

Why are tourist resorts attractive for transnational crime? The case of the Mayan Riviera

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Abstract

Purpose – The relationships between tourist resorts and transnational crime are rarely analyzed systematically. This paper begins to fill this gap by examining how organized crime groups and individuals linked to them can take advantage of tourist resorts to commit crimes.

Keywords Mexico, Tourism, Cancún, Mayan Riviera, Playa del Carmen, Transnational crime

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Organized crime groups (OCGs) and individuals related to them involved in transnational crime often take advantage of tourist resorts and the embedded tourist industry to pursue criminal goals (Savona and Riccardi, 2015, p. 202; 2017, p. 11; 2018, p. 57). Yet, the relationship between tourist resorts and transnational organized crime has not been analyzed adequately. This paper begins to address this analytical gap by providing a detailed conceptual framework for how organized criminal groups and individuals connected with them can exploit tourism areas and the tourist industry to further criminal ventures and elude law enforcement.

The proposed conceptual framework focuses on the case of the Mexican tourist resorts of Cancún and Playa del Carmen in the so-called Mayan Riviera. Cancún is the most visited city in Latin America (Euromonitor International, 2019) and was the second city in the world's most dependent on tourism after Macau (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2019) before the global COVID-19 pandemic hit tourism-dependent destinations. Considering that the Mayan Riviera has become home of expatriate communities involved in the tourism industry, this paper explores in particular the case of individuals of Italian origin tied to transnational crime who have relocated to Cancún and Playa del Carmen since the late 1990s. Additionally, based on open source information, this paper provides the first systematic review of the presence of transnational fugitives in the Mayan Riviera.

Historically, border areas, seaports, airports, free trade zones and other transportation hubs created to foster legal economies have been targeted by OCGs seeking to further criminal goals (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2016, p.137; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2010). Seaports, for example, have been identified as primary venues exploited by OCGs to smuggle contraband such as



drugs (Sergi, 2020, p. 28). Given the high influx of cargo and people, seaports face inherent difficulties of performing adequate controls (European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drugs Addiction [EMCDDA] [1], 2019) without undermining efficiency and economic functionality (World Customs Organization, 2019).

Mass tourism areas provide many of the same opportunities for organized criminal groups. Analyzing tourist resorts as physical and functional spaces exploitable by transnational OCGs for criminal purposes is all the more significant, given that tourism is one of the largest economic sectors globally (United Nations World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2006, 2020). In 2019, the tourism economy generated US\$8.9tn and represented 10.3% of the world's gross domestic product (GDP), according to the WTTC. Besides contributing consistently to several countries' GDP, thanks to tourist spending and general business investment in the sector, the physical movement of tourists around the world has grown massively, facilitated by less protective visa regimes and cheaper airfares (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2010). The UNWTO (2006, 2020) estimates that in 1970 there were 165.8 million international tourist arrivals, while in 2019 they reached 1.5 billion. The massive cross-border movement of tourists and the growth of the tourism economy have provided criminals with increased mobility and have allowed new opportunities for criminal enterprises (Shelley, 2011). At the same time, the expansion of the tourism economy has facilitated hiding profits of illicit origin by investing in the tourism industry (Savona and Riccardi, 2015, p. 202; 2017, p. 11; 2018, p. 57).

Yet, surprisingly, research is lacking into systemic analysis of how mass tourist resorts with a high influx of international tourists are exploited by transnational OCGs. Around the world, there are examples of individuals linked to transnational OCGs exploiting international tourist resorts to perpetrate criminal activities. These include, among others, Italian and Russian mafia-type OCGs and Bulgarian OCGs in tourist areas such as the Cote d'Azur in Southern France (Allen, 2010), the Black Sea coast in Bulgaria (Ghodsee, 2005, p. 9) and Punta del Este in Uruguay (El Pais, 2016; Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2019). Academic literature provides some notable evidence of the interactions between Camorra Italian mafia-type OCGs and the tourist industry in Spain (Allum, 2016, pp. 20–26), underscoring the vulnerability of the tourist sector to infiltration by Italian mafia-type OCGs across Europe (Antimafia Investigation Directorate Rome [DIA], 2018a, p. 199; 2018 b, p. 88; 2019a, p. 271; 2019b, p. 215).

On the other hand, governments have focused their attention primarily on the safety of tourists in tourism areas. Unsurprisingly, scholar analyses of the relationship between crime and tourism have mostly centered on predatory and opportunistic crimes (Altindag, 2014; Mawby, 2014; Pizam, 1982; Ryan, 1993) against tourists or on potential terrorist attacks in tourist resorts (Feridun, 2011; Fleischer and Buccola, 2002; Ryan, 1993; Smyth *et al.*, 2009) seeking to generate “social alarm.” Additionally, analyses of the relation between tourist areas and predatory crime tend to focus on identifying crime hotspots (Crotts, 1996) where tourists tend to be particularly vulnerable, such as bars and nightclubs, and the embedded victimization of tourists (Ryan and Kinder, 1996; Schiebler *et al.*, 1996).

Nevertheless, Lemiux and Felson (2011) have highlighted how tourism is “especially interesting” in relation to transnational crime. Additionally, Ryan (1993) has stressed that tourist locations are expressly used as “venues for crime.” While mainly focusing on predatory crimes and terrorism, Ryan argues that, just like big cities, “mass tourist destinations possess in themselves characteristics that aid criminal activity.” He shows how the tourist industry can serve as a front for criminal ventures while allowing criminals to remain inconspicuous. At the same time, tourist resorts feature plentiful “offender convergence settings” (Felson, 2006), such as bars, hotels, nightclubs, that can be functional

to set the stage for crime by assembling accomplices and getting illicit processes started. Illicit transactions might occur in these settings or might occur later elsewhere. Drawing from available academic literature (Lemieux and Felson, 2011; [Ryan, 1993](#)), this paper suggests that mass tourist resorts have four main characteristics that facilitate transnational crime operations and networking.

The first characteristic is the *high turnover* of national and international tourists, as well as that of seasonal workers, entrepreneurs investing in the tourist business and established expatriate communities.

The first characteristic facilitates a second one, namely, the *high level of anonymity* travelers enjoy in mass tourism areas. Strangers do not stand out, and thus local authorities and residents have a reduced capacity to identify suspicious individuals and activities and alert law enforcement agencies (LEAs). Fugitives from justice can easily pose as tourists or tourist sector entrepreneurs.

The third characteristic involves the *high volume of economic transactions* stemming from tourists' tendency of unrestrained spending habits, together with high flows of investment and profits in the tourist industry sector. High economic flows overall contribute to make circulation of cash and foreign currencies unexceptional and hide illicit money. Additionally, real estate investments in the tourism sector – in venues such as bars, restaurants and hotels – provides an additional opportunity to exploit them as fronts for perpetrating crimes ([Ryan, 1993](#)) and laundering illicit profits onshore.

Finally, the fourth characteristic involves the tendency of mass tourist resorts that are highly dependent on tourism *to hide or deny crimes for fear of discouraging tourists*, as noted by [Lemieux and Felson \(2011\)](#). In fact, to reap tourism revenues, governments tend to provide extensive security assets to limit visible predatory crimes in tourist resorts. Ironically, the presence of law enforcement units on the street does not discourage the type of criminal ventures described in this paper. Instead, it may contribute to a sense of security for OCGs' representatives to hide while fugitives.

In addition to these four characteristics, it is important to highlight that some mass tourist resorts possess an additional characteristic that can facilitate transnational crime activities and criminal networking stemming from their *geostrategic location*. This is evident in the case of Spanish tourist resorts such as the Costa del Sol – centered in the coastal city of Málaga – and the island of Tenerife, part of the Canary Islands archipelago. Spain is a wholesale drug market, as it is the entry and transit point for hashish from North Africa and cocaine from South America destined for other European drug markets ([EMCDDA, 2019](#)). For example, in 1986, Nunzio De Falco, an individual linked to the Casalesi clan of the Camorra Italian mafia-type OCG, moved while still a fugitive to the Costa del Sol where he had contacts and orchestrated the importation of cocaine into Italy ([Allum, 2016](#), p. 148). De Falco laundered the illicit profits by opening pizzerias, restaurants, hotels and factories and expanded to the larger cities of Seville and Barcelona. In a more recent example, police dismantled a large-scale cocaine trafficking network involving Colombian, Peruvian and Spanish nationals in the island of Tenerife in January 2020 ([European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation \[Europol\], 2020](#)). The network distributed cocaine delivered in bulk from Colombia, concealing it in caravans that traveled along the routes of Tenerife's tourist camping sites ([Europol, 2020](#)). These two examples show how the geostrategic location of certain mass tourist resorts can be an additional incentive for conducting transnational crime operations.

This study takes these initial conceptualizations further. It argues that mass tourist resorts provide transnational OCGs with highly networked logistical and financial interconnected structures. Taking into account the four characteristics cited above – along

with the geostrategic location of certain resorts – this study argues that transnational OCGs and OCG-linked individuals can exploit mass tourist areas in three main ways:

- (1) as platforms to broker and oversee criminal deals and operations, such as drug trafficking;
- (2) as areas to launder illicit profits derived from criminal activities onshore; and
- (3) as places to hide while fugitives to elude law enforcement authorities.

