

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 14, 2023

Mark Zuckerberg
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer
Meta
1 Hacker Way
Menlo Park, California 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg,

We write to express our alarm over Meta's repeated failure to address the fact that malicious actors are exploiting its platforms to facilitate human smuggling and drug trafficking in developing countries, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. Given the immense damage these crimes cause to communities across the Western Hemisphere, Meta has an obligation to address these challenges; one it is currently falling short of. We urge you to immediately dedicate renewed attention and resources to this crisis, and we request that you provide us with additional information regarding what steps Meta is prepared to take to prevent human smugglers and drug traffickers from utilizing its platform and address the significant real-world harms these activities have caused.

Numerous investigations, including those conducted by the Tech Transparency Project, have documented how human smugglers openly use Facebook to exploit vulnerable migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. These investigations found that human smugglers commonly use Facebook Marketplace to advertise their services and that such posts are often monetized by Facebook.¹ They also found more than 90 Facebook pages and 20 groups, generally in Spanish, advertising human smuggling services to cross the U.S. border.² These pages and groups, which often included several thousands of members and followers, operated openly on the platform for several months, providing users with routes, modes of transit, prices, discounts, and WhatsApp contact information for smugglers.³ Although the Tech Transparency Project reported this content to Facebook, your company failed to remove nearly half the content flagged after Tech Transparency's initial April 2021 investigation.⁴

¹ "Facebook Marketplace, WhatsApp Storefronts, TikTok Videos: How Coyotes Get Creative," *Tech Transparency Project*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/facebook-marketplace-whatsapp-storefronts-and-tiktok-videos-how-coyotes-get-creative>.

² "Facebook Teems with Human Smugglers Luring Migrants," *Tech Transparency Project*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/facebook-teems-human-smugglers-luring-migrants>; "Human Smuggling Rampant on Facebook Amid Border Surge," *Tech Transparency Project*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/human-smuggling-rampant-facebook-amid-border-surge>; "Spot Check: Facebook Still a Haven for Human Smuggling," *Tech Transparency Project*, September 23, 2021, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/spot-check-facebook-still-haven-human-smuggling>

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Human Smuggling Rampant on Facebook Amid Border Surge".

The Tech Transparency Project's investigations also found that human smuggling groups and pages on Facebook were rife with blatant lies intended to attract and deceive prospective migrants and asylum seekers and served as vehicles for drug cartels to advertise their activities.⁵ Previous reporting has found that drug cartels in Latin America and the Caribbean widely use Meta's platforms to traffic drugs, recruit members and smugglers, extort victims, and publish hit lists.⁶ The open advertisement of human smuggling and drug trafficking services and the prevalence of disinformation about the U.S. immigration system on Facebook contributes to transnational crime in the region and the challenges experienced by the United States at its Southwestern border. The amplification of these activities by Facebook's own algorithm only exacerbates these challenges.⁷

Despite Facebook's acknowledgment that human smuggling and drug trafficking activities violate its community standards,⁸ internal documents published by the *Wall Street Journal* reveal that your company's response to these issues has been inadequate and unacceptable, particularly in developing countries and for Spanish-language and other non-English content. To provide one example, these documents reveal that the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, one of the most dangerous and prominent Mexican drug cartels, openly recruited, trained, and paid hit men using Meta's platforms, and that even when Meta was made aware of these activities, it failed to fully remove the cartel from its platforms.⁹ They also reveal that Meta devoted significantly fewer resources to address the harms its platforms caused in developing countries relative to those spent addressing U.S.-specific content.¹⁰

It is imperative that Meta take seriously Facebook and WhatsApp's emerging roles as tools used to support human smuggling and drug trafficking operations in developing countries. This should particularly be the case in Latin America and the Caribbean, where human smuggling and drug trafficking activities are widely documented and not only harm local populations, but also significantly, adversely affect U.S. national interests. The Drug Enforcement Agency's announcement in December 2021 that Mexican drug cartels are using Meta's platforms to "flood our country with fentanyl" underscores the need for urgent action.¹¹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Robert Muggah, "Drug Cartels Are All Over Instagram, Facebook, and Tiktok," *Foreign Policy*, December 15, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/12/15/latin-american-drug-cartels-instagram-facebook-tiktok-social-media-crime/>; Rebecca Plevin and Omar Ornelas, "'We're Going to Find You.' Mexican Cartels Turn Social Media into Tools for Extortion, Threats and Violence," *Desert Sun*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.desertsun.com/in-depth/news/2019/02/27/mexican-drug-cartels-use-social-media-for-extortion-threats-violence-facebook-whatsapp-youtube/2280756002/>.

⁷ "Facebook Teems with Human Smugglers Luring Migrants"; "Drug Trafficking is Amplified on Facebook, Fueling a Drug Crisis," Alliance to Counter Crime Online, April 7, 2021, <https://www.countercrime.org/online-crimes/drug-trafficking-is-amplified-on-facebook-fueling-a-drug-crisis>.

⁸ "Human Smuggling Rampant on Facebook Amid Border Surge".

⁹ Justin Scheck, Newley Purnell, and Jeff Horwitz, "Facebook Employees Flag Drug Cartels and Human Traffickers. The Company's Response is Weak, Documents Show," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-drug-cartels-human-traffickers-response-is-weak-documents-11631812953?mod=article_inline.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Drug Enforcement Agency, "DEA Reveals Criminal Drug Networks are Flooding the U.S. with Fentanyl," press release, December 17, 2021, <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2021/12/17/dea-reveals-criminal-drug-networks-are-flooding-us-deadly-fentanyl>.

We urge you to take our concerns seriously and devote prompt attention to these matters. We look forward to your response, and welcome your continued engagement in order to ensure that moving forward Meta's platforms reinforce, rather than undermine, human rights and good governance worldwide.

Sincerely,



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



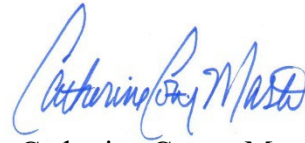
Jeanne Shaheen
United States Senator



Ben Ray Luján
United States Senator



Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator