THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN CORRUPTION, HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND SECURITIZATION IN LATIN AMERICA

by Mathilde GOURGEON

RESEARCH INTERN AT THE UNITED NATIONS, NEW YORK, USA, CoNGO,
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SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

In Latin America, violence is a well-known concept in the whole region. The general context of violence is marked by an important feeling of anxiety amongst the citizens, who often state that violence is the most important issue, before unemployment and the economy[1]. With about 8% of the world's population in Latin America, the region hosts about 35% of global homicides, with an annual rate over 20 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2016, more than three times over global average. The continent is the only region where violence levels kept intensifying since 2005[2].

This violence manifests itself under many different forms, and whether they are linked to delinquency, interpersonal relationships, or s ocial and political dynamics, Latin America ranks first in all of them. Young men are especially touched by gang violence, while young women are disproportionately touched by interpersonal violence, often domestic and in their own households. The increasing and proliferation of complex crimes such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and human trafficking, feed the violence and insecurity by expanding criminal networks able to corrupt state officials, civil servants, and to infiltrate state structures. For example, the war on drugs in Mexico became the second deadliest conflict in 2016, right after the conflicts in Syria.[3]

The persistence and the severity of the violence can be explained by a matrix of social inequalities deeply rooted in history and an institutional fragility in state responses to the violence. The legal and judiciary systems, the police and military forces, and penitentiary systems, have all failed to develop the necessary abilities to prevent and suppress criminality efficiently. This situation led to a deep credibility crisis between political figures, and politics in general, with high levels of mistrust toward the governments, the parliaments, the judiciary powers, and the police. Moreover, corruption, often worsened by the presence of organized crime and narcotrafficking, contributes to the violence and instability, with a generalized impunity and a lack of independence from the legal systems, including the criminalization of human rights defenders, which heavily impacts the actions of key actors of the democratization of the region.

[1] Lopez, D. (2017) *Securitisation and its Impact on Human Rights in Latin America*. Global Campus Human Rights Journal, *1*.
[2] Ibid
[3] Ibid

As stated, in this region, violence is very often powered by corruption and the securitization concept, creating a complex landscape for citizens and institutions. The World's Bank definition of corruption is as such: "the abuse of a public power for private benefits", though the NGO Transparency International, working to fight corruption, uses a broader approach: "the misuse of entrusted power for private gain". As defined in the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, it is an "insidious plague that has a wide range of corrosive consequences for society. It undermines democracy and the rule of law, gives rise to human rights violations, distorts markets, undermines quality and allows organised crime, terrorism and other threats to human security to flourish". In the region, corruption is a chronic issue. A 2019 survey revealed that 53% of the people in Latin America and the Caribbeans believe that corruption has increased over the past 12 months, and 57% think that the government is doing a bad job in fighting it.[4] Over half of the citizens consider that most elected officials and civil servants are corrupted, one person in five (about 56 millions persons in the 18 countries studied) declared having once paid bribes for public services over the past years.[5]

Human trafficking, as stated in the Palermo Protocol, one of the three protocols supplementing the UN Conventions against Transnational Organized Crimes (UNTOC), and is the main international legal instrument to combat human trafficking, "shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation". Exploitation includes: sex trafficking, prostitution, forced labor, modern slavery, organ trafficking. The consent of a victim is irrelevant when one of these manipulative means (threat, force, constraint, kidnapping, fraud, etc) is used to put them in the traffic. When it comes to children, even though none of these means were used to integrate them, recruiting, transporting, transferring, or accommodating a child, is enough to be considered as human trafficking, if these acts are for an exploitation goal. This crime is deeply linked to corruption; organised trafficking, especially human trafficking, could not exist at this scale without a corrupt system. Corruption is even considered as a necessary

[4] Transparency International. (2019). *BARÓMETRO GLOBAL DE LA CORRUPCIÓN AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE 2019: Opiniones y experiencias de los ciudadanos en materia de corrupción*.
[5] Ibid

investment and potentially the main cost factor for traffickers[6], often involving corrupted officials all along the trafficking thread, from border control to immigration services, but also law enforcement and judicial systems. Reports indicate that women are more affected by this issue, one in five having experienced or knowing someone who has experienced sexual extortion (sextortion)[7] often in exchange for public services such as healthcare or education. Globally, an estimated 20 million people are victim of forced labour, generating 150 billion US dollars in illegal profit.[8]

Finally, securitization, theorized by the school of Copenhagen, perceives security as a social and intersubjective concept. It is about a discursive act whereby the designation of a problem as an existential threat legitimizes the use of ‘necessary means’ to deal with it urgently, often outside the rule of law and leading to emergency policies. This process frequently uses fear as a disciplinary government tool and social control, demonizing a common enemy, to spread the state’s security capabilities. In Latin America, the securitization policies have historically questioned the rule of law and remain at the heart of interventionist tactics, affecting human rights, and potentially being manipulated to silence dissent. Generalized corruption and its links with organized crime contribute to a perception of “ungovernability”, which would justify the military intervention and adoption of extraordinary security measures, under the guise of protecting security and democracy.

This complicated interaction between corruption, human trafficking and securitization creates a vicious circle where institutional fragility and the lack of accountability promote criminal activities, while the speech of fear and security is used to justify the use of means that will undermine democracy and human rights.

This article is a research on the nexus of these three concepts in Latin America. It will follow a framework of analysing their interconnection while taking and comparing the cases of three countries; Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador.