On a methodological note, rather than focusing on criminal organizations as a whole, this paper focuses on the “individual dimension,” one of the most overlooked topics in organized crime studies – if compared to terrorism studies – as underscored by [von Lampe \(2009\)](#). Despite recognizing the intrinsic limits of case-based studies, this paper argues that the analysis of individuals and their relationship with specific settings is a good first step to understand overall dynamics between transnational OCGs and tourist resorts. Moreover, this paper has found that a case-based approach is not only helpful but also incumbent, at least at the time when this paper was written. The main reason is the lack of access to classified law enforcement information detailing the presence and operations of transnational OCGs in specific tourist locations over time. By focusing on the “individual dimension” of transnational organized crime, this paper seeks to present an initial exploration of a phenomenon and by no means intends to be exhaustive. Yet, this paper provides a conceptual framework that could help understanding the relationship between transnational crime and tourist resorts in other regions or countries of the world.

This paper examines these dynamics in one of the busiest tourist areas in the world: the resorts of Cancún and Playa del Carmen in the so-called Mayan Riviera area in the southeastern Mexican state of Quintana Roo. Nestled between the Caribbean Sea and bordering Belize, Quintana Roo’s economy is heavily based on tourism and real estate. The majority of the state’s economic activity is concentrated in the municipalities where Cancún and Playa del Carmen are located (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [INEGI], 2017). Relevantly, Quintana Roo is a strategic location within a decades-old cocaine trafficking route ([Bagley, 2012](#); [Stratfor, 2006](#)). The state is part of a drug trafficking route originating mainly in South America and one of the main gateways to the US criminal market ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \[UNODC\], 2019](#); US Department of Justice [DOJ] Drug Enforcement Administration [DEA], 2017, 2019). In particular, Cancún is the most visited city in Latin America and ranks second in the world in terms of dependence on tourism, accounting for 46.8% of Cancún’s GDP in 2018 ([Euromonitor International, 2019](#); WTTC, 2019). Playa del Carmen, 69 kilometers (43 miles) south of Cancún, has been gradually transformed since the 1980s from a small fishing village to a global tourist destination ([Donato, 2014](#), Location No. 556–1080). In 2019, the world’s largest travel website rated Playa del Carmen (the only Mexican destination on the list) as the 17th top travel destination worldwide, ahead of Lisbon and just behind Tokyo (TripAdvisor, 2019).

The Mayan Riviera is also home to an established international community (e.g. entrepreneurs, retired expatriates) including an estimated 16,000 Italian nationals residing in the area mostly concentrated in Playa del Carmen ([Barzizza, 2019](#); [Novedades Quintana Roo, 2016](#)) [2]. As in other tourist resorts around the world, criminal elements have unsurprisingly been detected among the several expatriate communities in the Mayan Riviera. Indeed, open source data shows how individuals of Italian origin with links to transnational criminal networks have relocated to Cancún and Playa del Carmen since the late 1990s, getting involved in drug trafficking and laundering networks while time posing as legitimate entrepreneurs in the tourist sector in the area. Of course, Italian origin

individuals are not the only international criminals present in Quintana Roo. In 2019, Mexican authorities assessed that criminal cells with ties to ten transnational OCGs including groups of Romanian, Israeli and Cuban origin (El Financiero, 2019; Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project [OCCRP], 2020) operate in Cancún and Playa del Carmen. Because of limitations on the scope of this paper, the empirical analysis focuses principally on Italians with links to OCGs operating in the Mayan Riviera.

This study is structured as follows: it begins by providing a general overview of the tourism industry in the Mayan Riviera. Then, the study delves into how individuals with links to transnational OCGs have used the Mayan Riviera as a place to oversee and orchestrate criminal activities such as drug trafficking. It details the emblematic case of Italian fugitive Oreste Pagano, a key figure in cocaine trafficking between South America, North America and Italy who relocated to the area in the late 1990s. Thanks to established criminal contacts with local players in the Mayan Riviera, Pagano got involved in Cancún's real estate industry. The following section highlights the vulnerabilities making the Mexican tourist sector particularly susceptible to money laundering by focusing on the case of Vincent Salzano, an Italian-born US entrepreneur with a drug-related criminal record who relocated to Playa del Carmen. Next, the study examines how international fugitives, including some with links to transnational OCGs, have found in the Mayan Riviera a favorable environment to camouflage their presence. Drawing from a universe of 34 international fugitives since at least 1997, the study focuses on the case of Italian fugitive Ivan Fornari, arrested in Playa del Carmen in 2017. Lastly, this study presents some conclusions.

2. Tourism in Mexico's Caribbean Coast: the rise of Cancún and Playa del Carmen

This section provides a general view of how Cancún and Playa del Carmen rose to become two of the most popular international tourist resorts. The tourism industry is one of Mexico's three main sources of foreign income, along with merchandise exports and migrant workers remittances. The tourism sector's relevance cannot be underrated, with Mexico being the world's 15th largest economy (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2018) and the world's seventh largest tourist destination by international arrivals, ahead of Germany and just behind Turkey (UN World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2019). Tourism represents 8.7% of Mexico's total GDP amounting to US\$67.7bn in 2018, according to INEGI (2019). The Mexican Caribbean state of Quintana Roo plays a prominent role in Mexico's tourism sector, accounting for almost half (47.5%) of the country's international arrivals OECD, 2017]. Within Quintana Roo, the coastal resort towns of Cancún and Playa del Carmen are the main hubs attracting domestic and international visitors. Located in the northern section of the state, Cancún and Playa del Carmen are part of Mexico's larger Yucatán Peninsula and are just five hours away from the international border with Belize. Covering an area the size of Switzerland, Quintana Roo's economy is mostly based on the tourism and real estate sectors, which account for 22.4% and 13% of the state's GDP, respectively – MXN \$224,000m pesos (2008 price) in 2015 (INEGI, 2017).

Cancún, located in the Benito Juárez municipality, was founded in the early 1970s, on a deserted coastline, underdeveloped and barely populated (Pelas, 2011). The birth of Cancún was the result of a state-directed tourism development strategy planned and put into action by the Mexican Government through the *Fondo Nacional de Fomento al Turismo* (FONATUR). In 1970, the state of Quintana Roo had a total population of 88,000 (INEGI, 2017; Pelas, 2011). Within a political system of one-party authoritarian rule, the Mexican Government saw in tourism an opportunity to stimulate economic development in a region

with great poverty and no industry. Moreover, the Mexican Government investment in the tourist industry in Quintana Roo may have also reflected geostrategic considerations. Tourism in the Yucatán Peninsula may have represented a way to deflect the threat of the Left and of a potential indigenous uprising in the area bordering a politically troubled Central America (Pelás, 2011).

Thanks to national and international investments, Cancún quickly became the “crown jewel” of the Mexican tourist sector, featuring five-star hotels, renowned nightlife, all-inclusive vacation offers, an international airport and close proximity to famous archeological sites of the Yucatán Peninsula. White sands, turquoise ocean waters and an average yearly temperature of 27 degrees Celsius (80 Fahrenheit) represent a unique setting attracting tourists year-round from all over the world. Cancún’s tourism industry, with its demand for non-specialized labor, has become a job magnet for people from other areas of Mexico. Today, Cancún has expanded its population to almost 750,000 (INEGI, 2017). One of the world’s most important tourist hubs and the most visited city in Latin America, the city recorded 6.2 million visitors in 2018 (Euromonitor International, 2019). In 2019, Cancún’s international airport – Mexico’s busiest airport in terms of the number of international passengers [Gobierno de México, Secretaría de Gobernación (SEGOB), 2021] – received 7.8 million international passengers. Over time, the growing development of the tourism industry has transformed the once poor and almost deserted state of Quintana Roo into a tourist mecca that can offer “a little bit of everything” for all budgets (Pelás, 2011), thanks to a wide selection of accommodation facilities and inexpensive all-inclusive hotels.

Just 69 kilometers (43 miles) south of Cancún, the small fishing village of Playa del Carmen, located in the municipality of Solidaridad, was transformed during the 1980s into an international tourist town due to its location as a convenient jumping off point to two other premier tourist sites: the island of Cozumel and the Mayan archeological site of Tulum. The tourist development of Playa del Carmen was more gradual than that of Cancún, at least in the early stages, attracting mostly Italian and German tourists (Donato, 2014, Location No. 556–557; Camacho Lomeli, 2015). Over time, Playa del Carmen was transformed from a rustic tourist resort into a top international destination, attracting international visitors and investments (Camacho Lomeli, 2015; Donato, 2014, Location No. 1038–1039). Today, Playa del Carmen has a population of over 200,000 (INEGI, 2017) including a sizeable community of international retirees and entrepreneurs. Quintana Roo as a whole features significant expatriate communities of Americans, Canadians, and Europeans totaling 24,000 in 2015, 1.6% of the state’s 1.5 million inhabitants (INEGI, 2015, 2017; Rodríguez Chávez and Cobo, 2012). It is reasonable to believe this is an underestimate since many foreigners do not formally register or only reside there for part of the year. Foreign-born populations in Quintana Roo are mostly concentrated in Cancún and Playa del Carmen.

