

This poster examines the conflicts surrounding the presence of migrants as drivers of bordering processes in the city of Tapachula, located near the border between Mexico and Guatemala. Understood as an ongoing strategy of differentiation of spatial mobility and access to certain territories between people, bordering allows us to question by whom, when, where and how borders are made, but also who has the power to cross them and who does not. This cartographic reflection is mainly based on a corpus of observations and semi-structured interviews conducted in Tapachula between January and April 2022. First, at the regional level, we analyze how the Mexican federal government has designed a migration control system to prevent migrants from reaching the US border and detain them in Tapachula, the main border city of Mexico's poorest state. We then show at the city level that a number of local actors, for whom the presence of migrants poses a threat to their interests, attempt to implement spatial strategies of surveillance, separation and exclusion, creating 'borders' in the urban landscape. These local control practices targeting migrants extend the scope and reach of restrictive national border policies at the city and street level.

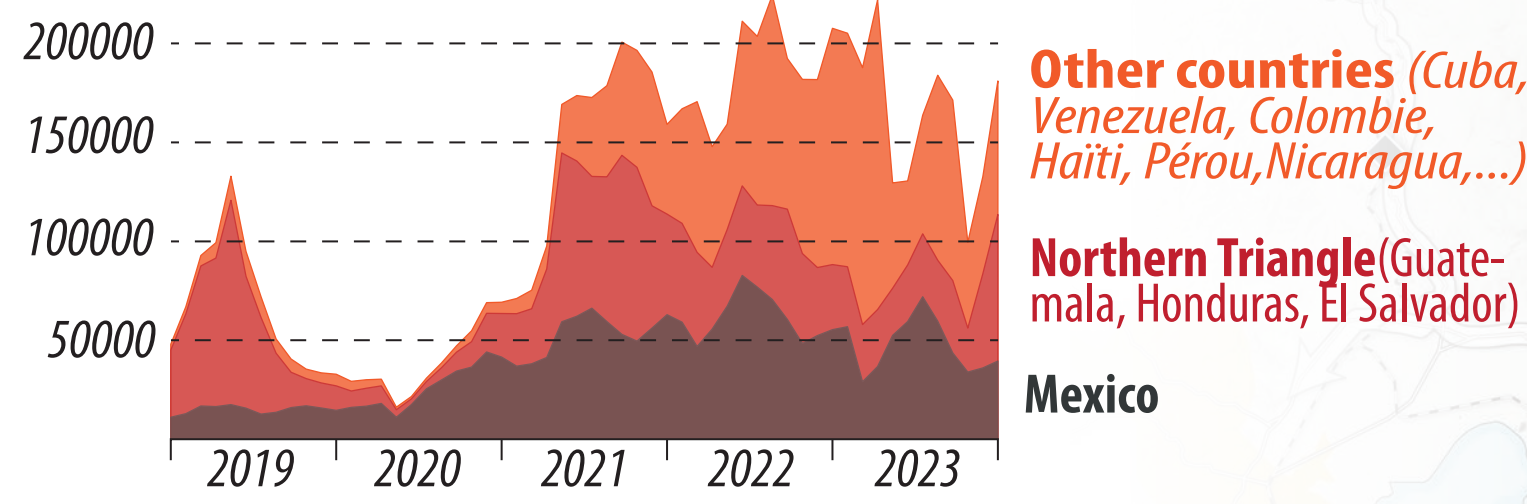
1. TAPACHULA IS THE EPICENTER OF A RETICULAR BORDER

THE MEXICAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES TO CONTROL UNDOCUMENTED MIGRATION CENTERED THE BORDER ON THE CITY OF TAPACHULA