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[6] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2011). *Issue Paper - The Role of Corruption in Trafficking in Persons*. United Nations.

[7] Transparency International. (2019). *BARÓMETRO GLOBAL DE LA CORRUPCIÓN AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE 2019: Opiniones y experiencias de los ciudadanos en materia de corrupción*.

[8] Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économiques (OCDE). (2016). *Trafficking in Persons and Corruption: Breaking the Chain*. OECD Public Governance Reviews. OECD Publishing.

1. Conceptual framework: understanding the nexus

1.2. Securitisation and its role in Latin America

In Latin America, securitisation policies have deep historic roots, namely with the enforcement of the National Security Doctrine (NSD) between the 1960s and the 1980s[9]. This doctrine put the military in the heart of the society, transforming public security into a military matter and grouping various insurgent movements together under a label of 'subservice threats'. Militarization was justified by the weakening and disintegration of the political institutions, as well as a perception of ungovernability and fear, which created a context of political threats and a power vacuum. The armed forces would directly intervene to ensure stability, often in the name of democracy. After World War II, under the continuing influence of the United States, the advent of communism was identified as a threat to regional and internal security. The war against subversion became the top priority, directing all of the state's symbolic and material resources. The Doctrine positioned the military as agents defending the value and the traditions of 'Western Civilizations', and anyone who rejected this interpretation of international tensions was considered an enemy or a threat to the nation.
In Central America, the influence of the doctrine manifested itself indirectly through the American conception of security, in the context of US political and even military domination. The rigid military logic of the friend-enemy opposition was used to create the concept of 'internal enemy', transforming the circumstantial political action.

This logic directly led to numerous military interventions and coups, the region holding the global record of 36, including Chile, Argentina, and Brazil. The concept of 'internal enemy' was forged, transforming the political opponent into an existential threat. It would justify the military coup and the state terrorism, as an action plan to convince ordinary citizens that their security was under control of the regime. The NSD also helped the regional cooperation between dictators, such as the Plan Condor in South and Central America.

The New Security Agenda (NSA), also called multidimensional security, represents an extension of the traditional concept of security, going over the military defense of states to

[9] Lopez, D. (2017) *Securitisation and its Impact on Human Rights in Latin America*. Global Campus Human Rights Journal, *1*.

fight untraditional and transnational crimes. This approach was initiated at the Organization of American States (OAS) General Assembly in Barbados in 2002 and was developed in the 2003 Declaration on Security in the Americas, which institutionalized multidimensional security in 2005. It identifies these crimes as not only terrorism, money laundering, drug trafficking, human trafficking, illegal migrant smuggling, but also cybercriminality, corruption, extreme poverty, natural catastrophes, pandemics, and environmental degradation. Securitisation plays a central part in this agenda. By designating these issues as existential threats, states can justify adopting extreme and immediate measures, very often out of the rule of law. This war rhetoric has the effect of encouraging the militarization of internal security issues and the involvement of the armed forces in the fights against public insecurity, creating a sense of 'warfare' in the collective imagination to fight the dissents. Though the measures deployed may have a positive effect on the reduction of crimes, they also have important consequences on human rights and human dignity.

The transition towards the NSA was mainly motivated by the advent of new risks and transborder threats that started appearing with the development of globalisation. States have recognized that they weren't the only international actors able to face them. Though this new approach was supposed to be operated under the rule of law, it has had a negative and regressive impact on human rights and democracy. Moreover, this modern securitization was used to weaken dissents and undermine accountability. Societal issues such as opposition to large scale natural resources extraction projects, demands for workers' rights, and recognition for the rights of women and LGBTQ+ individuals, have been perceived as threats to state governance and economic development. In response to these perceptions, the criminal justice system has been used as a primary tool in this new form of securitization.

Under this agenda, everything can be considered as a threat to national security and thus be eliminated rapidly, without any research, trial, or prior softer actions taken.
For example, any social protester or human rights defender can and will be arrested, as they will be considered a threat to economic growth or the government's credibility. Securitization had devastating consequences on human rights, especially in Latin America, as witnessed in El Salvador, which offers one of the most striking examples of how modern securitisation can dismantle the rule of law.

Under the Regimén de Exepción by newly elected president Bukele, we estimate that between 80,000 and 102,000 people were arrested between March 2022 and April 2024, including up to 78,000 potentially arbitrary arrests[10].These mass detentions resulted in approximately 100,000 children and teenagers being orphaned. Justice is seriously compromised: detainees are being tried in groups of up to 900 people at a time, and trials could be postponed to January 2026, more than three and a half years of pretrial detention for tens of thousands of people.

Between March 2022 and May 2024, at least 301 people died in detention, with only 6% of these deaths identified as gang members; the majority of victims showed signs of torture (beatings, electrocution, asphyxiation, burns, fractures) or died due to intentionally denied medical care. The mortality rate in detention is 374 per 100,000, which is 64.5 times higher than the international rate for violent deaths. Cases of 327 enforced disappearances have been reported to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced Disappearances, with families having no information about the fate of their loved ones. Legislation was amended to criminalize criticism, with penalties ranging from 20 to 30 years for promoting "groups", and 10 to 15 years for journalists disseminating gang messages (law since repealed). A climate of widespread fear prevails, with 70% of residents afraid to talk about the Régimen de Excepción.

