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Bordering on Solutions: A Comparative Study of Mexican and U.S. Policies to Address Human Trafficking along the Mexico-United States Border

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Bordering on Solutions: A Comparative Study of Mexican and U.S. Policies to Address Human Trafficking along the Mexico-United States Border

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Mexico and the United States both contend with the issue of human trafficking and implement measures to address this prevalent challenge, not only within their respective territories, but also along their shared border region. Despite significant efforts, both nations encounter obstacles in their anti-trafficking endeavors. The U.S. promotes a comprehensive legal framework, exemplified by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, yet faces criticism regarding deportation policies and inadequate victim support mechanisms. In contrast, Mexico has demonstrated progress through legislative advancements such as the 2012 anti-trafficking law and initiatives like the "Blue Heart" campaign, yet the country struggles with challenges in law enforcement coordination and media portrayal accuracy. International collaborations, including treaties like the Palermo Protocol and initiatives such as the Polaris Project, facilitate cross-border cooperation. But, there remains a pressing need for enhanced victim assistance, improved accessibility to legal aid, and intensified public awareness campaigns. This case note underscores the necessity of collaborative efforts between Mexico and the U.S. to effectively combat human trafficking. It advocates for legislative reforms that prioritize victim-centered approaches and comprehensive public engagement strategies, aiming to foster a safer and more just border region for all individuals involved.

I. Introduction

In today's interconnected world, the plague of human trafficking stands as a grave violation of human rights and a persistent global challenge. As the Mexico-United States border remains one of the most traversed and dynamic international frontiers, it has become an unfortunate hotspot for human trafficking activities. This case note delves into the web of legislation and policies established by Mexico and the United States (U.S.), seeking to unravel how each country respectively approaches human trafficking, as well as how their policies intersect and collaborate to confront the escalating crisis of human trafficking along their border. Beyond the geographical proximity that binds these two nations, their responses to this pressing issue carry profound implications for the victims, the traffickers, and the overall effectiveness of international efforts to combat modern-day slavery. Thus, the analysis herein explores the mechanisms through which Mexico and the U.S. join forces, and sometimes diverge, in the pursuit of a safer border region for all.

The United Nations (UN) defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit.”² Although this definition is modern and continues to pose a substantial contemporary challenge, human traffickers target individuals who are “poor, isolated, and weak.”³ Policies and practices that marginalize entire groups of people result in problems like disempowerment, social exclusion, and economic vulnerability, making these individuals especially susceptible to

¹ J.D. Candidate, SMU Dedman School of Law, 2025; Staff Editor for the International Law Review Association.

² Jamille Bigio & Rachel B. Vogelstein, *Ending Human Trafficking in the Twenty-First Century*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (June 2021), <https://perma.cc/47P6-85DH>.

³ *Id.*

trafficking.⁴ Further, natural disasters, conflicts, and political unrest erode already weak social protection measures.⁵ The “allure of opportunity, the relentless demand for inexpensive goods and services, and the expectation of reliable income drive people into potentially dangerous situations where they are at risk of being exploited.”⁶

The International Labour Organization (ILO), a UN agency whose mandate is to advance social and economic justice by setting international labor standards, releases periodic global estimates of modern slavery.⁷ The results from the September 2022 report revealed a staggering reality.⁸ In 2021, a shocking 50 million people were found to be living in modern slavery, marking a significant increase over the past five years.⁹ To put this into perspective, the 2021 figures showed that there were 10 million more individuals trapped in modern slavery as compared to the global estimates reported of 2016.¹⁰ The issue of human trafficking continues to progress, as it is exacerbated by the proliferation of migration crises, global conflicts, and the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹ In essence, these findings underscore the pressing need for intensified efforts and international cooperation to combat this serious infringement of human rights and address the growing challenge of modern slavery.

II. United States Human Trafficking Litigation

Under U.S. federal law, severe forms of trafficking in persons encompass both sex trafficking and labor trafficking.¹² Sex trafficking involves the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of an individual for the purposes of engaging in a commercial sex act.¹³ Such acts are induced through force, fraud, or coercion, or involve individuals who have not yet reached the age of eighteen.¹⁴ On the other hand, labor trafficking pertains to the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of individuals for labor or services.¹⁵ This is achieved through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, with the intention of subjecting the individual to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.¹⁶ These legal definitions serve as the foundation for addressing and combatting human trafficking within the U.S.¹⁷

The U.S. has established a broad framework to combat human trafficking, exemplified by several key legislative acts.¹⁸ In 2000, the U.S. Congress enacted the Victims of Trafficking and Violence

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage*, INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION (Sept. 12, 2022), <https://perma.cc/BUN7-TXKZ>.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Bigio & Vogelstein, *supra* note 1.