Among these foreign expatriates, Italian entrepreneurs were among the first foreign residents arriving in the former fishing village of Playa del Carmen and quickly became an integral part of the resort development in the area. The number of Italian residents living in Playa del Carmen has grown from 36 in 1996 to between 7,000 and 10,000 in 2014 (Donato, 2014, Location No. 1042). In all of Quintana Roo, the Italian community is estimated to be approximately 16,000, according to a consular statement reported by local media (Novedades Quintana Roo, 2016). Nowadays, Italians are an influential component of Playa del Carmen’s society (Donato, 2014, Location No. 1046) with some aspects of the Italian culture even becoming local traditions. Some of the most evident signs of influence of Italian culture are the creation of the *Ferragosto Festival*, inspired by Italy’s *Ferragosto* holiday of August 15 to celebrate the height of summer, and the Mayan Riviera Italian Festival.

During the past three decades, the members of the Italian community have become deeply involved in Playa del Carmen's tourism industry (Donato, 2014, Location No. 1052; Novedades Quintana Roo, 2016). Official statistics show that in Quintana Roo there are 375 companies with Italian capital concentrated mostly in Playa del Carmen, Cancún and the smaller resort of Tulum (Mexico's National Registry of Foreign Investment, consulted via Dateas, 2020). A total of 64% of these Italian capital companies (240) are based in Playa del Carmen. A substantial number of these companies in Quintana Roo (73) are devoted to temporary accommodation and food preparation services (i.e. hotels, restaurant, bars, cafeterias, nightclubs), while 94 are involved in the real estate sector. The other sectors involving Italian investments are active in the following sectors: wholesale, retail, construction, sporting, recreation and cultural services. The vast majority of the companies with Italian capital are listed as limited liability companies (LLCs, *Sociedad Anónima de Capital Variable* [S.A. de C.V.]), a common and widespread registration type in Mexico. However, as underscored by the latest IMF's country report (*Mexico: Detailed Assessment Report – Anti-Money Laundering and Combating the Financing of Terrorism*, 2018) this type of company lends itself to use by money laundering schemes. Creating such companies in Mexico involves minimal requirements (two shareholders) and leaves the door open for other people to act as straw men. Moreover, such companies may often “even be registered in the name of the criminal, but the name may still remain hidden from the general public due to the deficiencies in the company ownership register” (IMF, 2018).

3. Cancún as a platform for transnational crime: the case of Oreste Pagano

This section explores how individual criminals with ties to transnational OCGs have taken advantage of a world-class resort-like Cancún as a platform to oversee and orchestrate criminal activities, in particular drug trafficking. The rise of Cancún as a tourism mecca coincided with changes in the international cocaine trafficking business, making it attractive for criminal elements to settle there since at least the 1990s. After the US Government implemented interdiction efforts in the 1980s that effectively closed off Florida as a major entry point for Colombian cocaine, (Bagley, 2012; Stratfor, 2006) Mexico became an attractive transshipment point for Colombian OCGs. The country's 3,200-kilometer (2,000-mile) land border with the USA and its lightly patrolled Pacific and Atlantic coastlines facilitated drug smuggling. In the mid- to late 1980s and early 1990s, Colombian OCGs developed new cocaine trafficking routes transiting Central America and the Pacific Ocean into Mexico (Stratfor, 2006). The flows of cocaine through Mexico profoundly changed the drug trafficking landscape in the Americas and significantly increased the power of Mexican OCGs (Perry Center, 2014). Among the new drug trafficking groups there was the Juárez Cartel, whose home base was the manufacturing hub of Ciudad Juárez on the USA–Mexico border.

With the growth of the area's tourism industry in the 1990s, Quintana Roo's coastline in southeastern Mexico became a target for cocaine transshipment from South America. Throughout the decade, Mexican OCGs used downtown warehouse facilities in Cancún to store cocaine (Sheridan, 1998). In close proximity to the resort, small boats raced to big ships or low flying planes to pick up bundles of cocaine. Around the same time, drug traffickers used the nearby island of Cozumel (today a major pier for cruise boats along the Caribbean) and the smaller seaside resort of Tulum in similar ways. Mexican and US authorities estimated that each month OCGs moved about 15 tons of Colombian cocaine through Quintana Roo's “cocaine coastline” (Sheridan, 1998).

A lightly patrolled coast with geographical proximity to Central and South America was not the only feature attracting Mexican OCGs to Cancún in the 1990s. As a US counter-narcotics

official explained in 1998 (Sheridan, 1998), they were also taking advantage of the anonymity offered by Cancún's highly dynamic tourism industry. Due to Cancún's increasingly high turnover of visitors, individuals tied to Mexican OCGs could gain anonymity and evade law enforcement authorities by posing as tourists or businessmen. They could also hold meetings and organize criminal activities from the privacy and comfort of high-end hotels serving as "offender convergence settings" (Felson, 2006), while US law enforcement efforts were preoccupied elsewhere at its own the Southwest border, including Ciudad Juárez (Sheridan, 1998). In less than 30 years since its birth, Cancún had given rise to opportunities for legitimate entrepreneurs but also for criminal actors as a platform for networking and to oversee illegal activities including drug trafficking and laundering operations.

The case of Mexican drug trafficker Alcides Ramón Magaña is emblematic of how the Juárez Cartel exploited Cancún as a platform to oversee and orchestrate its drug trafficking operations. In the 1990s, the Juárez Cartel leadership commissioned Magaña and another high-ranking drug trafficking operative, Albino Quintero Meraz, to run the Quintana Roo "plaza" (turf), as reported by *Reforma* newspaper (Carrillo, 2000). By 1996, Magaña and Quintero Meraz controlled the entry of multiple tons of cocaine from Colombia into Mexican territory through the Cancún area (Carrillo, 2000). Well-established within the community, Magaña lived in a Cancún house known as *El Quijote*, located in the prestigious *Supermanzana 18* neighborhood of the city. Eating at Cancún's best restaurants, he related to people "as if he were a businessman," periodically booking a room at the high-end *Ritz Carlton Hotel* (Carrillo, 2000). There, he would arrive in luxurious cars with dark windows escorted by armed men who would organize the check-in and carry briefcases for him. As the briefcases were taken to the room, Magaña would be ushered quickly from the car to his room. Ultimately, he was arrested for drug trafficking and money laundering in 2001.

Crucially, the Juárez Cartel benefited from the cooperation of high-level Mexican officials in Quintana Roo. The corrupt collaboration went so far that Quintana Roo authorities even provided the Cartel's operatives, such as Magaña, with protection for his movements in the state. The collusion reached even Quintana Roo's governor between 1993 and 1999, Mario Villanueva Madrid. After his six-year term ended, Villanueva Madrid was indicted for drug trafficking. He was arrested in 2001 after two years on the lam and extradited to the USA. After pleading guilty in a federal court in New York, Villanueva Madrid was sentenced in 2013 to 11-year imprisonment "for conspiring to launder millions of dollars in narcotic bribe payments that he received from the Juárez Cartel" (DOJ, 2013). To this date, Villanueva Madrid's case remains one of the most egregious examples of high-ranking official corruption in Mexico. In sum, the 1990s saw Quintana Roo's geostrategic location gain in relevance for transnational criminal operations given its rise as a key point in an international drug trafficking route.

The arrival of foreign individuals with links to transnational OCGs in the Mayan Riviera happened as the Mexican Caribbean cocaine trafficking route grew in prominence and the Mexican drug trafficking organizations raised their profile. In fact, Cancún's rise as a cocaine trafficking hub did not escape the attention of criminal networks abroad. Among them was the Italian drug trafficker Oreste Pagano, with a past linked to the Neapolitan New Camorra Organization (NCO). A fugitive from Italian justice and largely overlooked in academic literature, Pagano can be considered a pioneer figure in the international drug trade business and who reinvented himself in the Americas as one of the first modern "brokers" for transnational criminal networks, arranging the movement of cocaine by the ton to North America and Europe, particularly for the Caruana-Contrera, an Italian-Canadian mafia-type OCG of Sicilian origin. The Caruana-Contrera was a family-based OCG

that left Sicily between 1950 and 1960 and relocated in North and South America, mostly in Canada and Venezuela (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, pp. 111–112).

The NCO was founded by the Camorra leader Raffaele Cutolo from within prison in the late 1970s (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, p. 113). In the 1970's, Cutolo had Pagano relocate to Soiano del Garda – a tourist resort on the Garda Lake in the province of Brescia in Northern Italy – to manage the NCO leader's lake villa and help orchestrate NCO's criminal ventures such as drug trafficking, extortion and loan sharking (Vallini, 1998; Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, p. 113; Osservatorio sulla Criminalità Organizzata [Cross], 2018, pp. 199–200). Pagano also contributed to the creation of the first “real [NCO Camorra] enclave” (Cross, 2018; p. 199) outside Southern Italy. In the villa, Pagano sheltered Cutolo after the NCO leader escaped from prison in 1977 (Cross, 2018, p. 199). His years in the tourist area of Lake Garda informed Pagano's criminal efforts in Cancún 20 years later. Pagano and Cutolo also laundered NCO's illicit profits through the tourism industry in the Lake Garda area, investing in pizzerias, bars, hotels, residences, nightclubs and car dealerships (Cross, 2018, p. 199). After Italian authorities charged him with various crimes, Pagano hid in Germany, Spain, Colombia and Venezuela, organizing drug trafficking activities from these countries.