Restrictions to the right of freedom of speech and pacific gatherings and protest, will be important, and attacks against journalists and media that diffuse information on corruption or collaboration between the governments and criminal organizations, Latin America being ranked as the most dangerous area for freedom of speech.

This regime explicitly serves as a cover for corruption for the Bukele administration and its associates. Corruption investigations have been systematically stifled, as evidenced by the dismissal of Attorney General Raúl Melara.

[10] Montgomery, T. S., & Boerman, T. (2024, August). *Intentional Injustice: Destroying the Rule of Law in El Salvador* (CeMeCA's Regional Expert Paper Series No. 12). Columbia University's Center for Mexico and Central America (CeMeCA).

1.2. Corruption: A systemic issue and its impacts

In Latin America, corruption is chronic and systemic, which has a significant impact on economic development, political stability, and public trust. It manifests itself in various forms, ranging from 'large-scale corruption', involving high-level officials and having destructive impacts on governance and the rule of law, to everyday 'petty corruption', involving lower level corruption. Different forms of corruption can be observed:
Active and passive corruption (bribing or accepting bribes) by public officials in exchange for political favors or government contracts, which may also involve foreign public officials or international civil servants. Corruption can take many different forms:

- Embezzlement of public funds or misuse of public property for personal or partisan purposes.
- Patronage, which is the exchange of political favors for electoral support, which can lead to the unfair distribution of public resources.
- Electoral fraud, including the manipulation of electoral processes and vote buying.
- Money laundering, i.e., the concealment of illicit funds through complex financial transactions.
- Lack of transparency, characterized by insufficient access to government information and opaque decision-making, which facilitates corruption.
- Obstruction of justice, which involves the use of physical force, threats, intimidation, or undue advantages to obtain false testimony or hinder the production of evidence or the exercise of official duties by law enforcement or investigative authorities

One of the most worrying aspects of corruption in the region is the widespread impunity, often due to a lack of judicial independence and the fragility of democratic institutions, which are threatened by the ruling political class and various pressure groups.

This chronic and systemic problem leads to a significant erosion of citizens' trust in government institutions. Data from the 2019 Global Corruption Barometer reveals a very low level of trust: on average, only 21% of people trust their government, 27% trust the courts, and 33% trust the police. Corruption is also a key factor in economic inequality, as it diverts funds intended for development and public services, impoverishing the most vulnerable populations in particular and creating an unequal distribution of wealth. It contributes to stagnant development by undermining quality of life, distorting markets, and constituting a major obstacle to poverty reduction. It also weakens democracy by undermining the rule of law, promoting impunity, and allowing organized crime and other threats to human security to flourish. Political leaders are often perceived as acting in their own interests, thereby undermining democratic foundations and sometimes leading to authoritarian tendencies.

1.3 Human Trafficking: Exploitation facilitated by corruption

Human trafficking is a transnational and extremely lucrative crime that operates on a global scale, often facilitated by systemic corruption. It is the third most profitable illegal business in the world, after arms and drug trafficking. It generates estimated annual profits of $150 billion USD, of which approximately $99 billion comes from forced sexual exploitation and $51 billion from forced labor, including domestic work and agriculture. It is one of the most profitable forms of organized crime in the world, ranking as the third most lucrative illicit business after arms and drug trafficking. The profitability is so high that many groups initially formed around political demands, such as the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in Colombia, eventually expanded their activities to include drug cultivation and trafficking to finance their insurgencies, and diversified into other crimes, including human trafficking.

In Latin America, highly complex criminal organizations such as drug cartels and gangs exploit open borders, free markets, and technological advances to thrive, engaging in activities such as human trafficking[11]. Colombia, for example, faces transnational trafficking to Asia, other South American countries, and North America, with victims exploited for sex, forced labor, domestic work, marriage for asylum, organ harvesting, and even criminal exploitation in armed conflicts, including the recruitment of child soldiers. Migrants and asylum seekers, particularly those fleeing violence, poverty, and lack of opportunities, are among the most vulnerable populations and are frequently targeted by traffickers.

Corruption is a key factor in enabling human trafficking to reach such proportions. Criminal organizations consider it a necessary investment and often the main cost of their operations.

Corruption facilitates trafficking at every stage:

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[11] Baysal, B. (2025). ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND HYBRID VIOLENCE: UNRAVELING THE BLURRED BOUNDARIES OF POLITICAL AND CRIMINAL CONFLICTS IN LATIN AMERICA. In *GRF Global Outlook Report 2024*. Global Relations Forum.

• Recruitment: by buying the silence of the authorities or obtaining fraudulent documents (fake passports, visas, permits).

• Transportation: customs, immigration, and border police officers are particularly vulnerable to bribes, turning a blind eye to the illegal passage of victims.

• Exploitation: bribes are paid to protect places of exploitation (brothels, factories) from police raids or to hinder investigations and prosecutions, ensuring the impunity of traffickers.

It has been observed that the countries that make the least effort to combat human trafficking are also those with high levels of perceived corruption[12]. To fight human trafficking, the international community has established a comprehensive legal framework and cooperation mechanisms, recognizing that this transnational crime cannot be effectively fought at the national level alone. At the heart of this legal architecture is the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), also known as the Palermo Convention, adopted in December 2000.Its objective is to promote international cooperation to prevent and combat transnational organized crime more effectively. This Convention is supplemented by three additional protocols, the most relevant of which to your question is the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (the Palermo Protocol). Its main objectives are:

• To prevent and combat trafficking in persons, paying particular attention to women and children.