¹² *Federal Law*, NATIONAL HUMAN TRAFFICKING HOTLINE, <https://perma.cc/CJ5W-3P9X> (last visited Oct. 9, 2023).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ 22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(A).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Federal Law*, *supra* note 12.

¹⁸ *Id.*

Protection Act of 2000 (“TVPA 2000”), a landmark legislation to strengthen penalties against human traffickers, provide increased safeguards for victims of human trafficking, and actively work to prevent and discourage human trafficking.¹⁹ The impetus for this legislation stemmed from the alarming fact that *millions* of individuals, particularly women and children, were falling victim to trafficking on an annual basis.²⁰ Further, deliberations in Congress showed that TVPA 2000 was crafted to ensure that the U.S. government leveraged its global influence around the world to stop human trafficking universally.²¹ Subsequently, this legislation has undergone multiple reauthorizations, notably in 2003, 2008, 2011, and 2019.²² These reauthorizations have served to reaffirm and expand the law’s vital mission.²³

The TVPA 2000 created a three-pronged approach to human trafficking encompassing prevention, protection, and prosecution.²⁴ To accomplish this, the TVPA fosters awareness, ensures the wellbeing of victims through a range of services, and prosecutes traffickers by designating trafficking as a federal offense with significant consequences.²⁵ Moreover, this legislation includes provisions of services, such as shelter, legal aid, and medical care to human trafficking survivors, and it allows for the issuance of T-visas for victims who cooperate with law enforcement.²⁶ But, these T-visas are not automatically extended to all trafficking victims, and individuals who fail to meet the visa's requirements are subject to deportation proceedings and removal from the U.S.²⁷ Following rejection, these individuals are deported and frequently find themselves at risk of being trafficked once more.²⁸

This broad legislation also called for the State Department to establish the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (TIP).²⁹ The TIP report is the U.S. Government’s principal diplomatic tool to engage foreign governments on human trafficking as well as an international resource of governmental anti-trafficking efforts.³⁰ The main function of the TIP office is to publish a yearly report, which plays a significant role in assessing global anti-trafficking efforts and is a useful tool to encourage countries to take action to address the issue of human trafficking within their borders.³¹ It categorizes countries into tiers based on their compliance with anti-trafficking standards, thus incentivizing governments to make improvements.³² However, some

¹⁹ Christina T. Le & Cathleen S. Creegan, *UPDATE: The Exploitation of Women and Children – A Comparative Study of Human Trafficking Laws between the United States-Mexico and China-Vietnam*, GLOBALEX (Nov. 2021), <https://perma.cc/48UQ-JDT3>.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Federal Law*, *supra* note 12.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ H.R. REP. NO. 106-3244, at 16, 42 (2000).

²⁷ *2020 Trafficking in Persons Report*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, <https://perma.cc/ZJP3-DG7R> (last visited Oct. 24, 2023).

²⁸ Le & Creegan, *supra* note 19.

²⁹ *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, <https://perma.cc/TA7Y-FVKW> (last visited Oct. 22, 2023).

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.*

³² *Id.*

critics argue that the use of sanctions is ineffective and political considerations can sometimes influence the rankings.³³

In response to the U.S. approach to human trafficking as a whole, critics further argue that there is a need for innovative approaches to enhance the enforcement of international anti-trafficking standards.³⁴ For instance, critics suggest holding the private sector responsible for ensuring that their supply chains are free from forced labor.³⁵ Additionally, the financial industry should take more proactive measures to identify and report the illicit profits generated by traffickers.³⁶ Furthermore, leaders in security and development should acknowledge that human trafficking undermines economic progress and contributes to instability.³⁷ These leaders should therefore expand their policies to combat this crime, even within their own organizations.³⁸ Governments, too, should discourage traffickers and reduce the prevalence of trafficking by implementing sustainable development strategies that target the root causes of this issue, coupled with robust apprehension and punitive measures.³⁹ Following a comprehensive assessment of the U.S. human trafficking legislation, it is evident that its overall approach is robust; however, as noted by critics, there are specific critical areas that require improvement and attention.⁴⁰