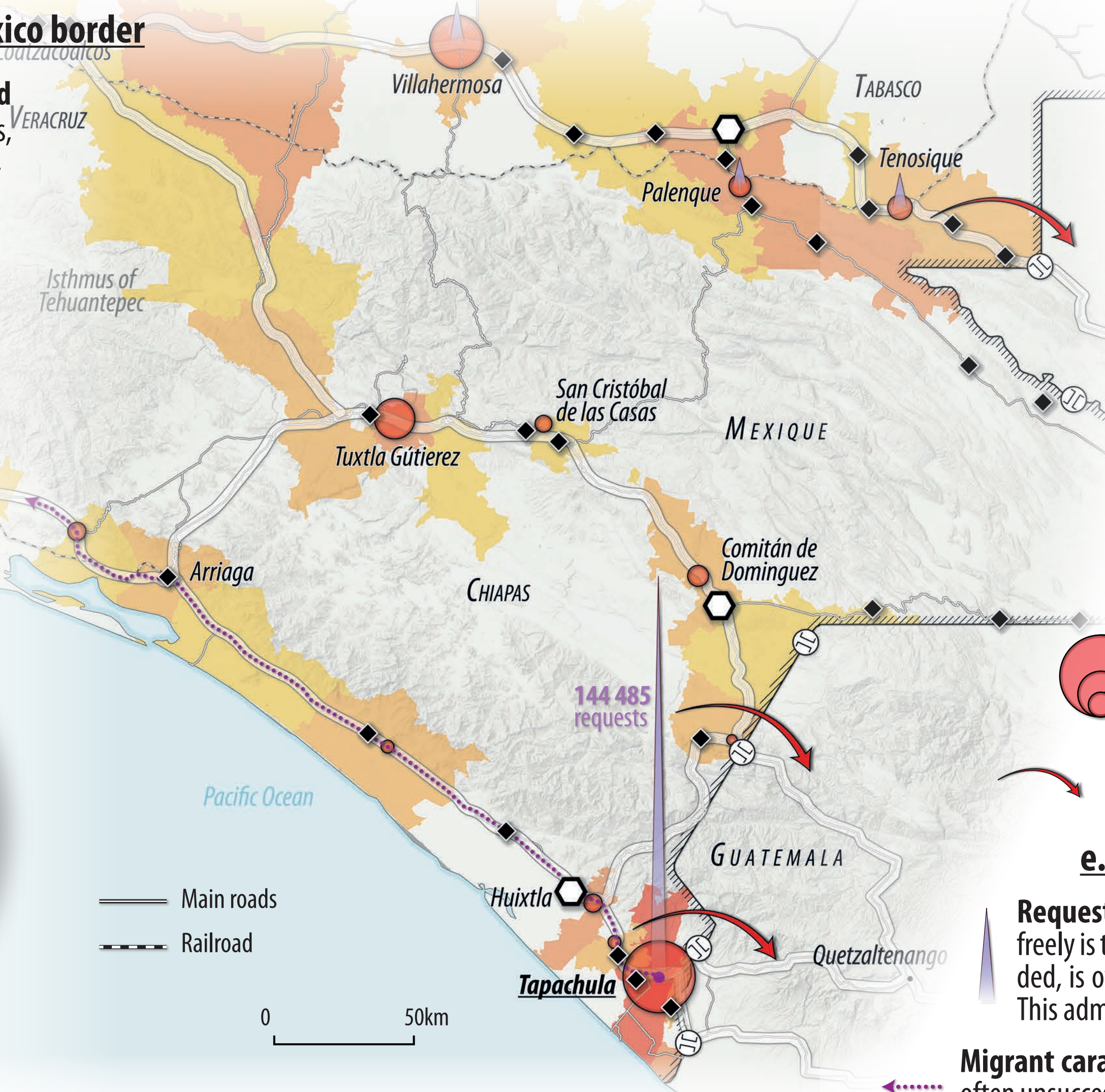
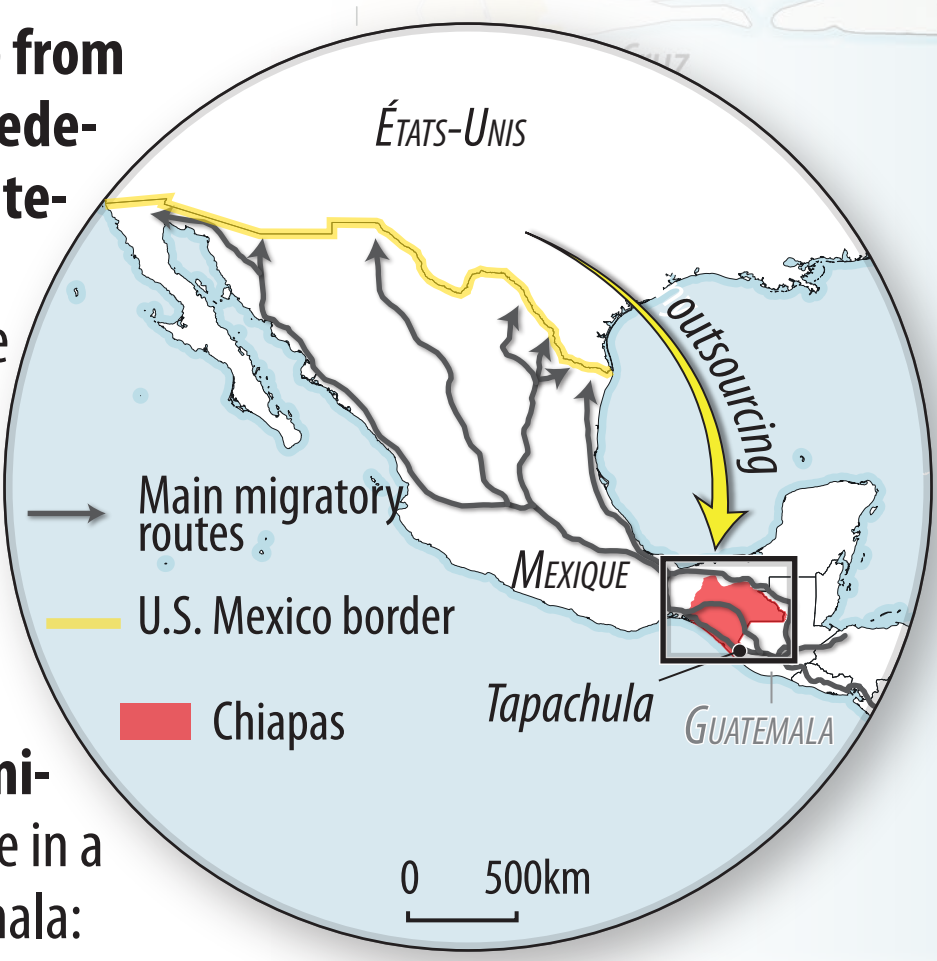
a. Prevent undocumented migrants from reaching the US-Mexico border