• To protect and assist victims of such trafficking, fully respecting their fundamental rights.

• To promote cooperation among States Parties to achieve these objectives.

It also calls on States to criminalize these intentional acts. Although it does not specifically mention corruption, it contains provisions aimed at preventing trafficking that are intrinsically linked to the fight against corruption.

Other international instruments are used to complete it, including The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), though separate, that also struggles against human trafficking because of its connection with corruption. It requires States Parties to criminalize

[12] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2011). *Issue Paper - The Role of Corruption in Trafficking in Persons*. United Nations.

active and passive corruption of public officials, to put in place preventive measures to promote integrity and transparency, and to facilitate international cooperation in the fight against money laundering and the recovery of criminal assets. The Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air and the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition are the two other additional protocols to the UNTOC, highlighting the interconnectedness of different forms of transnational organized crime.

These instruments establish essential mechanisms for international cooperation, such as mutual legal assistance, which allows states to assist each other in investigations, prosecutions, and judicial proceedings. States cannot invoke banking secrecy to refuse such assistance. They also help one another with the extradition of suspects or convicted persons; the cooperation between law enforcement agencies, including the exchange of information on the identities of traffickers, illicit fund movements, routes and methods used by organized criminal groups. They have special investigative techniques, such as controlled deliveries and undercover operations, where compatible with domestic law, and training and technical assistance for professionals involved in combating trafficking.

These instruments emphasize the protection of victims, providing measures for their physical safety, psychological and material support (housing, counseling, medical assistance), as well as the possibility of obtaining compensation for damages suffered. They also encourage the prevention of trafficking through information campaigns and social and economic initiatives.

2. National study cases: Situations, politics, and consequences

2.1 Mexico

In Mexico, corruption is an endemic and systemic problem that profoundly affects governance, political stability, and public trust, while exacerbating violence and instability, particularly due to the presence of organized crime. In 2022, the country ranked 126th out of 180 countries in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), and in 2019, 90% of Mexicans considered government corruption to be a serious problem. It shows a national consensus in the concern, but also a lack of institutions put into place to regulate it.

The data illustrates the depth of this phenomenon[13]: in 2019, one in two people in Mexico reported receiving a bribe in exchange for their vote in elections, and 52% of those who interacted with the police said they had paid a bribe. These practices are not limited to low-level officials; in 2022, Mexico's top public security official, Genaro Garcia Luna, was convicted by a US federal court of accepting millions of dollars in bribes from the Sinaloa cartel, allowing it to operate with impunity. Operatives from the Sinaloa cartel even confessed to paying more than $100 million to former President Peña Nieto for his protection.

For citizens, corruption translates into deteriorating public services and persistent economic inequality, as wealth does not concern the lower class. The most vulnerable populations are the most affected by the situation, including women, who are more likely to pay bribes for health or education services, and are even victims of “sextortion” in the context of accessing public services. The perception of high levels of corruption among law enforcement agencies is used by traffickers to control their victims, deterring them from reporting crimes for fear of reprisals and due to a lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the authorities. Corrupt behavior has even become “normalized” in everyday life for obtaining documents or services.

Corruption within law enforcement agencies is a key and pervasive factor that significantly reinforces human trafficking, creating a dynamic in which Organized Crime Groups (OCGs) can operate with near-total impunity. This relationship is so deep-rooted that organized human trafficking is considered impossible on a large scale without the complicity of corrupt officials.

This corruption is a major factor in the militarization of OCGs and the proliferation of complex crimes. Widespread corruption is also a crucial enabler of human trafficking and forced labor, as it allows criminal actors to operate with impunity, undermining the rule of law and leaving populations vulnerable to exploitation. Police and border agents accept bribes, tip off traffickers, and collaborate with criminal networks, ignoring the fate of victims.

The militarization of cartels and organized crime in Mexico is a direct consequence of the changing relationship between these OCGs and the state, exacerbated by security policies and

[13] Lopez, D. (2017) *Securitisation and its Impact on Human Rights in Latin America*. Global Campus Human Rights Journal, *1*.

deteriorating governance. Historically, OCGs operated in a “gray area”[14] of crime, benefiting from state protection thanks to deep networks of corruption established under the authoritarian PRI regime. However, the erosion of this “gray area” beginning in the 1990s, due to external pressure, democratization, and increasing competition among OCGs themselves, forced these groups to develop their own capacity for violence to ensure their security and control their territory.

It intensified with the implementation of the federal anti-OCG policy in 2006, which, although intended to dismantle criminal organizations, paradoxically prompted them to become even more militarized. The Merida Initiative is a security cooperation agreement launched in 2008 between the United States and Mexico, with the stated aim of combating drug trafficking, organized crime, and violence. As part of this initiative, the United States allocated $1.4 billion to help Mexico combat OCGs[15]. The agreement provided for military assistance, training, and institutional support to Mexican security forces, with the goal of dismantling criminal organizations, strengthening the rule of law, and improving border security. However, Mexico's security policies and strategies, heavily influenced by the United States through this initiative, have failed to prevent criminal operations and have even had the opposite effect of the intended results. US resources have facilitated the adoption of tactics such as High-Value Targeting (HVT) and Counterinsurgency-Based Interdiction (CBI), which were untested in Mexico and left vital areas unprotected. As a result, the Mérida Initiative paradoxically contributed to the militarization of Mexican cartels, despite resources that proved insufficient given the scale of the challenge.