III. Mexico Human Trafficking Legislation

Mexico has made significant strides in its fight against human trafficking since passing its inaugural national law in 2007.⁴¹ Within this national legislation, the Mexican federal government banned all manifestations of human trafficking and established a sentencing range of six to twelve years for offenses related to trafficking.⁴² As of 2011, each of Mexico's thirty-two states had enacted anti-trafficking regulations to some extent, though the scope and impact of these laws differed.⁴³ Mexico has maintained its commitment to combat human trafficking, and in April 2010, it became the pioneer in launching its own nationally led United Nations "Blue Heart" campaign against human trafficking.⁴⁴ This initiative urges all segments of Mexican society to collaborate in mobilizing social awareness against human trafficking, seeks to enhance understanding of this criminal activity, and strives to deter additional individuals from falling prey to it.⁴⁵ Further, collaborative efforts involving government agencies, civil society, and law enforcement entities pursue a threefold mission: prevention through raising awareness, protection of trafficking victims with services like medical and legal support, and prosecution of perpetrators,

³³ Alese Wooditch, *The Efficacy of the Trafficking in Persons Report: A Review of the Evidence*, CRIMINAL JUSTICE POLICY REVIEW, Dec. 2011, at 476-477.

³⁴ Bigio & Vogelstein, *supra* note 1.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ Victoria Rietig, *Prevent, Protect and Prosecute Human Trafficking in Mexico: Policy and Practical Recommendations*, 53 INT'L MIGRATION 9, 10 (2014).

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² Le & Creegan, *supra* note 19.

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ Press Release, *Office on Drugs and Crime, Mexico First Country in the World to Launch the "Blue Heart" Campaign Against Human Trafficking*, U.C. PRESS RELEASE (Apr. 14, 2010).

⁴⁵ *Id.*

including men, women, and children alike.⁴⁶ Some laws that Mexico has attempted to pass, however, have been viewed by anti-trafficking advocates as too complex to be applied consistently.⁴⁷

In June 2012, the federal government of Mexico enacted a comprehensive anti-trafficking legislation that replaced the 2007 law.⁴⁸ This new law prohibits all types of human trafficking, stipulating punishments that range from five to thirty years of incarceration, and mandates that states appoint a specialized human trafficking prosecutor.⁴⁹ In 2016, the Mexican Congress endorsed a Law for Crime Victims, encompassing, among other provisions, support for trafficking victims.⁵⁰ This law compels the establishment of a national fund for assisting crime victims and obligates individual states to create similar funds.⁵¹

Despite these positive developments, some anti-trafficking advocates believe that more can be done.⁵² Penalties for human trafficking in Mexico are notably lower than those for drug trafficking, rendering it a crime with low risk but high reward.⁵³ Investigations and convictions remain limited despite recent legislative enhancements.⁵⁴ Moreover, the information the Mexican media propagates regarding human trafficking is often unreliable.⁵⁵ The media's handling of trafficking is rife with uncertainties and inaccuracies.⁵⁶ Consequently, the public remains uninformed or misinformed about the grim reality of human trafficking.⁵⁷ Given the media's significant influence in shaping public perceptions and informing public policies, Mexico should explore how disseminating accurate information about this issue through media coverage can contribute to the protection of women and other vulnerable groups.⁵⁸

IV. Human Trafficking Treaties

Over the past two decades, human rights and labor leaders have developed a comprehensive international framework defining the crime of human trafficking, most notably in 2000 with the Palermo Protocol to prevent, suppress, and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children.⁵⁹ This protocol established the first common international definition of “trafficking in persons” and is intended to prevent and combat such crime and facilitate international cooperation

⁴⁶ Rietig, *supra* note 37.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ Hélène Le Goff, *IOM Supports Mexican Government Dissemination at State Level of New Counter-Trafficking Law*, IOM UN MIGRATION (June 14, 2012), <https://perma.cc/6JFN-JSUK>.

⁴⁹ *2020 Trafficking in Persons Report*, *supra* note 27.

⁵⁰ *2017 Trafficking in Persons Report*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, <https://perma.cc/MVX2-ZDRE> (last visited Oct. 24, 2023).

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ Adriana Gonzalez Veloz & Luis Gabriel Arango Pinto, *The Human Rights Crisis in Mexico: Human Trafficking and Information Management*, 50 *LATIN AM. PERSP.* 166, 168 (2023).

