the United States, Canada, and Western Europe; Mexican men also purchase sex from child trafficking victims. Authorities reported trafficking networks increasingly used cryptocurrencies to launder proceeds from their crimes. Economic hardship resulting from the pandemic led some workers to accept loans from their employers that left them highly vulnerable to debt bondage.

**Nicaragua:** The Government of Nicaragua did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and is not making significant efforts to do so, even considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, if any, on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Nicaragua remained on Tier 3. Despite the lack of significant efforts, the government took some steps to address trafficking, including prosecuting eight alleged traffickers and convicting four sex traffickers. However, the government continued to downplay the severity of the trafficking problem in Nicaragua, contradicting civil society reports of increased cases during the pandemic; it did not have shelters or allocate funding for specialized victim services; the government made negligible efforts to address labor trafficking, although it remained a serious concern; and victim identification efforts remained inadequate. The government denied that traffickers exploited Nicaraguans in foreign countries, despite media reports that foreign officials identified several Nicaraguan victims. The government did not report any investigations, prosecutions, or convictions of government employees complicit in trafficking offenses, despite endemic corruption and widespread official complicity. The government did not cooperate with NGOs to provide protection services or include civil society in the national anti-trafficking coalition. Prosecution, protection, and prevention efforts in the two Caribbean autonomous regions of Nicaragua continued to be much weaker than in





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the rest of the country.

Women, children, and migrants in Nicaragua are especially vulnerable to trafficking. Traffickers subject Nicaraguan women and children to sex trafficking within the country and in other Central American countries, Mexico, Spain, and the United States. Victims' family members are often complicit in their exploitation. Traffickers take advantage of Nicaraguans' desire for economic opportunity through fraudulent offers of higher pay outside the country for work in restaurants, hotels, domestic service, construction, and security. More than half of Nicaraguans who migrate to—or are forcibly displaced to—other Central American countries and Europe are reportedly vulnerable to and have been victims of sex and labor trafficking, both in transit and after they reached their destinations. Traffickers increasingly use social media sites to recruit their victims. Traffickers often recruit their victims in rural areas or border regions with false promises of high-paying jobs in urban centers and tourist locales, where they subject them to sex or labor trafficking.

Nicaraguan women and children are subjected to sex and labor trafficking in the two Caribbean autonomous regions, where the lack of strong law enforcement institutions, rampant poverty, a higher crime rate, and lingering impacts of hurricanes Eta and Iota increase the vulnerability of the local population. In addition, experts report traffickers often target (for sex and labor trafficking) Nicaraguan children whose parents leave the country to work abroad. Traffickers exploit Nicaraguan adults and children in labor trafficking in agriculture, construction, mining, the informal sector, and domestic service within the country and in Costa Rica, Panama, Spain, the United States, and other countries. Traffickers force some children to work in artisanal mines and quarries. Observers report traffickers exploit children through forced participation in illegal drug production and trafficking. Children and persons with disabilities are subjected to forced begging, particularly in Managua and near tourist centers. Traffickers subject some male migrants from Central American countries transiting Nicaragua en route to Costa Rica and Panama to labor trafficking. Cuban nationals working in Nicaragua may have been forced to work by the Cuban government. Nicaragua is a destination for child sex tourists from the United States, Canada, and Western Europe.

**Panama:** The Government of Panama did not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking but is making significant efforts to do so. The government demonstrated overall increasing efforts compared to the previous reporting period, considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its anti-trafficking capacity; therefore Panama remained on Tier 2. These efforts included identifying more victims; convicting and stringently penalizing two traffickers under the anti-trafficking statute; seeking survivor input in victim protection efforts; supporting victims' right to restitution from their traffickers; undertaking a cumulative review of its own anti-trafficking efforts; and providing additional food and hygiene support to trafficking victims during the



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pandemic. However, the government did not meet the minimum standards in several key areas. Authorities investigated fewer traffickers, and, despite proactive screening efforts, government statistics indicated most trafficking victims self-reported their exploitation. The government did not amend the anti trafficking law to remove the requirement of movement to constitute a trafficking crime, which perpetuated misconceptions about trafficking and conditioned the government’s anti-trafficking efforts, such that law enforcement inadequately investigated internal trafficking cases and plausibly mis- or under-identified internal trafficking victims.