Two main tactics contributed to this phenomenon: HVT and CBI[16]. HVT, by decapitating OCGs leaders, led to the “fractalization” of groups, promoting the emergence of younger leaders more inclined to violence, and streamlined command structures toward greater militarization. CBI, meanwhile, plunged the OGC into direct conflict with militarized state security forces, forcing them to adopt insurrectionary tactics to defend their operations and territories.

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[14] Gomez-Thomas, R. (2025, May). *From Corruption to Combat: The Militarization of Organized Crime in Mexico* [Senior Thesis]. Brandeis University.
[15] Gomez-Thomas, R. (2025, May). *From Corruption to Combat: The Militarization of Organized Crime in Mexico* [Senior Thesis]. Brandeis University.
[16] Ibid

The consequences of this militarization are numerous and devastating:iIncreased violence and insecurity; Mexico experiencing one of the most violent periods in its modern history, with homicide rates exceeding those of conflict zones such as Iraq or Afghanistan. The GCOs have recruited former military and police personnel into their ranks, strengthening their structure, training, and tactics. They have acquired sophisticated weaponry, including high-capacity rifles, RPGs, IEDs, drones, and armored vehicles, enabling them to compete with state forces. Militaristic OCGs seek to undermine the state by controlling territories, imposing their own forms of criminal governance, and infiltrating licit markets (e.g., the avocado industry). This ability to challenge the state's monopoly on violence weakens governance and citizens' rights.

Groups such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) perfectly illustrate this new generation of militaristic OCGs[17]. Having not inherited the deep-rooted corruption networks of the past, the CJNG has favored direct violence and a vertical command structure to assert itself and expand its influence. In contrast, the Sinaloa Cartel, thanks to its historical ties of corruption with the state, has largely been able to avoid the most direct effects of HVT and CBI policies, maintaining a less militarized approach and favoring negotiations and discretion.

2.2 Colombia

Colombia faces a multifaceted human trafficking problem, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, and the recruitment of child soldiers in armed conflicts, often by OCGs. A key factor contributing to this trafficking is widespread corruption and the inefficiency of government services, as studies indicate. An overwhelming majority of Colombian citizens, 94%,[18] consider government corruption to be a serious problem, and the police are perceived as a service with a high rate of corruption: 26% in 2019.

Specific patterns in trafficking identified in Colombia distinguish it from other regions of the world include the exploitation of homeless people, marriage for asylum, and organ harvesting. The recruitment and coercion methods used by traffickers are varied, ranging from intimidation and threats of violence to emotional abuse, isolation, and victim blaming.

[17] Gomez-Thomas, R. (2025, May). *From Corruption to Combat: The Militarization of Organized Crime in Mexico* [Senior Thesis]. Brandeis University.
[18] Transparency International. (2019). *BARÓMETRO GLOBAL DE LA CORRUPCIÓN AMÉRICA LATINA Y EL CARIBE 2019: Opiniones y experiencias de los ciudadanos en materia de corrupción*.

Traffickers control their victims' spending and exploit them physically and mentally. The financial vulnerability of victims, as well as the presence of armed groups and criminal organizations, are key factors contributing to this phenomenon in regions such as Antioquia, Cundinamarca, Norte de Santander, Risaralda, and Valle del Cauca.

Corruption is a key factor facilitating and promoting human trafficking in Colombia. Corrupt actors are found at every stage of the trafficking chain: from recruitment to the provision of documents (identity papers, visas) and transportation, through border crossings and exploitation. Corruption can also involve actors in the private sector, such as travel or modeling agencies, marriage bureaus, hotels, and construction companies. The high perception of corruption in the country of origin is a powerful tool for traffickers to control their victims at the destination, threatening them that corrupt police will return them to their exploiters or mistreat them.

The consequences of human trafficking and corruption are profound in Colombia. The country remains one of the 20 most violent countries in the world, with more than 12,000 deaths in 2016, drug trafficking being an aggravating factor in insecurity. Corruption and the inefficiency of government services are major problems that prevent an effective fight against trafficking. Historically, anti-trafficking programs in Colombia have suffered from a lack of funding, poor implementation, and rapid abandonment. The judicial system is often compromised by organized crime, lack of judicial independence, bias in civil service appointments, and allegations of political influence undermining anti-corruption efforts. Citizens' lack of trust in institutions, including the government, courts, and police, is very high. Despite these challenges, Colombia has taken a proactive approach to combating human trafficking, earning it Tier 1 status under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. This national strategy is facilitated by the Colombian National Police and INTERPOL, which employ specialized investigators, collaborate with prosecutors, and provide services to victims. The country has also entered into bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding with 18 other South and Central American nations (including Ecuador, Chile, Argentina, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, and Peru) to combat transnational trafficking, with prison sentences ranging from 13 to 23 years for offenders[19]. Progress has been made in protecting witnesses and victims within the prosecution services, although a dedicated whistleblower protection

[19] Aspen Journal of Scholarly Works (AJSW). (2022). The Problem of Human Trafficking in Colombia: Multiple Case Study. *Aspen Journal of Scholarly Works, 2*, 246.

law is still needed. However, persistent corruption, exploitation of socio-economic vulnerabilities, and the influence of organized crime continue to hinder progress, making the fight against human trafficking in Colombia an ongoing challenge requiring continuous institutional reforms.