Since fleeing from Italian justice in 1988, Pagano had been living in Spain, Colombia and Venezuela prior to reaching Cancún (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, pp. 111–112). In the 1990s in Venezuela, Pagano established a business relationship with the Caruana-Contrera OCG. At the time, Venezuela was “a place tailor-made for criminals on the run,” particularly of Italian-origin (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, p. 96). Home to a large Italian population at the time, Venezuela made “anonymity easy” and was a place where new identities could be easily obtained (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, p. 96). Pagano transferred himself to Venezuela, where he established his base and operated under the alias of “Cesare Petruzzello” (although he would use several aliases). For the Caruana-Contrera network, Pagano helped establish a major transnational cocaine pipeline from Colombia to Canada, Europe, and Italy, using Miami as a key transshipment hub where he could count on some Cuban OCG members working at the port (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, pp. 159–161).

From the scant information available, Pagano appears to have taken up residence in Cancún in the summer of 1997 (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, p. 187) right at a time when trafficking drugs through Florida became more complicated. His relocation in Cancún could have been facilitated by Italian Umberto Naviglia, a “criminally exploitable tie” (von Lampe, 2011) and member of the Camorra OCG. Naviglia, who had connections to both Cuban OCGs in Miami and “strong contacts with the Juárez Cartel in Mexico,” had met Pagano previously in Venezuela (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, p. 161). In Cancún, Pagano opened two real estate businesses – the *Royal Mont* and *euro* real estate companies in the famed *Zona Hotelera* – while continuing to organize drug shipments for the Caruana-Contrera OCG, according to police wiretaps (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, pp. 245–246; Proceso, 2003). Posing as tourism businessman, Pagano became part of the Cancún establishment and a regular at sought-after social events, and his children attended one of the city's most prestigious schools (Proceso, 2003). However, Pagano's long drug trafficking career came to an end in July 1998 when Mexican authorities arrested him along with his business partner Alberto Minelli, an expert in finance, who was well known by US authorities as a “main player in the international movement of criminal money” (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, p. 159).

The arrests of Pagano and Minelli in Cancún were based on evidence gathered during a three-year international law enforcement operation involving Italian and Canadian authorities, the *Omertà Project*. Interpol described Pagano as “armed and dangerous” and listed his past crimes as criminal conspiracy, drug trafficking, mafia-type criminal conspiracy, armed robbery, fraud, receiving stolen property, violations of firearms laws,

theft, rape and forgery (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, pp. 157–158). After transferring him to Mexico City, Mexican authorities ultimately sent Pagano to Canada, where he would help the prosecution of the Caruana-Contrera OCG. In exchange for information on his drug trafficking ventures, Pagano was able to obtain US \$100,000 from Canadian authorities and a place in Italy's witness protection program (Lamothe and Nicaso, 2001, p. 252). Thanks to this deal, Pagano avoided the threat of a 28-year prison sentence for drug trafficking, assault and conspiracy. In 2001, Canadian authorities extradited Pagano to Italy where he started collaborating with Italian law enforcement. As of 2016, Pagano was living in Italy sheltered by the country's witness protection program (Appleby, 2000; Peggio, 2016).

This section shows that while Cancún's geostrategic location was attractive to Pagano, given his long drug trafficking career, his relocation took advantage of Cancún's characteristics as a tourist resort: high international tourist arrival turnover, assuring anonymity, and a growing tourist industry attracting foreign investors and capital. Despite being an outsider in the Mayan Riviera, Pagano was able to present himself as an international entrepreneur investing in real estate in the late 1990s. While he developed his business activities in Cancún, Pagano continued to organize transnational drug shipments as proven by Canadian police wiretaps. Even after the arrest of Pagano and his crime partner Minelli, Cancún and the Mayan Riviera continued to attract individuals of Italian origin, tied to transnational networks to pursue illicit goals. In the following section, this paper will show how such opportunities have been exploited in recent times as well, particularly in Playa del Carmen, which since the late 1990s has been home to an established and successful Italian expatriate community.

4. Playa del Carmen and the risks of money laundering: the case of Vincent Salzano

This section explores how individual criminals with ties to transnational OCGs can take advantage of the Mayan Riviera's opportunities for money laundering. Since the creation of Cancún in the 1970s, Mexico's Mayan Riviera area has developed a dynamic tourism industry. Such dynamism, while attracting legal investments, is at risk of being targeted by criminal actors for money laundering purposes, the core of which involves hiding the illicit origin of such profits. The money laundering process consists of three basic stages: *placement* that distances funds from the criminal activity; *layering* that hides the trail; and *integration*, making funds available to criminal actors (Alasmari, 2012; Fantò, 1999; p. 16). Billions of dollars of illicit proceeds are laundered annually through the Mexican financial system (U.S. Department of State [USDoS], 2019). The most frequently used money laundering methods appear to be the placing of bank deposits below the reporting requirements along with the investment of illicit proceeds in financial and real estate assets (USDoS, 2019). Despite the fact that in 2017 the IMF reported a consistent improvement in the country's anti-money laundering regime, Mexico continually faces frequent money laundering attempts. These schemes stem principally from activities associated with organized crime (IMF, 2017). Mexico's main anti-money laundering agency is the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU), which began operations in 1997 (Egmont Group, 2020). Although according to the IMF (2017) the FIU functions well and generates "good financial intelligence," Mexico's ability to detect illicit transactions remains of concern. Furthermore, impunity in money laundering cases is an additional problem in Mexico. Government figures show that only 2% of money laundering investigations opened by the Attorney General's Office (FGR) between 2007 and 2019 ended in a formal conviction (Sánchez Ley et al., 2020). In those cases, where prosecutors were able to win a conviction (44 cases), Mexican judges only gave the defendant the minimum prison time (5 years).

The large tourism economy of Mexico's Mayan Riviera encapsulates vulnerabilities that put the area at high risk of money laundering schemes by individuals, local criminal groups and transnational OCGs. As seen in previous sections, the Mayan Riviera's economy is primarily based on the tourism and real estate sectors. The IMF (2017) has called attention to the widespread use of cash in Mexico's tourist areas. Like in other areas of the country, many hospitality sector establishments in Cancún and Playa del Carmen are registered under legal figures – mostly LLCs – that allow some degree of secrecy (IMF, 2017). The latter also applies to the Mayan Riviera's real estate sector, which has long represented “a preferred choice” (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019) for hiding of illicit proceeds (Financial Action Task Force of Latin America [FATF and GAFILAT], 2018; IMF, 2017). Criminals willing to launder illicit profits also take advantage of Mexico's regionally integrated and well-connected financial sector, its inadequate record on money laundering prosecutions and the limited knowledge among Mexican non-financial actors (i.e. notaries, real estate agents) of complex laundering schemes (IMF, 2017). The Mayan Riviera is also at risk for money laundering given that it is the main gateway for international tourists into Mexico and given the country's relatively weak border controls (IMF, 2017). Overall, this paper concurs with Binder (Binder, 2019) in affirming that Mexico, despite its geographical proximity to offshore tax havens (i.e. Belize), can provide “formidable spaces for onshore money laundering.” This fact has not gone unnoticed for individuals connected to transnational OCGs.

Currently, there is no comprehensive money laundering assessment of the Mayan Riviera's risks to money laundering. However, we can point to official data about the size of the tourism and real estate sectors and envision the setting where legitimate and illegal business operations coexist. While they do not encompass all existing establishments in the area, statistics (INEGI, 2017) show that there are at least 221 so-called tourism-certified hotels in Playa del Carmen and 187 in Cancún. The vast majority of these hotels are in the top “five-star” category. Both locations also concentrate the majority of restaurants, bars and nightlife establishments in Quintana Roo: 560 in Playa del Carmen and 734 in Cancún (INEGI, 2017). As for the real estate sector, a recent analysis of online residential listings shows that the vast majority of properties offered for sale and rental in Quintana Roo are located in the Mayan Riviera area: 34% in Playa del Carmen and 49% in Cancún (Lamudi, 2019). This is not a surprise given that 65.9% of the total state's housing is located in Playa del Carmen and Cancún (INEGI, 2017). Online residential listings in Playa del Carmen and Cancún fit the demand of an affluent clientele, with a majority of them falling within the “Residential Plus Category” (US\$175,000 to US\$500,000) and the “Premium Category” (above US\$500,000). Given that Mexican average wages are far lower than those in industrialized countries, top listings in the Mayan Riviera tend to be more accessible for foreign buyers (see OECD data Indicators on average wages). This fact is reflected in local real estate agencies catering to foreigners, including the use of the English language. Foreign buyers are not perceived as unusual. Given the sheer size of its tourism industry and its real estate market, it should not be a surprise that the Mayan Riviera offers a wide range of opportunities to hide illicit proceeds.