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ Bigio & Vogelstein, *supra* note 1.

against it.⁶⁰ The protocol applies to the prevention, investigation, and prosecution of trafficking offenses, as well as the protection of trafficked persons.⁶¹

Balancing crime-control measures with victim support is a key aspect of the protocol, which is found in provisions for victim protection and support as well as provisions addressing the repatriation of individuals to their home countries.⁶² The protocol includes general measures to protect and support victims, offers benefits such as counseling, housing, education, medical and psychological aid, and opportunities for victims to attain legal status for temporary or permanent residence in the receiving country.⁶³ Under the protocol, law enforcement agencies in signatory countries must collaborate in identifying offenders and victims, share information about offender tactics, and provide training to investigators, law enforcement, and victim support personnel.⁶⁴ Parties are also obligated to enhance security and border controls to detect and prevent trafficking.⁶⁵ This involves strengthening their own border security, imposing requirements on transportation providers to verify passports and visas, setting standards for travel document quality, and cooperating in validating their documents when used internationally.⁶⁶

While Mexico and the U.S. are signatories to the convention which created the Palermo Protocol, the countries have a separate agreement, the Polaris Project, to address the issues at the U.S.-Mexico border.⁶⁷ Polaris is a U.S. initiative aimed at decreasing human trafficking.⁶⁸ The initiative is partnered with a Mexican institution called Consejo Ciudadano, which is a civil society organization in Mexico whose primary goal is to create citizen complaint mechanisms that are simple, confidential, and effective so that citizens can report threats to their security and well-being.⁶⁹ Survivors on both sides of the border can seek assistance and receive support through Consejo's Línea Nacional Contra la Trata de Personas (LNCTP) and the National Human Trafficking Hotline (NHTH), both operated by Polaris.⁷⁰ Through a data-sharing agreement and collaboration across the border, the two organizations can coordinate the response to human trafficking in either country and exchange key insights.⁷¹

Between the national helpline operated by Consejo Ciudadano in Mexico and the human trafficking resource center operated by Polaris in the U.S., hotline coverage for victims of human trafficking spans across two-thirds of the North American continent.⁷² The organizations also raise awareness about human trafficking and the availability of the hotline so even victims in remote

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ U.N. GA Res. 55/25, ¶ 4 (Nov. 15, 2000).

⁶⁴ Adriana Gonzalez Veloz & Luis Gabriel Arango Pinto, *supra* note 55.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Fighting Human Trafficking Across the U.S.-Mexico Border*, POLARIS PROJECT (2018), <https://perma.cc/GYW3-B8FW>.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ Press Release, *Mexico City's Anti-Human Trafficking Hotline to Expand Nationally*, POLARIS PROJECT (Sept. 30, 2015), <https://perma.cc/4Z5C-AK9A>.

⁷⁰ *Fighting Human Trafficking Across the U.S.-Mexico Border*, *supra* note 67.

⁷¹ *Mexico City's Anti-Human Trafficking Hotline to Expand Nationally*, *supra* note 69.

⁷² *Id.*

areas of Mexico are aware there is support.⁷³ Consejo’s hotline is the first ever citizen-created hotline for reports of this crime in Mexico.⁷⁴ The CEO of Polaris stated:

human trafficking networks operate across borders, so it is critical that we collaborate...by working internationally, we can shut down traffickers and their networks regardless of where they operate, as well as ensure that survivors can receive the support they need.⁷⁵ Together, Polaris and Consejo Ciudadano are building a critical cross-border safety net for victims of human trafficking in North America.⁷⁶

The Polaris Project's collaboration with Mexico is meaningful in addressing human trafficking by offering critical support to victims, collecting and analyzing data, facilitating cross-border coordination, raising awareness, and sharing information to attempt to combat trafficking.⁷⁷

Furthermore, the Departments of Justice (DOJ) and Homeland Security (DHS) initiated the U.S.-Mexico Bilateral Human Trafficking Enforcement Initiative in 2009, aiming to enhance cooperation with Mexican law enforcement agencies for a more effective response to cross-border trafficking threats.⁷⁸ Within this initiative, U.S. and Mexican authorities share information and intelligence to bolster investigations and prosecutions, facilitate victim recovery, secure the return of victims' children, and disrupt trafficking networks through impactful legal actions in both nations.⁷⁹ Additionally, apart from coordinating joint investigations and prosecutions, DOJ, DHS, and their Mexican law enforcement counterparts engage in extensive knowledge sharing and “case-based mentoring to advance best practices in victim-centered enforcement strategies.”⁸⁰ Despite the collaborative efforts inspired by both countries’ human trafficking hotlines, the Palermo Protocol, and the Bilateral Human Trafficking Enforcement Initiative, there remains a need for further cooperation between the two countries due to the ongoing issue of trafficking between Mexico and the U.S.⁸¹