Since 2019, undocumented migration at the US-Mexico border has increased significantly. The profile of migrants has also changed. It is no longer just Mexicans, but also Central Americans, Cubans, Venezuelans and even Haitians who travel several thousand kilometers to reach the United States via Mexico.

Apprehension at the US-Mexico border by month and country of origin



In June 2019, under strong pressure from the US government, the Mexican federal government committed to tightening controls on migratory flows crossing its territory. This is the price it must pay for maintaining its privileged relations with its northern neighbor, especially in the economic field. From that date until December 2023, the Mexican authorities arrested 1,721,797 undocumented migrants. 31% of these arrests took place in a single state on the border with Guatemala: Chiapas.



b. A 'porous' border

- Mexico-Guatemala border:** it was established in 1882 and runs for 573.2 km through mountainous and forested areas that are difficult to access and control.
- Official border crossings:** this is where the regular flows of goods and people are concentrated, while clandestine flows cross the border via around fifty informal border crossings.
- Main undocumented migration corridors** follow communication routes to the north.

c. A reticular and militarized migration control system that coincides with the migration routes

- The CAITF:** built in 2015 with US funding, these inland border-crossings use advanced detection technologies, to control all passengers and goods traveling north..
- Permanent roadblocks:** they are manned by Mexican INM and military or police officers with the aim of detecting and arresting irregular migrants.

Apprehensions of undocumented migrants (total of apprehensions 2018-22 by municipalities):



d. Detain and remove from national territory

- Migration detention centers:** the 21st Century migratory station in Tapachula is the largest detention center in the country. In fall 2019, 2,000 people were detained there, twice the official capacity.
- Deportation:** these are carried out by land or air and mainly involve nationals of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. Since 2019, nationals of other countries have had few choices but to apply for humanitarian status or leave Mexico via the Guatemalan border.

e. Immobilize in Tapachula

- Request for refugee status by COMAR office (2019-22):** for thousands of migrants, the only way to reach the north freely is to initiate a refugee status application process. The COMAR office in Tapachula, which is understaffed and underfunded, is overwhelmed by the number of applications and candidates have to wait several months for a first appointment. This administrative inertia has led to several thousand migrants being stuck in the city.
- Migrant caravan path:** between February 2019 and December 2023, 18 migrant caravans attempted to leave the city. These often unsuccessful and violently repressed mass mobilisations, which attract political and media attention, have become a mobility strategy to undermine migration controls.

