

Out of the Mouths of Babes

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Gabriella Sanchez, "[Circuit Children](#)": *The Experiences and Perspectives of Children Engaged in Migrant Smuggling Facilitation on the US-Mexico Border*, 11 *Anti-Trafficking Review* 103 (2018).

[International](#) and [domestic](#) laws aimed at protecting children involved in human smuggling generally operate under the assumption that these children are vulnerable and defenseless prey to dangerous and violent criminals, for whom they work against their will. In her recent article, "[Circuit Children](#)": *The Experiences and Perspectives of Children Engaged in Migrant Smuggling Facilitation on the US-Mexico Border*, sociologist [Gabriella Sanchez](#) uses original qualitative fieldwork to upend or at least nuance this claim that sits at the heart of current anti-smuggling laws. The children whose stories she tells offer a much more complex picture of their role in helping others navigate the U.S.-Mexico border.

While many scholars have decried the carceral turn in human smuggling laws, Sanchez offers a key piece of evidence demonstrating the fundamental problems with this move to criminalization. It is, as has been far too obvious of late, easy for politicians and governments to demonize actors in the migratory process, both migrants and those who help them to move. But the carceral approach masks the structural forces that render migration both necessary and nearly impossible to undertake lawfully for individuals who do not win the birthplace lottery. Sanchez's body of work highlights the humanity and dignity of the individuals who facilitate migrant journeys—who might, from a different perspective, be viewed as part of a modern-day Underground Railroad. Though she refrains from hitting the reader over the head, the unmistakable take-away from her work is that these individuals are not the source of the problem; they are doing the best they can in the face of structural and geopolitical forces beyond their control.

Sanchez's empirical research fills a crucial gap in the literature. Undocumented migration is by its very nature challenging to study; people moving outside the bounds of the law are not easy to track let alone interview. Sanchez engages with this challenge head-on to gather insights into the realities of human movement across borders that are often at odds with the assumptions animating laws that criminalize human smuggling. Her [previous scholarship](#) challenges popular depictions of migrant smugglers as ruthless criminals, using empirical work to demonstrate the symbiotic relationships and social networks that often connect migrants and those who facilitate their journeys. If migrants' perceptions of smugglers rarely enter the legal or even scholarly discourse, it is rarer still to hear from children who participate in facilitating human movement across borders.

The voices of these children tell a story that, in Sanchez's words, defies "the state-centric notion that the facilitation of informal, clandestine mobility strategies inherently constitutes a crime" as well as the assumption that "smuggling is the exclusive domain of organized crime." Her interviews with 18 children aged 14 to 17 in Ciudad Juárez reveal conscious decisions to engage in smuggling that enabled them to support their families financially. These children empathized with the migrants, and appreciated the personal, social, and economic capital they gained through their smuggling work. Sanchez recognizes the risks faced by these children, but notes that they viewed law enforcement, especially U.S. Border Patrol, as the most fearsome danger.

Sanchez's interviews raise the voices of a small group of children in one specific location. The story they tell cannot possibly be universal, but it raises important questions about the criminalization of migrant smuggling. Sanchez emphasizes that children involved in smuggling face serious risks, but refutes essentializing claims that all of these children are forced against their will to work for transnational organized crime. Their perspectives beg for further study,

and starkly highlight the need for a reassessment of law's carceral approach to migrant smuggling.

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