Colombia is particularly affected by human trafficking due to a combination of internal and external factors that create an environment conducive to this crime, mainly for the following reasons:

- Socio-economic vulnerability and internal conflicts. Colombia has a history of internal unrest and violence, factors that contribute directly to the problem of trafficking.
- Social inequalities are linked to systemic failures in the distribution of wealth, resources, and opportunities. Limited diversification of production, regressive income distribution, and a highly stratified labor market contribute to these inequalities.
- Financial vulnerability is a key factor, making victims more susceptible to exploitation. Women living in poverty are particularly vulnerable to trafficking.
- The forced recruitment of child soldiers in armed conflicts is a common form of trafficking in Colombia, often perpetrated by organized criminal groups.

According to the US Bureau of Justice, cited in a study on human trafficking in Colombia, 82%[20] of suspected human trafficking incidents between January 2008 and June 2010 were related to sexual exploitation, and 40% of these cases involved children.Victims of trafficking in Colombia, which include women, men, and children from all regions of the country, are transported to various destinations, including Asia (the largest market), Mexico, other South American countries, and, to a lesser extent, the United States.

2.3 El Salvador

As mentioned earlier in this article, the situation of El Salvador is an excellent case of a securitization programme by the government, that has consequences on human rights and dignity. Though detention aside, El Salvador is plagued with corruption and trafficking which are direct consequences of its securitization measures put into place by President Bukele.

[20] Aspen Journal of Scholarly Works (AJSW). (2022). The Problem of Human Trafficking in Colombia: Multiple Case Study. *Aspen Journal of Scholarly Works, 2*, 246.

He has consolidated his power and undermined democratic principles. He dismissed all members of the Constitutional Court and appointed handpicked replacements, enabling him to run for re-election in 2024 despite the constitutional ban on consecutive presidential terms. His party, Nuevas Ideas, holds a supermajority in the Legislative Assembly (54 out of 60 seats) and 43 of the country's 44 mayoral offices, transforming El Salvador into a one-party state. The law on access to public information has been suspended, and data on homicides, arrests, prison records, and the use of public funds are classified as "national security," limiting transparency. Criminal laws were amended to target critics, journalists, and human rights defenders, although a law criminalizing the reproduction of gang messages by journalists was repealed in November 2023. The justice system is weakened: prisoners are tried in groups of up to 900 at a time, and tens of thousands of people are held in pretrial detention in inhumane conditions.

Though the country has a low corruption index, ranking at 116 out of 180 in 2022, the Bukele administration is accused of seeking to cover up corruption by dismissing prosecutors investigating allegations of corruption, enacting laws protecting public officials, and dissolving anti-corruption commissions. Concrete examples of corruption include payments required from prisoners' families for food and necessities, only a third of which reportedly reach the prisoners, with the rest going into the pockets of prison authorities. The construction of a mega-prison, the CECOT (Center for the Confinement of Terrorism), with a capacity of 40,000 inmates, raises serious concerns about corruption, as the government has not disclosed any data on costs or the procurement process, classifying them as matters of "national security." The adoption of Bitcoin as legal tender has raised currency concerns about transparency and money laundering, despite warnings from institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF.

Despite abuses, the Régimen de Exepción enjoys strong popular support (around 80%) in El Salvador, as it is perceived to have improved security against gangs, even if this comes at the expense of democracy and human rights[21]. This popularity has led other Latin American countries, such as Peru, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, and Honduras, to consider replicating Bukele's tactics, even calling it the "Miracle of Nayib Bukele" in Colombia. However, a significant portion of the Salvadoran population is afraid to talk about the Régimen de

[21] Montgomery, T. S., & Boerman, T. (2024, August). *Intentional Injustice: Destroying the Rule of Law in El Salvador* (CeMeCA's Regional Expert Paper Series No. 12). Columbia University's Center for Mexico and Central America (CeMeCA).

Exepción (70%) and expresses serious concerns about the suspension of constitutional rights and arrests without warrants.

The current situation gravely intensified the facilitation of human trafficking. Securitization, by creating a climate of fear and uncertainty, can push more people into situations of vulnerability. It occurs in a context of high social inequality, poverty, and underdevelopment, which are fundamental factors that make individuals (especially women and children) vulnerable to trafficking.

3. Strategic recommendations for Latin America

To effectively fight human trafficking, corruption, and the negative consequences of securitization, it is imperative to adopt a holistic and coordinated approach that goes beyond short-term punitive measures and addresses the root causes of these phenomena.

By concept, different solutions have been established by researchers and NGO's to try and tackle them.

3.1 Combating the excesses of securitization:

Abandoning "mano dura" policies:

These punitive strategies, while sometimes offering temporary relief from violence, exacerbate human rights violations, lead to prison overcrowding, and undermine trust in institutions. They do not dismantle entrenched criminal networks or resolve underlying inequalities. In order to do that, adopting a multidimensional human security approach would be preferable. Shifting from a war and repression-focused conception of security to an approach that integrates economic, social, health, and environmental dimensions. Security should be understood as freedom rather than restriction, and aim to create de-securitized scenarios. There is also a need to address the root causes of violence; a long-term strategy must focus on socioeconomic inequalities, weak judicial systems, underdevelopment, land inequality, and structural poverty. Sustainable rural development initiatives, agrarian reform, and the expansion of public services are essential to providing alternatives to illicit economies[22].