A review of open source data shows that international criminals have taken advantage of the tourism and real estate infrastructure of the Mayan Riviera for money laundering schemes since at least the 1990s. Along with Cancún, Playa del Carmen's geographic position and surrounding coastline have made it an attractive place for criminals. Like in Cancún, the presence of non-Mexican individuals involved in transnational criminal networks has been reported in Playa del Carmen since the late 1990s (Caballero, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). In 1998, Playa del Carmen's mayor acknowledged that foreign individuals

tied to transnational crime had been detected in town (Caballero, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). At the time, the mayor was referring to the arrest of two German citizens in Playa del Carmen the year before: Harry Walter Pfell and Otto Alexander Nesnidal. Mexican authorities charged both individuals with drug trafficking and money laundering (Caballero, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Pfell, a fugitive wanted by the International Crime Police Organization (INTERPOL), was planning to buy a hotel in the Playa del Carmen area (Caballero, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Based on open source information, this is the oldest publicly known case involving transnational criminals and money laundering in the buoyant Playa del Carmen tourist sector.

Mexican authorities rarely publicize money laundering cases. One exception occurred in March 2014 and involved a prominent Playa del Carmen entrepreneur. In that year, the Mexican Attorney's General Office (FGR) initiated a complaint against Vincenzo Salzano (also known as Vincent). Salzano is an entrepreneur born in Italy in 1958 (specifically in the town of Santa Maria La Fossa in the Italian region of Campania) but who became a US citizen in 1979 (DOJ, 1979) and who had made several investments in Playa del Carmen. At the time, Mexican organized-crime prosecutors ordered the freezing of Salzano's and some of his family members' accounts together with the ones of other prominent Quintana Roo's entrepreneurs and politicians on suspicion of "financial operations with resources of unlawful origin" (PGR, 2014). Although information on the exact circumstances that triggered the investigation into Salzano by Mexican authorities is unknown, it is probable that it was related to his arrest on US soil in October 2013. Salzano and his son and son-in-law had been arrested at the Baton Rouge airport in Louisiana when they stopped to refuel a private jet loaded with 32 kilograms of cocaine (70 pounds) worth US\$1m (CBS News, 2014; United States of America v. Vincent Salzano also known as Vincenzo Salzano [U.S. v. V.S.], 2014a, 2014b). In December 2014, Salzano pleaded guilty before a US federal court to conspiracy to distribute drugs and received a jail sentence of 60 months. It is worth noting that Salzano, a longtime resident of Colorado, had a previous criminal record, having served a six-month prison sentence in 1992 for cocaine distribution in the USA (U.S. v. V. S., 2013). By the time that Mexico's Attorney General acted against Salzano in March 2014, many of the bank accounts that were at the heart of the investigation had reportedly been emptied, highlighting the weaknesses of Mexico's anti-money laundering efforts (Noticaribe, 2014a, 2014b).

Salzano's arrival in Playa del Carmen dates back to sometime around 1998. His previous criminal record in the USA does not seem to have been an impediment to starting two real estate businesses in town: Caribe Investment Properties in 1998 and Grand Enterprises in 2004 (U.S. v. V.S., 2018a). He also developed a fitness center company, Evolve Fitness Center, that by 2013 had a total of eight clubs throughout Playa del Carmen, Cancún, and Tulum, employing some 100 people in total. In the USA, Salzano also owned a home and commercial establishment, including a car dealership, valued at approximately US \$4m (U.S. v. V.S., 2018a). While a detailed account of the nature of his investments in Playa del Carmen is not publicly available, Salzano succeeded in hiding his involvement in nefarious drug trafficking activities throughout the years. When the news of his arrest in the USA reached Playa del Carmen in 2013, local newspapers reacted in disbelief, shocked that a well-respected "Italian" entrepreneur could have been accused of such a serious crime (Noticaribe, 2013). Given his prior drug trafficking history and the subsequent Mexican money laundering investigation, questions arise about the origin of Salzano's resources invested in the Mayan Riviera, his business contacts and other potential hidden activities that he could have carried out in the area.

While there is no comprehensive money laundering risk assessment of the Mayan Riviera, the analysis of a case like Salzano's illustrates at least four key vulnerabilities exploitable by money laundering schemes. A first vulnerability stems from the combination of an established expatriate community and of a dynamic tourism industry making the arrival of international entrepreneurs like Salzano unexceptional. Despite his past as drug trafficker, Salzano was able to invest in high-risk sectors – real estate and health clubs – without raising red flags in Playa del Carmen [3]. In fact, fitness clubs specifically have been highlighted globally as potential hotspots for drug dealing (Møller *et al.*, 2015, p. 447; Groom, 2016; *Il Messaggero*, 2017). A second vulnerability evidenced by the Salzano case is the dubious ability of Mexican authorities to perform successful prosecutions. According to newspaper reports, Salzano's Mexican accounts were already emptied when the Attorney General's Office (PGR) ordered their freezing in March 2014 (Noticaribe, 2014a, 2014b). There is no known record that the Mexican investigation into Salzano's resources reached any conviction, showcasing the country's limited capacity to conduct anti-money laundering enforcement. A third vulnerability evidenced by the Salzano case is how some individuals can profit from a fragmented enforcement space where LEAs in different countries do not necessarily communicate between each other. After a US federal court convicted Salzano for cocaine trafficking in 2015, it is not publicly known whether U.S. authorities shared with Mexican authorities any concerns about his sizeable investments in the Mayan Riviera. One would assume both U.S. and Mexican authorities would be interested in looking into Salzano's numerous businesses in the area. Moreover, U.S. court records show that Salzano was able to gain permission during his supervised release in 2018 to travel "periodically [to Playa del Carmen] so that his businesses do not cease to exist." It is unknown whether the USA asked Mexican authorities to monitor Salzano's activities during these trips (U.S. v. V. S., 2018b; U.S. v. V.S., 2018c). Open source information shows that Salzano's businesses in the Mayan Riviera have continued operating since then. A fourth vulnerability made evident by the Salzano case is how convicted criminals of Italian origin, posing as entrepreneurs, can blend in the large law-abiding Italian expatriate community of Playa del Carmen without raising suspicions. This last vulnerability will be further studied in the following section.

5. Mayan Riviera as a haven for international fugitives: the case of Ivan Fornari

In this final section, this paper explores how individual criminals linked to transnational OCGs take advantage of tourist resorts to evade justice while on the run from law enforcement, while at the same time continuing to frequently engage in both legitimate and illicit activities. The section first reviews the phenomenon overall and then analyzes specific cases of international fugitives in the Mayan Riviera. In stark contrast to academic focus on property crime and crime mobility, relocation choices and mobility of international fugitives have rarely been systematically analyzed (Drealan, 2007; Van Daele and Vander Beken, 2009; von Lampe, 2009, 2011). Criminal fugitives are individuals attempting to evade justice. According to INTERPOL's Fugitive Investigative Support (no date), an individual can become a fugitive after being charged with a crime but before arrest; fleeing law enforcement while on bail to avoid prosecution; or prison escape. By necessity of having to hide from law enforcement, fugitives tend to be mobile and opportunistic, and they sometimes cross international borders to hide using real or fake documents (or no documents at all). Specifically, international fugitives have long targeted holiday destinations as hiding places (i.e. Al Jazeera, 2005; Fuller, 2011).

While no comprehensive information is available in the public domain, it is safe to assume that LEAs put particular attention on holiday destinations as hiding places. In 2017,

for example, European law enforcement – through the European Network of Fugitive Active Search Teams (ENFAST) and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) – sought help to find the exact location of some of its “Most Wanted” fugitives. Europol launched a campaign seeking information on these fugitives using digital postcards that featured well-known European tourist landmarks and stressing that criminals did not “deserve a vacation.” Despite fugitives’ need to stay off law enforcement’s radar, they may still engage in social and economic activities abroad. International fugitives can become involved in legal businesses or continue illicit ventures while in hiding. This paper uses the term “actively absconding” to refer to the involvement of fugitives in legal or illegal economic activities while hiding from LEAs. The term originates from the work of [dalla Chiesa \(2016, Location No. 2597–2670\)](#) and his concept of *latitanza attiva* applied to the ability of the Italian Camorra and ‘Ndrangheta mafia-type OCGs fugitives to infiltrate the legal tourist sector in Spain. According to [dalla Chiesa](#), these actors were able to carry out legal activities (e.g. bars restaurants, real estate and food import export companies) as well as illegal ventures (e.g. drug trafficking and money laundering) to such an extent that they even “reshape” the Spanish tourist sector ([dalla Chiesa, 2016, Location No. 2599](#)).