V. Improving Human Trafficking Statistics Across the United States-Mexico Border

While there are indications of independent progress in the U.S. and Mexico regarding efforts to combat human trafficking, both nations have room to enhance their legislation and policies.⁸² Therefore, collaborative efforts between the two countries could further amplify their impact and significantly reduce trafficking across the border.⁸³ The countries should consider reforming

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ *Mexico City's Anti-Human Trafficking Hotline to Expand Nationally*, *supra* note 69.

⁷⁸ *Special Programs and Initiatives*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, <https://perma.cc/42RS-AG58> (last visited Oct. 24, 2023).

⁷⁹ *Id.*

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ Le & Creegan, *supra* note 19.

⁸² *2023 Trafficking in Persons Report*, *supra* note 29.

⁸³ Le & Creegan, *supra* note 19.

deportation policies, ensuring victims of human trafficking have access to legal aid, regardless of their immigration status, and beginning education and awareness campaigns about the human trafficking issues at the border.⁸⁴

The U.S. should reconsider its deportation policy specifically with regard to trafficking victims, possibly reevaluating or altering the approach to significantly decrease deportations to cities where deportees are at a high risk of trafficking and exploitation.⁸⁵ Unaware of their rights and often paralyzed by fear when seeking assistance in the U.S., Mexican migrants and trafficking victims face profound vulnerability and isolation.⁸⁶ For instance, recent policies have resulted in the swift deportation of migrant children upon their arrival in the U.S., leaving them at high risk of falling prey to human traffickers upon their return to their home countries.⁸⁷ This practice demands immediate cessation.⁸⁸ Moreover, the U.S. should contemplate expanding the allocation of T-visas and discontinuing the deportation of trafficking victims.⁸⁹ Currently, only 5,000 T-visas are designated for victims annually, with significantly fewer being granted in practice.⁹⁰ A recent report identifies the T-visa system as underutilized, with just 500 to 600 visas typically awarded per year.⁹¹ Additionally, the stringent requirements, including the traumatic necessity of testifying against traffickers, should be reconsidered to grant victims T-visas without such burdensome prerequisites.⁹²

Many of the services available to immigrants are offered free of charge, such as law school clinics, legal providers rooted in the community, and non-profit organizations, among others.⁹³ However, this might not be adequate for individuals who have been subjected to trafficking, as their various civil legal requirements can vary greatly based on their personal circumstances and the specific circumstances of their trafficking experience.⁹⁴ Some individuals may require only limited legal assistance for a brief period, whereas others could confront numerous legal challenges that extend over many years.⁹⁵ In certain situations, an individual's access to services may be impacted by factors like a criminal record or their immigration status.⁹⁶ Further, public benefit offices may lack familiarity with human trafficking and may not appropriately apply the criteria for

⁸⁴ *The Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking*, UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, <https://perma.cc/H84E-KQKD> (last visited Oct. 25, 2023); Carter Quinley, *Along the Borderline: The Critical Links Between Human Trafficking and U.S.-Mexico Immigration*, THE INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS REVIEW, <https://perma.cc/J7AZ-AVRW> (last visited Oct. 24, 2023).

⁸⁵ *Trafficking in Persons Along Mexico's Eastern Migration Routes*, WILSON CENTER LATIN AMERICA PROGRAM, <https://perma.cc/6XK7-5GB3> (last visited Oct. 26, 2023).

⁸⁶ Quinley, *supra* note 84.

⁸⁷ Caitlin Dickerson, *10 Years Old, Tearful and Confused After a Sudden Deportation*, NEW YORK TIMES (May 20, 2020), <https://perma.cc/2HYC-98XW>.

⁸⁸ Quinley, *supra* note 84.

⁸⁹ *Id.*

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ Stephen Wood, *The Intersection of Human Trafficking and Immigration*, HARVARD LAW BILL OF HEALTH (June 27, 2018), <https://perma.cc/GUK9-TUNH>.