[22] Lopez, D. (2017) *Securitisation and its Impact on Human Rights in Latin America*. Global Campus Human Rights Journal, *1*.

Strengthening state capacity and legitimating their presence: rather than resorting to the militarization of internal security forces, state institutions must be strengthened so that they can prevent and suppress crime in a legitimate manner. The state must fill the governance vacuum, often exploited by criminal groups, by providing services and enforcing the rule of law. They need to promote transparency and accountability: reforms must emphasize these concepts, and participatory governance to prevent security measures from becoming tools for control and suppression of dissent[23]. Including human rights defenders: Activists and human rights defenders are often criminalized and seen as threats to economic development or order. It is important to include them in making and implementing public policies to make sure basic rights are respected.

Strengthening international and intersectoral cooperation: Complex crimes such as trafficking and corruption have cross-border dimensions that require international and intersectoral cooperation. This includes sharing information on criminal methods and capacity building[24].

3.2 Combating corruption

Promoting political integrity and transparency. The states need to establish clear standards, ensure disclosure of income, expenses, and assets of political parties and candidates. Transparency in political financing is crucial. Presidents and parliamentarians are often perceived as the most corrupt. When the state itself is corrupt, it is immensely difficult to hold accountability for the corrupt. States also need to strengthen the independence of judicial institutions. Impunity and lack of judicial independence are major concerns. It is essential to give judicial authorities the appropriate tools and sufficient independence to investigate and prosecute cases of corruption.

The empowerment of citizens to take actions against corruption. Encouraging and protecting people who report corruption (whistleblowers) against reprisals. Governments should support legal assistance mechanisms and work with NGOs and the media to monitor and report cases of corruption. Many NGOs against corruption have put into place measures such as access to

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[23] Baysal, B. (2025). ILLICIT ECONOMIES AND HYBRID VIOLENCE: UNRAVELING THE BLURRED BOUNDARIES OF POLITICAL AND CRIMINAL CONFLICTS IN LATIN AMERICA. In *GRF Global Outlook Report 2024*. Global Relations Forum.

[24] Lopez, D. (2017) *Securitisation and its Impact on Human Rights in Latin America*. Global Campus Human Rights Journal, *1*.

platforms to denounce corrupt people, framework on how to recognize a corruption crime and help promote transparency, first among the citizens[25].

Reducing factors conducive to bribery such as simplifying bureaucratic processes and investing in user-friendly digital platforms for accessing public services to reduce opportunities for bribery.

It is also essential to recognize and address gender-based corruption. Women are particularly vulnerable to sexual extortion and corruption in general.Measures are needed to end this, along with secure and gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms.

Combat money laundering and recover criminal assets: Establish regulatory and supervisory regimes for financial institutions, enable the identification, tracing, freezing, and confiscation of the proceeds of crime. International cooperation is essential for tracing illicit funds.

The promotion of the integrity of public officials is also essential; by establishing codes of conduct, transparency measures (internal approval systems, avoidance of one-on-one meetings with individuals at risk), and ethics training for civil servants. Staff rotations may be considered, with adequate monitoring

Integrate anti-corruption and anti-trafficking strategies: Develop joint strategies that address corruption and human trafficking in a coherent manner, as corruption is a key facilitator of trafficking. Investigations into trafficking should include investigations into corruption and the finances of suspects[26].

3.3 Combatting Human Trafficking

To fight human trafficking it is necessary to strengthen the international and national legal framework and to ratify and fully implement international legal instruments like the UNTOC and its Palermo Protocol. These instruments provide a universal definition of human trafficking and order States to criminalize these acts, while providing a framework for mutual legal assistance and extradition.

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[25] De Los Reyes Ramírez, R. (2023). *The misery of some, the wealth of others: Corruption in Latin America and the Caribbean* (IEEE Analysis Paper 68/2023).
[26] Organisation de Coopération et de Développement Économiques (OCDE). (2016). *Trafficking in Persons and Corruption: Breaking the Chain*. OECD Public Governance Reviews. OECD Publishing.

Protecting and assisting victims in order to put in place comprehensive measures for the physical, psychological, and social protection of victims, including access to housing, counseling, medical assistance, and employment or training opportunities. It is crucial to ensure that victims are not penalized for acts committed under duress and that they can obtain reparations. A human rights-centered approach is essential.

To prevent trafficking by addressing vulnerabilities, it is needed to develop comprehensive policies and programs to prevent trafficking, including through research, information campaigns, and socioeconomic initiatives. It is essential to address the factors that make people vulnerable, such as poverty, underdevelopment, and unequal opportunities, as well as deterring demand for exploitation. Adopt legislative, educational, social, and cultural measures to deter demand that fuels all forms of exploitation, particularly of women and children[27].

Strengthening cooperation between law enforcement and border control services by improving information exchange between law enforcement, immigration, and other relevant authorities to identify traffickers and victims, and strengthen border controls to prevent trafficking and the smuggling of migrants. Specialized training is needed for these officials, with an emphasis on human rights and gender and child-specific issues. Moreover, securing travel and identity documents by implementing measures to ensure the quality, integrity, and security of travel and identity documents to prevent their misuse or falsification by traffickers.

Finally, to fight organ trafficking (TIP for OR), they should specifically criminalize organ trafficking and identify and prosecute all those involved. This involves strengthening data collection on this poorly documented phenomenon, developing clear frameworks for health professionals, and raising public awareness of legal and illegal organ donation[28].