Most identified trafficking victims are foreign adults exploited in sex trafficking, especially women from South and Central America. However, traffickers also exploit Panamanians in sex trafficking in Panama, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Government reporting indicates more than two-thirds of convicted traffickers are foreign nationals, primarily from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Colombia, and Venezuela; roughly half of traffickers are men. Cuban nationals working in Panama may have been forced to work by the Cuban government. Traffickers exploit children in forced labor, particularly domestic servitude, and sex trafficking in Panama. Children living in shelters are vulnerable to recruitment by traffickers. Traffickers take advantage of transgender individuals’ increased vulnerability—stemming from limited economic opportunity, entrenched discrimination, and demand for commercial sex acts from this population—to exploit them in commercial sex. Limited economic opportunity and entrenched discrimination also contribute to increased vulnerability to labor trafficking for the wider LGBTQI+ community. Venezuelan and Nicaraguan migrants are increasingly at risk for both sex and labor trafficking. Traffickers exploit some adults from Central America who transit Panama en route to the Caribbean or Europe in sex trafficking or forced labor in their destination countries.

Traffickers exploit Indigenous women from rural, impoverished border areas of the country in forced labor. Traffickers exploit men from Central and South America, the PRC, and Vietnam in forced labor in construction, agriculture, mining, restaurants, door-to-door peddling, and other sectors using debt bondage, false promises, exploitation of migratory status, restrictions on movement, and other means. Traffickers have forced victims to consume illegal drugs as a coercive measure. Traffickers typically exploit sex trafficking victims in bars and brothels; however, they increasingly exploit these victims in beauty parlors, spas, houses rented by traffickers, and private homes. Traffickers utilize social media and messenger apps to recruit victims. Men from the United States have been investigated as child sex tourists in Panama. Government officials have been investigated and arrested for alleged involvement in trafficking.





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## ANTI-TRAFFICKING LEGISLATION

All of the countries in Central America have defined anti-trafficking legislation specifically dedicated to clearly outlawing most forms of slavery and providing appropriate punishment. Every country in Central America has signed or ratified the [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#). The International Labor Organization's [law database](#) possesses anti-trafficking legislation under “forced labor” for Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama.

## KEY ORGANIZATIONS

There are several helpful organizations that aid victims of human trafficking within South America, especially irregular migrants and children who face commercial sexual exploitation. [The International Organization for Migration](#) has worked in or with every country in Central America. Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama are all member states of the [IOM](#).

Notable local organizations include:

- [End Child Prostitution and Trafficking \(ECPAT\)](#)
- the multinational NGO [Casa Alianza](#), which provides support for trafficked and exploited children in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico, and Honduras
- the [Face of Justice Ministries](#) in Costa Rica, which focuses on protecting and supporting survivors of trafficking
- the Guatemalan division of the [Institute for Trafficked, Exploited, and Missing Persons](#) (ITEMP)
- the Guatemalan NGO [Fundación Sobrevivientes](#)
- the Mexican NGO [AGAPE](#), which primarily supports girls and women who have been trafficked or been victims of gender-based violence
- and the Mexican NGO [El Pozo de Vida](#)

The Global Modern Slavery Directory and End Slavery Now's [Antislavery Directory](#) include other anti-trafficking organizations working in South America.

Several countries have instituted their own anti-trafficking national councils or committees. These include but are not limited to, Belize's [Anti-Trafficking in Persons Council](#), Costa Rica's Coalición Nacional Contra el Tráfico Ilícito de Migrantes y Trata de Personas, [CONATT](#), El Salvador's [Consejo Nacional contra la Trata de Personas](#), and Panama's [Comisión Nacional contra la Trata de Personas](#).