⁹² Quinley, *supra* note 84.

⁹³ *Services Available to Victims of Human Trafficking*, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, <https://perma.cc/S7NF-WDUX> (last visited Oct. 26, 2023).

⁹⁴ *The Legal Rights and Needs of Victims of Human Trafficking in the United States*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE, <https://perma.cc/S7NF-WDUX> (last visited Oct. 26, 2023).

⁹⁵ *Id.*

⁹⁶ *Id.*

determining eligibility.⁹⁷ So, it is crucial for both the U.S. and Mexico to guarantee that every trafficking victim is provided with the necessary legal assistance to address their specific legal requirements, regardless of their immigration status, in order to secure the delivery of justice.⁹⁸

Finally, Mexico and the U.S. should collaborate in efforts to promote awareness of the serious issue of human trafficking along their shared border.⁹⁹ Every day in the U.S. and Mexico, powerful criminal networks with transnational operations target vulnerable individuals for exploitation.¹⁰⁰ These traffickers employ deceptive tactics, such as offering fraudulent job opportunities or feigned affection, to trap their victims.¹⁰¹ Once trapped, victims are coerced into forced labor or commercial sexual exploitation through threats, debt bondage, and other severe forms of abuse.¹⁰² To effectively identify more victims, ensure survivors receive the necessary support to rebuild their lives, and prevent the recurrence of this crime, it is imperative to raise public awareness about the signs of human trafficking and the procedures for seeking help or reporting suspicious activities.¹⁰³ Collaborative endeavors should be undertaken by the U.S. and Mexico to enhance public awareness within both nations regarding the issue of human trafficking across the border.¹⁰⁴ This can be achieved through comprehensive public information campaigns and various other communications strategies.¹⁰⁵ Specifically concerning trafficking victims, these campaigns should encompass fundamental human rights principles and empower victims with the knowledge that trafficking is a criminal offense, that they are victims, and that they have the right to seek legal protection.¹⁰⁶ To ensure effectiveness, these campaigns must be custom-designed to cater to the specific needs and language preferences of the target audiences.¹⁰⁷

VI. Conclusion

While there are signs of individual progress in the U.S. and Mexico in combating human trafficking, there is a clear need for legislative and policy improvements in both countries. Collaborative efforts between the two nations have the potential to significantly reduce trafficking across the border. These efforts should involve a reconsideration of deportation policies, ensuring access to legal aid for trafficking victims regardless of their immigration status, and the initiation of education and awareness campaigns focused on the issue of human trafficking at the border. Specifically, the U.S. should reevaluate its deportation policies to reduce the risk of trafficking and exploitation faced by deported individuals, particularly vulnerable migrant children. This includes a review of the allocation and accessibility of T-visas for trafficking victims, as the current system

⁹⁷ *Id.*

⁹⁸ *See id.*

⁹⁹ *Joint Statement: U.S.-Mexico High Level Security Dialogue 2023*, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE, <https://perma.cc/2APZ-7T2U> (last visited Oct. 26, 2023).

¹⁰⁰ *Raising Awareness about Human Trafficking and the National Hotline in Mexico*, POLARIS BLOG, <https://perma.cc/C5P4-ZX2X> (last visited Oct. 26, 2023).

¹⁰¹ *Id.*

¹⁰² *Id.*

¹⁰³ *Id.*

¹⁰⁴ *See Philip Reichel, Cross-National Collaboration to Combat Human Trafficking*, OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS, <https://perma.cc/575M-X5JH> (last visited Oct. 26, 2023).

¹⁰⁵ *Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons*, UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, <https://perma.cc/WJE4-M9F7> (last visited Oct 26, 2023).

¹⁰⁶ *Id.*

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

is deemed underutilized and overly burdensome. Furthermore, efforts should be made to enhance the availability and effectiveness of free legal services to address the diverse legal needs of trafficking victims, who often face obstacles due to factors such as criminal records or immigration status. Lastly, fostering collaboration between Mexico and the U.S. to increase awareness of human trafficking along their shared border is crucial. Each day, criminal networks exploit vulnerable individuals through deceptive means, subjecting them to forced labor and sexual exploitation. To make a substantial impact, it is essential to raise public awareness, making people more vigilant about the signs of human trafficking and knowledgeable about how to seek assistance and report suspicious activities. These combined efforts hold the potential to create a safer and more just region for individuals on both sides of the border.