Crossing borders is not always an easy task for criminal fugitives. They can encounter unfamiliar or even hostile environments, exposing them to the risk of behaving in an unconventional or outright suspicious way. Although the presence of established contacts (i.e. family members, friends, affiliates) in an alien territory is a feature of some specific OCGs like the Italian Camorra ([Allum, 2016, pp. 20–26](#)) and Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta mafia-type OCGs ([Sciarrone, 2009, pp. 146–147](#); [Sciarrone and Storti, 2014](#)), the presence of some support and collaboration in an unfamiliar territory can be considered a necessity for fugitives to survive “below the radar” and keep a fugitive’s presence inconspicuous. Without support of someone familiar with local culture, language and customs, foreigners can stand out, and in the case of international criminal fugitives, be vulnerable to the scrutiny of local LEAs, perhaps even more so than domestic offenders ([von Lampe, 2011](#)). An established network of contacts or criminal ties can also facilitate new criminal activities while actively absconding.

Since the early 19th century, Mexico has been regarded as a preferred destination for international fugitives, particularly due to its territorial proximity to the USA ([Fuller, 2015](#); [Jordan and Sullivan, 2001](#)). Mexico remains attractive to US citizens on the lam given that they do not need to present a passport when traveling by land and also given the high volume of vehicles crossing the USA–Mexico border making inspections random and infrequent. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 brought stronger border enforcement between the USA and Mexico, particularly when traveling by air. However, a review of open source information shows that the Mexican territory remains an attractive destination for fugitives of US justice. According to the report *Ten Most Wanted Fugitives 60th Anniversary, 1950–2010* of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 12 of the 26 most wanted fugitives arrested between 1998 and 2009 were found in Mexico. In 2001, the then head of INTERPOL’s Mexico office summarized to The Washington Post: “[. . .] it is one of the oldest stories in American crime: Everybody runs to Mexico. South of the border has long been viewed as a place of warm beaches and cold drinks, and little chance of getting caught” ([Jordan and Sullivan, 2001](#)).

While it is not a surprise that US fugitives may choose to cross into Mexico given the geographic proximity, the role that Mexico plays as a desirable destination for non-US international fugitives (e.g. from Europe) has rarely been explored. This paper intends to bridge this gap by building the first comprehensive database of international fugitives apprehended in the Mexican Mayan Riviera since the late 1990’s as shown in [Appendix](#).

The Mayan Riviera has many characteristics to make it a favorable hiding place: a well-developed tourist industry, air connectivity with direct flights to 97 international airports via the Cancún International Airport, visa-free access for North American and European Union tourists, a high turnover of international arrivals and the presence of expatriate communities in the area (SEDETOUR, 2015). The high frequency of flights to Cancún can even provide opportunities for reconnaissance trips for individuals looking for a permanent relocation while fugitives without raising alarm. Cancún's airport can also be used as a convenient layover to escape to other Central, North and South American destinations. For example, Ivan Fasciani, member of the Fasciani Italian mafia OCG from the Lazio region, wanted for a ten-year prison sentence in Italy, recently sought to escape to Belize (where he had established contacts) via Cancún before being arrested in 2019 (Frignani, 2019).

The Mayan Riviera's dynamic tourist industry makes it easy for foreign individuals to engage in temporary economic activities without requiring certification and in a favorable context where knowing a foreign language can be considered a plus. In addition to the above advantages, corruption among Mexican public officials, including law and immigration enforcement, has proven to be exploited by fugitives on the run. Recently, investigative reporting has shown that at least one member of a Romanian-origin OCG benefited from the use of forged documents for entry into Mexico via the Cancún International Airport (Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project [OCCRP], 2020). Until at least 2004, several Mexican airports booths lacked the adequate computer system to process the information required by the Advance Passenger Information System (APIS) useful to take the necessary measures when a passenger is "red-flagged" (Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) – Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (ITAM), 2004). While immigration enforcement at airports has strengthened – as some arrests show – it is not possible to establish from open source information whether Cancún's airport booths are fully equipped at the present time to effectively detect "red-flagged" passengers (CSIS-ITAM, 2004). In sum, international fugitives can count on the Mayan Riviera's several vulnerabilities to make their absconding successful.

Given the absence of comprehensive data on fugitives, and based on a thorough review of open-source documents (local news outlets, government press releases, international agencies and books), this paper contains the first systematized list of 34 international fugitives' apprehensions in the resort towns of Cancún and Playa del Carmen between 1997 and 2019 (Appendix). One must note that LEAs do not make public all the arrests they perform and that it is likely that other fugitives are hiding in the area without raising suspicion. Most of the arrests in the data set are North American and European nationals (21 and 7 arrests, respectively), but the list also includes nationals from Israel, Argentina, Colombia and Cuba. While a mandatory visa could be a barrier for fugitives from Asia or Africa to arrive in Mexico, all 34 individuals in the list are nationals from countries that can enter Mexico as tourists without needing one. The duration of the 34 fugitives' stay in the Mayan Riviera varies from just a few hours at the airport to over two decades. All 34 fugitives were wanted by foreign LEAs, including three with a "Red Notice" from INTERPOL (see Appendix). Two of the fugitives were actually found dead, execution style, in Cancún: one Canadian national tied to the Vito Rizzuto Italian-Canadian mafia-type OCG and one Romanian national tied to an OCG involved in international credit card fraud. In 22 of 34 cases, fugitives on the list had known links to various transnational OCGs based in the USA, Argentina, Israel, Cuba, Italy and Canada. Criminal charges against individuals in the list include drug trafficking, money laundering, credit card fraud, child pornography, human trafficking and sex exploitation. A total of 12 cases in the list were individuals with no known connection to OCGs and face charges including sex-related crimes, murder, drug

offenses, fraud, robbery and arson. At least 9 of the 34 international fugitives arrested in the Mayan Riviera had been able to engage in either licit or illicit economic activities while on the lam. They engaged in “active absconding” ([dalla Chiesa, 2016](#)) managing or working in tattoo parlors, retail stores, restaurants, and nightlife establishments. Even while open-source data is often incomplete (means of transport, routes and travel documents are usually lacking), the list shows that in nearly all 34 cases their arrival to the Mayan Riviera was successful.

The case of Italian national Ivan Fornari provides a paradigmatic example of how the tourist industry and the embedded entrepreneurial Italian community of Playa del Carmen can be vulnerable to infiltration by fugitives. Originally from the Italian region of Sardinia, Ivan Fornari has been described by Italian police as a “prominent member” of local organized crime involved in drug trafficking with links to international networks, particularly those in Spain ([Polizia di Stato, 2017](#)). In April 2014, Ivan Fornari was arrested in Sardinia as part of larger international counter narcotics operation known to the Italian police as “Operazione Bitumat” ([Italian Parliament, House of Representatives, 2014](#); [Polizia di Stato, 2014](#)). Launched by the Spanish Police in 2013, the operation sought to dismantle a transnational criminal organization involved in hashish trafficking between Spain and Sardinia ([Polizia di Stato, 2014](#)). Fornari’s collaboration with the Italian police netted the arrests of other individuals and the seizure of 64 kilograms of hashish ([Agenzia ANSA, 2017](#)). After being convicted and sentenced to 5 years and 7 months in jail (a lenient sentence thanks to his collaboration), Fornari fled Sardinia and was declared a fugitive from Italian law in May 2016 ([Agenzia ANSA, 2017](#)).

Fornari is believed to have arrived in Mexico toward the end of 2016, via Spain where he could probably count on his network of contacts for support. Just a few months later, in February 2017, INTERPOL issued a Red Notice for Fornari. While the details of his travel are not entirely clear, Fornari could have reached Cancún easily, benefiting from direct flights and Mexico’s visa-free entry program for tourists from the European Union. After his capture in March 2017, Mexican authorities revealed that Fornari had been expelled from the country because he had violated the terms of his immigration status, presumably as a tourist. At the time of his capture, Mexican authorities may have opted to follow an expedited deportation of Fornari rather than waiting for a formal extradition request from Italy ([Agenzia EFE, 2017](#); [Periodistas Quintana Roo, 2017](#)).

At the time of his arrest in March 2017, Fornari was managing a small restaurant, *Controvento Sardegna*, right in the heart of Playa del Carmen’s famed *Quinta Avenida* district and in the proximity of ritzy shops and restaurants. Just one block from the beach, Fornari boasted on social media of having purchased the restaurant and renamed it after his home region of Sardinia. Similar real estate investments in the Playa del Carmen downtown area are valued at US\$150,000 [4]. While exact details on his arrival are unclear, questions emerge about why Fornari’s criminal past and immigration status were not an impediment to managing a restaurant in a prime location of Playa del Carmen and how he raised the funds to acquire the property.

Ivan Fornari ended up living in Playa del Carmen for approximately six months, actively absconding as a respectable restaurateur and living in a downtown apartment complex. Fornari was probably not overly worried about being targeted by Mexican police. More than 9,000 kilometers (5,500 miles) from his native region of Sardinia, he also did not seem worried about Italian police being able to track him down. Fornari appeared so confident of not being detected that he routinely published pictures and videos on a Facebook page without even changing his name. His vanity and carelessness would be crucial for the Italian police and INTERPOL to track him down and provide Mexican authorities with leads that

resulted his arrest in March 2017. Italian law enforcement shared with the public that Fornari's arrest would not have been possible without the analysis of Fornari's Facebook pictures from Playa del Carmen by the beach, at the gym and other locations including his *Controvento Sardegna* restaurant (Pinna, 2017).