# CENTRAL AMERICA

## MAIN RESOURCES:

There are several standard worldwide publications that discuss human trafficking and modern-day slavery in South America including the [Global Slavery Index's 2018 report on the Americas](#), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's 2020 "[Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#)," and the US Department of State's [2022 Trafficking in Persons Report](#). Other regional reports include:

- the International Labor Organization's report, "[Regional brief for the Americas, 2017 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery and Child Labour](#),"
- IOM's report on women's trafficking experiences, "[La experiencia de las mujeres víctimas de trata en América Central y República Dominicana y la actuación de las instituciones](#),"
- Polaris's research overview, "[Sex Trafficking in or from Latin America](#),"
- ECPAT's report, "[Los Códigos De Conducta Para La Protección De Niños, Niñas Y Adolescentes En La Industria De Los Viajes Y El Turismo En Las Américas](#)," and regional report on Latin America, "[Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism](#),"
- ECPAT's report, "[The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Latin America](#),"
- Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios de Seguridad's article, "[La trata de personas en América Latina: una problemática de asistencia e identificación](#),"
- ILO's synthesis report, "[Commercial sexual exploitation in Central America, Panama, and Dominican Republic](#),"
- ENACT's [Global Organized Crime Index](#),
- the human trafficking in Central America section of the IOM's [Migration Data Portal](#),
- UNODC's country profiles of [Central America and the Caribbean](#),
- UNODC's report, "[Trata de mujeres y niñas en Centroamérica](#),"
- UNODC's fact sheet, "[La trata de personas: la cruda realidad](#),"
- William J. Perry Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies' report, "[Human Trafficking Trends in the Western Hemisphere](#),"
- and the Congressional Research Service's specialist report, "[Trafficking in Persons in Latin America and the Caribbean](#)."





# CENTRAL AMERICA

More specific country or region reports include but are certainly not limited to:  
Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama

- ECPAT's country reports on [Costa Rica](#), [Guatemala](#), [Honduras](#), [Mexico](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Panama](#),
- UNICEF's report on child labor in the hotel industry in Mexico, "[La niñez y la industria hotelera en México](#),"
- ECPAT's guide on commercial sexual exploitation of children in the tourism industry in Mexico, "[Una industria turística responsable y sostenible en la prevención de la explotación sexual comercial de niñas, niños y adolescentes: Orientaciones generales](#),"
- ECPAT's special report on the commercial sexual exploitation of children in Guatemala, "[Apoyo A La Reparación Del Daño En Niños, Niñas Y Adolescentes Víctimas De Explotación Sexual Comercial](#),"
- IOM and Western Hemisphere Program's joint report, "[Smuggling of Migrants in Central America and Mexico in the Context of COVID-19](#),"
- Paniamor and the Costa Rican Tourism Foundation's guidelines on witnessing sex trafficking of children in the tourism industry, "[Guía informativa para la actuación de las empresas turísticas](#),"
- Verité's reports, "[Labor and Human Rights Risk Analysis of the Guatemalan Palm Oil Sector](#)" and "[Research on Indicators of Forced Labor in the Supply Chain of Coffee in Guatemala](#),"
- Polaris' report on labor trafficking in Mexico, "[Diagnóstico – Trata De Personas Con Fines Laborales En México](#),"
- IOM's report on human trafficking in Nicaragua, "[Reporte Sobre Situación De Trata De Personas](#),"
- Amnesty International's report, "[Mexico: Invisible victims, Migrants on the move in Mexico, facts and figures](#)," and accompanying film, "[The Invisibles](#),"
- ILO's reports on child labor in [Belize](#), on the commercial exploitation of minors in [Costa Rica](#), and on exploitative conditions of women labor migrants in [Nicaragua](#),
- and Human Rights Watch's reports on child labor in El Salvador, "[Oídos Sordos: Trabaja infantil peligroso en el cultivo de caña de azúcar en El Salvador](#)" and "[Sin Descanso: Abusos contra niñas trabajadoras domésticas en El Salvador](#)."

**For more resources on all forms of human trafficking and modern slavery, please visit [HumanTraffickingSearch.org](https://www.humantraffickingsearch.org) and select or enter specific search terms in the [Global Database](#).**