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[27] United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2011). *Issue Paper - The Role of Corruption in Trafficking in Persons*. United Nations.
[28] Office on Trafficking in Persons. (2025, January 16). *Trafficking in Persons for Organ Removal Information Memo*.

Conclusion

The analysis of corruption, human trafficking, and securitization in Latin America shows a deep and complex relationship between the three. They are not separate problems but overlapping issues that feed into one another, creating a cycle of violence, weak institutions, and violations of human rights. By looking at the conceptual framework and the case studies of Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador, it becomes clear that this relationship is structural and long-standing, shaped by historical inequalities, fragile governance, and the presence of powerful criminal networks.

Corruption appears at the heart of this connection. It is both a facilitator and a consequence of organized crime. Without the involvement of corrupt officials, human trafficking networks would not be able to reach their current size and profitability. Border guards, police officers, prosecutors, and even high-level politicians often turn a blind eye in exchange for money or personal gain. This allows traffickers to operate with near impunity. In Mexico, corruption within law enforcement and politics has long enabled cartels to expand their power, leading to the militarization of these groups. This militarization has created even higher levels of violence, forcing citizens to live in fear and further undermining trust in the state. In Colombia, corruption weakens every part of the fight against trafficking, from issuing fraudulent documents to avoiding police raids. The result is a society where citizens lose confidence in institutions, reinforcing the very conditions that allow corruption and trafficking to flourish.

Human trafficking itself cannot be understood without examining its ties to corruption and securitization. It thrives in contexts where governments are weak, institutions lack transparency, and poverty is widespread. Vulnerable groups (women, children, migrants, and those living in poverty) become targets for exploitation. In Colombia, human trafficking is closely linked to armed conflict and social inequality. Victims are recruited or coerced in multiple ways, including false promises of work, threats of violence, or manipulation of their financial needs. This exploitation does not occur in isolation; it is directly connected to corruption that enables traffickers to operate and to the failures of the state to protect its people. In El Salvador, human trafficking has worsened under heavy securitization, which creates fear and instability that leave many people even more vulnerable to exploitation. By weakening democracy and limiting rights, securitization policies indirectly push more individuals into the hands of traffickers.

Securitization is presented by governments as a way to bring order and safety, but in practice it often worsens the situation. By framing crime or dissent as existential threats, states justify extreme measures such as mass arrests, military interventions, and restrictions on freedom of expression. While these policies may create an illusion of control, they rarely reduce organized crime. Instead, they open new opportunities for corruption, as security forces and officials gain unchecked power. The case of El Salvador demonstrates how securitization can be used to strengthen authoritarianism, silence critics, and hide corruption. Mass arrests and emergency measures do not dismantle criminal networks; rather, they weaken democratic oversight and increase social inequality. In Mexico, security initiatives such as the Mérida Initiative ended up strengthening cartels, pushing them to adopt military tactics and making them more violent and powerful than before.

When corruption, human trafficking, and securitization are seen together, their interdependence becomes clear. Corruption makes trafficking possible by weakening state controls and ensuring impunity. Trafficking generates huge profits that are reinvested into corrupt practices, further undermining governance. In response, governments adopt securitization policies that concentrate power in the hands of security institutions. These measures, instead of solving the problem, create new opportunities for corruption and lead to further human rights abuses. The result is a vicious circle: insecurity justifies securitization, which enables corruption, which in turn sustains trafficking and organized crime. Citizens lose trust in institutions, and this distrust is then used as further justification for stronger and more repressive security policies.

The consequences of this cycle are profound. It shows that partial solutions are ineffective. Anti-trafficking programs that ignore corruption do not work, since traffickers simply bribe their way around laws. Anti-corruption efforts that do not address abusive securitization are weakened, because authoritarian measures limit transparency and accountability. And securitization, when detached from human rights and social justice, becomes a tool to silence dissent and cover up abuses. Citizens are left feeling unprotected, disillusioned with democracy, and caught between criminal organizations on one side and repressive states on the other.

The research highlights that solutions must be comprehensive. Breaking the cycle requires reforms that strengthen democratic institutions, promote transparency, and protect human rights. Addressing social inequality is essential, since poverty and lack of opportunity are key drivers of trafficking. Judicial independence and accountability are needed to fight corruption. Security must be redefined not as repression but as protection, linked to human dignity and social well-being. International cooperation also plays a role, since trafficking and corruption are transnational by nature and cannot be addressed by one country alone.

Ultimately, the link between corruption, human trafficking, and securitization reflects a broader political and social crisis in Latin America. These phenomena reinforce each other, making the region more insecure, unequal, and unstable. Recognizing their interconnectedness is the first step toward real change. By understanding how they function together, governments and societies can design strategies that address not only the symptoms but also the root causes. Only by tackling these problems as parts of the same system can Latin America move toward a future where democracy, justice, and security are not empty promises but lived realities.

In conclusion, corruption, human trafficking, and securitization form a cycle of mutual reinforcement that damages both governance and human rights. To break this cycle, states must focus on structural reforms that attack the roots of inequality, promote transparency, and place human dignity at the center of their security policies. If these efforts are not made, the cycle will continue, trapping millions of people in violence, exploitation, and fear. But if governments, institutions, and civil society act together, the region has the potential to build more secure, fair, and democratic societies where corruption, trafficking, and abusive securitization no longer define the lives of its people.

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