During all this time, Fornari was able to settle in Playa del Carmen camouflaged among the large and law-abiding Italian expatriate community. As described in a previous section of this paper, small Italian-owned businesses are a central feature of Playa del Carmen since the 1990s. Some of these entrepreneurs left Italy not only attracted by profitable investment opportunities but also following their dream of opening "a *chiringuito* on the beach" (a beach bar), leaving everything behind and starting out a new life (Donato, 2014, Location No. 1073). This clustering of Italian-origin people (sharing a similar ethnic and social background, similar life goals, and in some cases working together) can help in networking and facilitate the integration of newcomers (Kleemans, 2014). Newcomers like Fornari, posing as entrepreneurs, are not perceived necessarily as outsiders, and this may aid in lowering the threshold of scrutiny of an investor's past. In many cases, having enough economic means can be enough to settle in Playa del Carmen.

Given Fornari's case, law-abiding Italian entrepreneurs in Playa del Carmen (and in the entire Mayan Riviera) should be interested in proactively engaging in establishing prevention strategies to impede the settlement of fugitives posing as entrepreneurs in their community. Implementing of prevention strategies is even more relevant considering that it has been proven that the targeting of legitimate businesses in the tourist sector can be a potential step for criminal groups tied to Italian mafia-type OCGs (Camorra and 'Ndrangheta in particular) to fully settle down in a new territory (Sciarrone and Storti, 2014; Antimafia Investigation Directorate Rome [DIA], 2018a, p. 199; 2018 b, pp. 88–89; 2019a, 267–271; 2019 b, p. 215).

6. Conclusions

Despite the fact that tourism, and the cross-border movement of people related to it, has become a key economic sector around the globe, academic literature has seldom analyzed the relationship between tourist resorts and transnational crime in a systematic fashion. This paper begins to fill this gap by outlining a framework of how individuals linked to transnational OCGs can exploit tourist resorts for criminal purposes. Understood as an initial exploration of an understudied topic, this paper analyzed how Italian-origin individuals linked to transnational OCGs have been able to use two global tourist meccas in the Mexico's Caribbean coast: the resorts of Cancún and Playa del Carmen in the so-called Mayan Riviera. Research for this paper involved a comprehensive review of open source information going back 23 years (periodical press, historical accounts, court records, government releases) in three different languages (Spanish, Italian, English). Focusing on three Italian-born individuals (Oreste Pagano, Vincenzo Salzano and Ivan Fornari), the paper explored how people involved in transnational crime have used the Mayan Riviera as a platform to broker and oversee criminal deals and operations (Pagano in Cancún); as an area suitable to launder illicit profits derived from criminal activities (Salzano in Playa del Carmen); and as a place to hide while fugitives to elude law enforcement authorities (Ivan Fornari in Playa del Carmen).

This paper has focused on the individual dimension of transnational crime and its relation to the Mayan Riviera's tourist resorts. The fact that individuals tied to transnational crime posing as tourists and entrepreneurs may have taken advantage of highly networked logistical and financial structures of mass tourist resorts is not a surprise. What is concerning is that such highly networked logistical and financial structures can serve as

criminal networking platforms to extensively facilitate their criminal enterprises. In fact, this paper describes how at the same time that Cancún was becoming the crown jewel of Mexico's tourism industry, it was also becoming a relevant transshipment point in a prominent cocaine trafficking route from South and Central America to the USA. In 1997, Italian national Oreste Pagano took advantage of the resort's insertion in the drug trafficking route and its tourism-oriented economy to relocate. While in Cancún, by posing as a real estate entrepreneur, Pagano was able to facilitate drug shipments from South America for the Canadian-Italian mafia-type Caruana-Contrera OCG. Since then, the two Mayan Riviera's resorts have continued to offer to individuals with criminal records further opportunities for relocation. As demonstrated in the case of Italian-born US citizen Vincenzo Salzano in Playa del Carmen, individuals with criminal records can exploit the cosmopolitan setting of a location that 30 years ago was just a fishing village. Relevantly, the fragmentation of the international law enforcement space allowed Salzano to move forward with investments in sectors at high risk of money laundering like real estate and gyms in the Mayan Riviera. By exploiting the Playa del Carmen's cosmopolitan environment, Salzano was able to remain prosperous even when Mexican authorities opened a money laundering case against him after he was indicted (and later convicted) in the USA for conspiracy to distribute 32 kilos of cocaine. This paper also showed how, during the same period of time, the Mayan Riviera was a formidable destination for international fugitives including Italian nationals. Overall, the author found 34 known international fugitives taking refuge in the Mayan Riviera since 1997. In particular, the study focused on Ivan Fornari, a fugitive of Italian justice who had been arrested as part of a counterdrug operation in southern Europe and who reached Playa del Carmen. Fornari's case showcases how weak border controls, international connectivity and, most relevantly, the size of the Italian expatriate community in the area allowed Fornari to remain undetected and even manage a restaurant. Again, this study is just an initial outline to encourage more studies on tourist resorts as venues for transnational crime.

In the three case studies presented in this paper, the mass tourist resorts of Cancún and Playa del Carmen have demonstrated to be functional to commit crimes for individuals linked to transnational organized crime during the past 30 years. The criminogenic nature of both resorts over time confirms that tourist locations around the world continue to function as "venues for crime," as noted by [Ryan \(1993\)](#), and continue to provide "convergent opportunities" for crime as underscored by [Crofts \(1996\)](#). For these reasons, the work of both authors remains overall valid today. The intense cross-border movement of people arriving in mass tourist resorts, the high flows of foreign currency and the use of cash transactions are still functional to hide crimes even in an Internet era when electronic payments are taking over. However, further research on this topic should be encouraged to establish whether a possible replacement of cash transactions by virtual currencies (e.g. Bitcoin) or phone payments may diminish or neutralize the opportunities to hide crime in tourist resorts in Mexico and elsewhere. Additionally, further field research should be conducted on-site to deepen the understanding of how legitimate actors (law enforcement, businessmen, trade groups, etc.) perceive the presence of individuals suspected to have links to transnational crime among the Mayan Riviera's expatriate communities. Nevertheless, cooperation could be problematic since reputation matters for tourist resorts and businesses so dependent on tourism like the Mayan Riviera. Local authorities and entrepreneurs may be tempted not to disclose the ways through which local and transnational OCGs exploit their tourist localities. However, merely shoving the problem under the rug is dangerously shortsighted. Studying the relationship between transnational crime and the resorts in the Mayan Riviera gains even more relevance at present given two recent developments:

- The COVID-19 pandemic is creating new opportunities for transnational OCGs to penetrate legitimate economies, particularly in the tourism sector globally. The massive losses of revenues and the increasing indebtedness of many tourism entrepreneurs make the industry even more vulnerable to penetration and even outright takeover of many businesses by transnational OCGs. This phenomenon is already happening in different regions of Italy like Veneto, Tuscany and Liguria ([Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2020](#); [Il Giorno, 2020](#); [Carnevali, 2020](#)). In fact, the Italian government has been already warning about the increasing risk of infiltration by Italian mafia-type OCGs targeting the tourism economy (Governo Italiano – Ministero dell’Interno, 2020). This is particularly relevant for small businesses, often family based. These small and very small entrepreneurs are pressed by the crisis and in debt, and could be more prone to accept cash offers to sell their business. Besides risking the value of their assets, these entrepreneurs may be more willing to overlook scrutiny procedures and take the risk of facilitating illegal activity. For this reason, legitimate entrepreneurs and authorities in Cancún and Playa del Carmen – particularly those Italian-owned businesses – should not let their guard down.
- While the Mexican Caribbean cocaine trafficking route through the Mayan Riviera became less prominent in the early 2000s, a review of literature in the public domain signals that it might have been reactivated recently. This assumption is linked to the discovery of several clandestine airstrips and of ultra-light planes landing/ crashing in Quintana Roo. In some cases, Mexican authorities have made seizures of tons of cocaine coming from South America. At the same time, reports of seizures of cocaine bundles by the sea have increased constantly since at least 2017 ([Noticaribe, 2017b](#); [Noticaribe, 2018](#); [Noticaribe, 2019](#); [Noticaribe, 2020](#)). The issue grows even more complex as local OCGs in Mexico could also be targeting the area to use it again as their own platform for drug trafficking and laundering operations.

The factors cited above could undermine the reputation of tourist resorts in the Mayan Riviera and reduce tourist flows to them. Thus, local and national authorities in Mexico need to devote extensive intelligence and law enforcement capacity to prevent and eradicate infiltration by transnational OCGs to preserve the financial integrity and the physical safety of the Mayan Riviera’s tourist resorts. Eventually, local civil society in Quintana Roo also has a role to play. The local legal business community and business groups in the area can adopt best international practices against money laundering. They can diligently promote this culture among smaller local businesses in the Mayan Riviera. Overall, the author hopes that the analysis of tourist resorts in Mexico contributes to the discussion regarding transnational crime both in the North American region and beyond.