2. INTERTWINED RESTRICTIONS IN THE PUBLIC SPACES OF THE CITY CENTER OF TAPACHULA

IN THE CITY CENTER OF TAPACHULA, WHERE THE PRESENCE OF MIGRANTS IS CONSPICUOUS, THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S URBAN POLICY EXTENDS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S MEASURES TO PREVENT THE PRESENCE OF MIGRANTS IN THE CITY

- City center**
- Political, economical, cultural and social heart of the city center**

a. The space of the 'other': migrants' conflictuous appropriation of public spaces in the city centre

- Public spaces occupied by migrants:** places of forced appropriation used by migrants to meet, rest, wash and sleep. The central location of these spaces gives their occupation a political dimension. Migrants organise demonstrations and caravans here.
- Concentration of migrant street vendors:** areas with high transit traffic where migrants, especially Haitians, engage in street trading to make a living while they wait.
- 'Reclaiming the city center':** for some locals, the appropriation of the city center by migrants has exacerbated social, identity and economic insecurities. With the support of local media, the economic elite and shopkeepers have launched a public discourse with the call to 'reclaim the city center'.

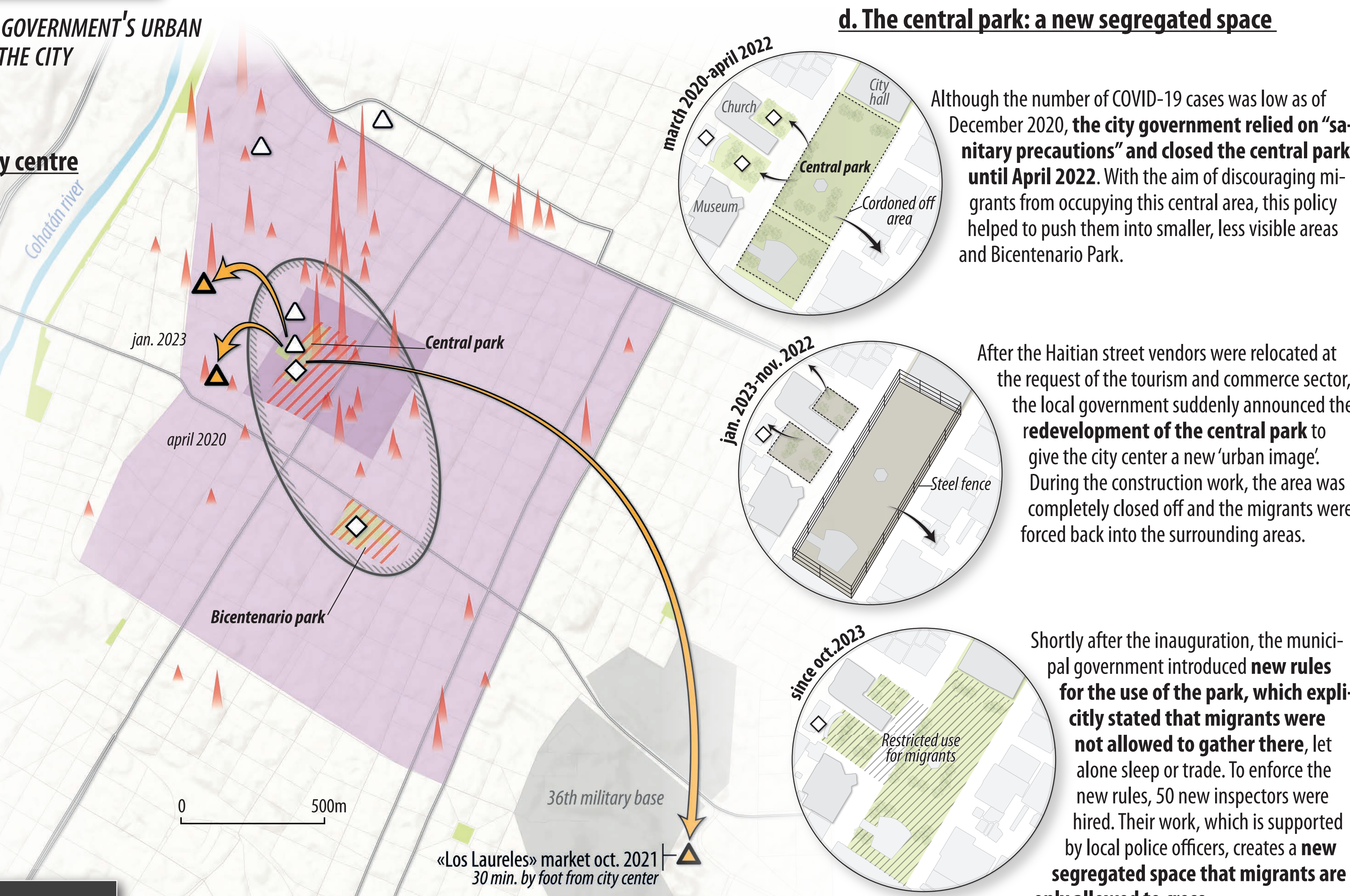
b. Pursuing migrants: local impacts of national migration control policies

INM operations in hotels (2017-2022): the INM is targeting hotels where migrants are staying:

- Targets of migration control operations:** accompanied by soldiers or local police officers, INM agents organise raids in downtown parks where migrants congregate.

c. Ordering to invisibilise and segregate: the municipal strategy towards migrant street vendors

- Attempts to relocate Haitian street vendors:** these measures, carried out with varying degrees of coercion, are intended to keep Haitians away from the economic and tourist center of the city.
- 'Migrant markets':** second-tier or abandoned markets with closed architecture where the city government tried to concentrate Haitian vendors and customers in order to make them disappear from the public space.



d. The central park: a new segregated space

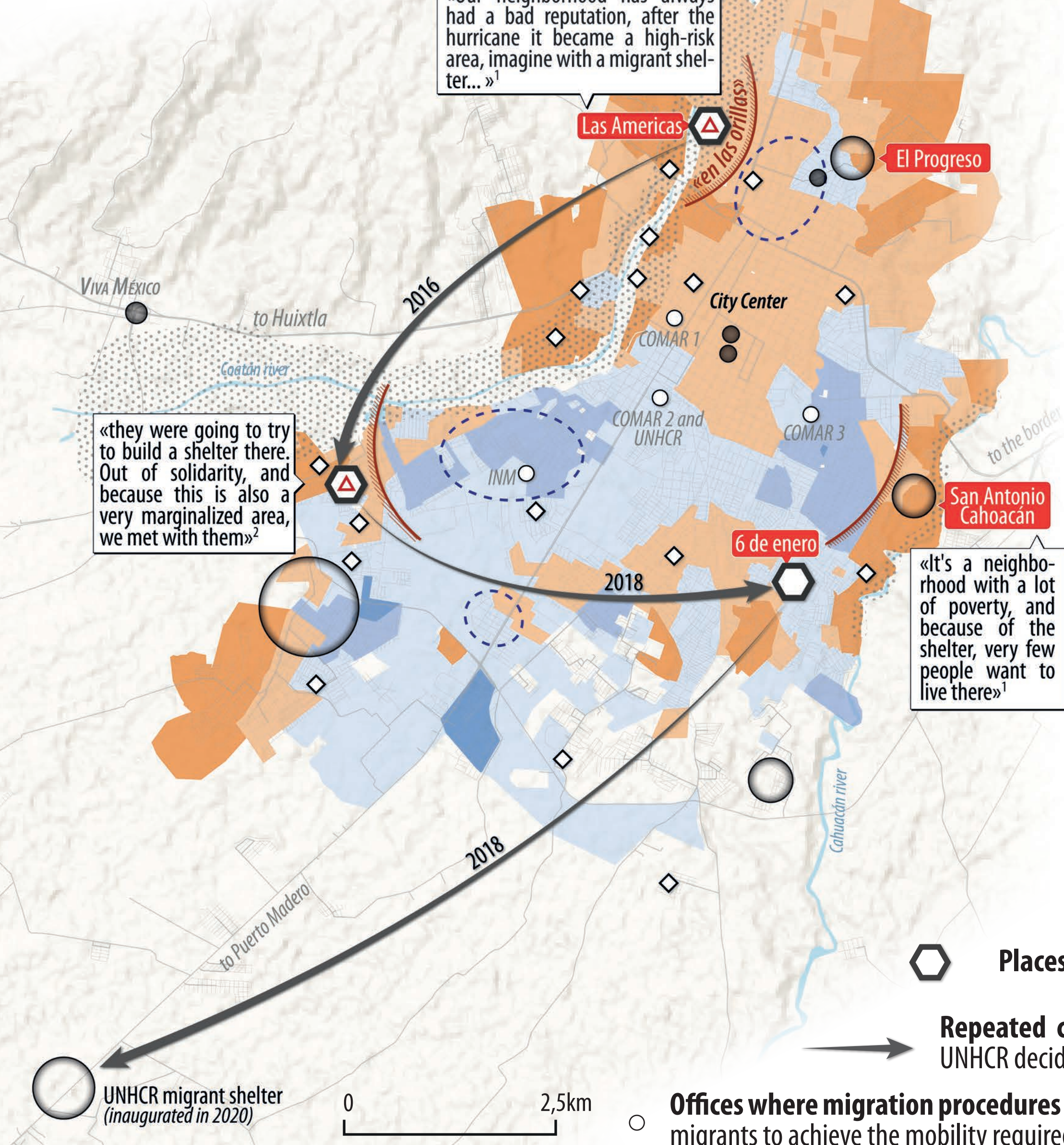
Although the number of COVID-19 cases was low as of December 2020, the city government relied on "sanitary precautions" and closed the central park until April 2022. With the aim of discouraging migrants from occupying this central area, this policy helped to push them into smaller, less visible areas and Bicentenario Park.