Notes

1. Of the 750 million global container movements reported per year, only an estimated 2% are inspected (EMCDDA, 2019).
2. The exact number of Italian residents it is unclear. The author of this paper has sent two e-mail requests to the Italian Embassy in Mexico City and to the Italian Consulate in Playa del Carmen asking for the number of Italian residents in the municipality of Solidaridad without receiving any reply to the request.
3. Mexican criminals have, of course, equally taken advantage of the money laundering opportunities in the Mayan Riviera. Recently, Mexican authorities have charged Quintana

Roo's former governor Roberto Borge (in office, 2011-2016) on several criminal charges including corruption, embezzlement and money laundering. Borge was extradited to Mexico after having been arrested in Panama, and is currently in a federal prison (Varillas, 2020).

4. Prices have been converted from Mexican pesos taking as reference listings of commercial buildings for sale in downtown Playa del Carmen (Lamudi, no date).

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Progressive no.	Year of arrest Name Gender	Nationality	Year of arrival in the Mayan Riviera	Accusation – related crime	Arrest Location Arrest Authority	Reference
1	1997 Harry Walter Pfeil (male)	German	Unclear, probably years before	Drug trafficking and money laundering	Playa del Carmen INTERPOL and Mexican authorities	(Caballero, 1997)
2	1997 Otto Alexander Nesdinal (male)	German	Unclear	Drug trafficking and money laundering	Playa del Carmen INTERPOL and Mexican authorities	(Caballero, 1997)
3	1998 Oreste Pagano (male)	Italian	Probably in the Summer of 1997	Drug trafficking and money laundering	Cancún Mexican police under request of international LEAs	(Caballero, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c)
4	1998 Alberto Minelli (male)	Italian	Unclear	Drug trafficking and money laundering	Cancún Mexican authorities under request of international LEAs	(Caballero, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c)
5	2004 John Forrest (male)	USA (New Jersey)	Unclear	Fraud	Cancún Bounty Hunter	(Morgan, 2004)
6	2007 Enrico Carella (male)	Italian	Unclear: fugitive 2003	Arson	Cancún Mexican authorities and INTERPOL	(La Nuova Venezia, 2007)
7	2010 Roger Charles Day Jr (male)	USA (Virginia)	Probably 2008	Wire fraud, aggravated identity theft, money laundering	Cancún Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Green, 2010)
8	2012 William A. White (male)	USA (Virginia)	Unclear, evaded probation terms in 2011, believed to belong to a neo-Nazi group	Violation of probation terms	Playa del Carmen Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Noticaribe, 2012a)
9	2012 Vincent Legend Walters (male)	USA (California)	Probably 1988	Murder	Cancún Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Fox News Channel, 2012)

(continued)

Table A1.
International
fugitives detected in
Cancún and Playa
del Carmen

Table A1.

Progressive no.	Year of arrest Name Gender	Nationality	Year of arrival in the Mayan Riviera	Accusation – related crime	Arrest Location Arrest Authority	Reference
10	2012 Michael Joseph Chávez (male)	USA (California)	2009	Sexual abuse minors	Cancún Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Noticaribe, 2012b)
11	2012 For security reasons no identity details are available (male)	Unclear	Unclear	Murder	Playa del Carmen Mexican authorities and INTERPOL	(Noticaribe, 2012c)
12	2013 Jimmy Cournoyer (male)	Canadian	A few hours: arrested at Cancun's airport upon arrival	40 felony counts, among them drug trafficking	Cancún Mexican authorities at the request of US Government, located through an INTERPOL Red Notice	(Thibault, 2013)
13	2013 Walter Lee Williams	USA (California)	Probably 2011	Child pornography and sexual abuse (minor)	Playa del Carmen Mexican authorities at the request of US Government;	(Newcomb, 2013)
14	2014 Jeffrey Janssen Anuth (male)	USA (state unclear)	Unclear	Fraud and tax evasion scams	Cancún Mexican authorities at the request of USA Located through an INTERPOL Red Notice	(Noticaribe, 2014)
15	15. 2014 Calvin Nagy (male)	USA (Colorado)	Unclear	Sexual assault and misdemeanor assault	Playa del Carmen Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(CBSN Denver, 2014)
16	2015 Jason Allen Beeching (male)	USA (state unclear)	Probably 2010	Sexual intercourse with a minor	Playa del Carmen Arrested by Mexican authorities for public disturbance and deported to the USA	(Noticaribe, 2015)

(continued)

Progressive no.	Year of arrest Name Gender	Nationality	Year of arrival in the Mayan Riviera	Accusation – related crime	Arrest Location Arrest Authority	Reference
17	2015 John Castellanos (male)	USA (Michigan)	Probably 2013	Drug related crimes and illegal use of weapons	Playa del Carmen Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Expediente QuintanaRoo, 2015)
18	2016 Joseph Andersen (male)	USA (Michigan)	Probably 2015	Bank robbery and probation terms evasion	Playa del Carmen Arrested by Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Noticaribe, 2016)
19	2016 Anthony Avniel Awan (male)	USA (North Carolina)	Unclear	Murder, fraud, unlawful possession of firearm	Playa del Carmen Arrested Mexican authorities for reported harassment deported to the USA	(The Yucatan Times, 2016)
20	2016 Christopher Daniels (male)	USA (state unclear)	Unclear	Criminal drug related record	Playa del Carmen Arrested with Anthony Avniel Awan	(The Yucatan Times, 2016)
21	2017 Ivan Fornari (male)	Italian	Probably 2016	International drug trafficking	Playa del Carmen Mexican authorities at the request of Italian authorities via INTERPOL Red Notice	(Reforma, 2017)
22	2017 Juan Carlos Marin Cardona (male)	Colombian	Unclear: fugitive since 1994	Drug trafficking	Playa del Carmen Arrested by Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Noticaribe, 2017a)
23	2018 Jorge Rondón Martínez (male)	Cuban	Probably 2017	Large scale credit card scam	Arrested by Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Radio televisión Marti, 2018)
24	2018 Leidy Labrada de la Guardia (female)	Cuban	Probably 2017	Partner of Jorge Rondón Martínez accused for the same crimes	Cancún. Arrested by Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Radio televisión Marti, 2018)

(continued)

Table A1.

Table A1.

Progressive no.	Year of arrest Name Gender	Nationality	Year of arrival in the Mayan Riviera	Accusation – related crime	Arrest Location Arrest Authority	Reference
25	2018 Daniele Ranieri (male)	Canadian	2015	Extortion and person of interest in the Musitano – Barberi murder in Hamilton – Ontario Canada. Member of the Vito Rizzuto mafia OCG based in Montreal	Cancún. Wanted by Canadian authorities. Found dead in a ditch, in Cancún, executed	(Martin – Robbins, 2018)
26	2018 Michael Graham Cudmore (male)	Canadian	Probably May 2017. He is believed to have reached Daniele Ranieri	2 homicides (Musitano – Barberi) related to Canadian Italian mafia OCG in Hamilton	Cancún Wanted by Canadian and INTERPOL found dead (probably executed) in June 2020 in rural Mexico	(Hristova, 2020)
27	2018 Daniel Mario Tomassetti (male)	Canadian	2017, he is believed to have reached Daniele Ranieri with Cudmore Probably 2014	2 homicides (Musitano – Barberi) related to Canadian Italian mafia OCG in Hamilton	Cancún. Still wanted by Canadian authorities and INTERPOL who believe he might still in Mexico	(Hristova, 2020)
28	2018 Sorinel Constantin Marcu (male, deceased)	Romanian		Attempted murder	Cancún Wanted by Romanian authorities through INTERPOL Found dead (executed)	(Krebs on Security, 2019)
29	2019 Daryoush “Darius” Bunyad (male)	USA (California)	Since 2017	Sexual battery and molesting	Playa del Carmen Arrested by Mexican authorities as recognized by a bystander and deported at request of the US Government	(FOX2 KTVU, 2019)

(continued)

Progressive no.	Year of arrest Name Gender	Nationality	Year of arrival in the Mayan Riviera	Accusation – related crime	Arrest Location Arrest Authority	Reference
30	2019 Erez Akrishevsky (male)	Israeli	Unclear; probably 2004	Murder. Member of an Israeli OCG	Cancún Arrested by Mexican authorities at request of Israeli police.	(El Dictamen, 2019)
31	2019 Dylan Bennet (male)	USA (Minnesota)	Arrested after 4 days from his arrival	Murder	Cancún Arrested by Mexican authorities at the request of US Government	(Por Estol, 2019a)
32	2019 Raúl Luis Martins Coggiola (male)	Argentinian	2002	Sex exploitation and money laundering	Cancún Arrested by Mexican authorities through INTERPOL at request of Argentinian authorities	(Barajas, 2019)
33	2019 Vincent Yen Tek Chiu (male)	Canadian	Arrested at Cancun airport in 2019	International drug smuggling and money laundering	Cancún Arrested by Mexican authorities at the request of US Government. INTERPOL	(Bolan, 2019)
34	2019 Ivan. “G.” (male)	USA (Colorado)	2017	Murder	Red Notice Playa del Carmen Arrested by Mexican authorities in an anti-narcotics operation	(Por Estol, 2019b)

Table A1.