After the Haitian street vendors were relocated at the request of the tourism and commerce sector, the local government suddenly announced the redevelopment of the central park to give the city center a new 'urban image'. During the construction work, the area was completely closed off and the migrants were forced back into the surrounding areas.

Shortly after the inauguration, the municipal government introduced new rules for the use of the park, which explicitly stated that migrants were not allowed to gather there, let alone sleep or trade. To enforce the new rules, 50 new inspectors were hired. Their work, which is supported by local police officers, creates a new segregated space that migrants are only allowed to cross.

3. IN THE URBAN MARGINS: NEIGHBORHOOD MOBILISATION AS A BORDERING PROCESS

IN POPULAR COLONIAS, THE PRESENCE OF MIGRANT SHELTERS HAS LED TO THE MOBILISATION OF NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANISATIONS TO EVICT THEM FROM THEIR LIVING SPACE AND PUSH THEM OUT OF THE CITY



a. Conflicts over migrant shelters in popular suburban neighborhoods

- Migrant shelters:** these facilities, run by various actors (churches, UNHCR, local authorities), provide accommodation and support services for migrants. Their capacity is completely inadequate to accommodate thousands of migrants.
- Migrant settlements:** places with a high concentration of migrants. Rental prices have risen due to higher demand, forcing migrants to look for housing in popular neighborhoods.
- Degree of social marginalization by neighborhood:** shelters and migrants settle mainly in marginalised suburban neighborhoods, mostly of irregular origin.

Conflicts linked to the presence of migrant shelters: residents of these neighborhoods are united in local organizations that rally around leaders to improve living conditions through self-organisation and negotiation with the authorities. These groups are now mobilising in response to the establishment of migrant shelters in their community.

b. Case study: The mobilisation of Las Americas residents against the UNHCR shelter project

A mobilization rooted in the representation of urban and social inequalities

- Places of mobilization:** residents of Las Americas organised public rallies and negotiations with the UNHCR inside and outside their neighborhoods.
- Flood-prone areas:** a shared story about the destruction of their neighborhood during Hurricane Stan (2005) crystallises a sense of marginalisation and resilience.

'en las orillas': an expression that reflects the way in which neighbors view peripheral and marginalised areas in contrast to...

... 'Central' neighborhoods which neighbors consider to be more socially integrated and materially better off

Neighbors speech: by presenting the presence of migrants as a factor of marginalisation, neighbors legitimise their mobilisation by making it a question of spatial and social justice. (Josselin A., neighbors of Las Americas, Tapachula march 2022; Miguel L., president of the Las Americas neighbors comitee, Tapachula march 2022)

Excluding migrants outside city limits

- Places considered by the UNHCR to build the new shelter**
- Repeated changes of location:** due to systematic opposition from neighborhood organisations, UNHCR decided to build the shelter in a rural area 10 km from the city center.
- Offices where migration procedures are carried out:** the remoteness of the shelter and transportation costs make it difficult for migrants to achieve the mobility required to regularise their status and *de facto* depriving them of the opportunities of urban life.

Sources: material collected by the author during fieldwork in Tapachula (jan.-april 2022) and northern Chiapas (aug. 2023), local press review, Zepeda and Fuentes Carrera (2020), CBP, Unidad de Política Migratoria, INM and COMAR (request via the PNT), CONAPO, CNDH (2019)

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