
CENTRAL AMERICA & MEXICO POLICY INITIATIVE

CLANDESTINE MIGRATION AND MIGRANT RISK IN ARIZONA

FALL 2024 – SPRING 2025



TEXAS LBJ School

The University of Texas at Austin
Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

POLICY RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

229

Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Policy Research Project Report

Number 229

**Clandestine Migration and Migrant Risk
in Arizona**

Project Directed by

Stephanie Leutert

A report by the Policy Research Project
on Clandestine Migration Along the U.S.-Mexico Border

April 2025

The LBJ School of Public Affairs publishes a wide range of public policy issue titles.

ISBN-10: 978-1-951006-24-2

©2025 by The University of Texas at Austin

All rights reserved. No part of this publication or any corresponding electronic text and/or images may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover design by Alison Prince

Policy Research Project Participants

Authors

Drew Buffalino, M.S. (Homeland Security), Monmouth University

Anthony Hernandez Escobar, B.A. (International Studies & Spanish), Texas A&M University

Pete Rios, B.S. (Psychology), East Texas A&M University

Payton Sinsabaugh, B.A. (Global Affairs), George Mason University

Project Director

Stephanie Leutert, Director, Central America and Mexico Policy Initiative, Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law, The University of Texas at Austin

Partnerships and Acknowledgments

The following report is the result of a year-long investigation by graduate students at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. These students were part of a Policy Research Project (PRP) that examined clandestine migration and migrant risk along the U.S.-Mexico border. The students conducted their analysis on four border zones—California, Arizona, West Texas and New Mexico, and South Texas—and produced corresponding policy reports.

The PRP and associated travel and field research was made possible by the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas at Austin. The authors would also like to thank the many people who spoke with them about clandestine migration, migrant risk, and migrant smuggling along the border. This includes through phone interviews and in-person meetings during their trip to Brooks County, Texas.

Table of Contents

List of Figures.....	6
List of Acronyms.....	7
Foreword.....	8
Executive Summary	8
Methodology	11
Chapter 1: Clandestine Migration in Arizona	14
Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border	15
Vehicle Pick-Ups.....	17
Stash Houses at the Border.....	17
Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention.....	18
Stash Houses in Interior Cities	21
Chapter 2: Migrant Risk and Mortality in Arizona	23
Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border	24
Vehicle Pick-Ups.....	27
Stash Houses at the Border.....	28
Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention.....	29
Stash Houses in Interior Cities	33
Chapter 3: Migrant Smugglers in Arizona.....	34
Clandestine Migrant Smugglers	35
Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border	35
Vehicle Pick-Ups.....	36
Stash Houses at the Border.....	37
Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention.....	38
Stash Houses in Interior Cities	39
Migrant Smuggling Coordinators.....	39
Conclusion	41
Endnotes	42

List of Figures

Figure 1: Migrant Deaths in Arizona Counties by Dataset.....	13
Figure 2: Primary Migration Routes in Arizona	14
Figure 3: Ports of Entry Along the Arizona-Mexico Border	15
Figure 4: Border Patrol Checkpoints in Arizona	19
Figure 5: Interior Stash Houses in Arizona.....	22
Figure 6: Map of Recovered Migrant Remains in Arizona (2014–2024).....	23
Figure 7: Migrant Deaths From Border Wall Falls in Urban Areas	25
Figure 8: Migrant Deaths From Border Wall Falls in Rural Areas.....	26
Figure 9: Migrant Deaths From Exposure to the Elements (Within 15 Miles of the Border)	27
Figure 10: Migrant Deaths From Vehicle Accidents (Within 15 Miles of the Border).....	28
Figure 11: Migrant Deaths From Exposure to the Elements (15+ Miles from the Border)	30
Figure 12: Migrant Deaths From Vehicle Accidents (15+ Miles from the Border)	30
Figure 13: Smuggler Demographics by Clandestine Migration Phase.....	35

List of Acronyms

BSITS	Border Safety Initiative Tracking System
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
DACA	Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals
DPS	Texas Department of Public Safety
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
HSI	Homeland Security Investigations
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
PACER	Public Access to Court Electronic Records

Foreword

The Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs has established interdisciplinary research on policy problems as the core of its educational program. A major element of this program is the nine-month Policy Research Project, during which one or more faculty members direct the research of ten to twenty graduate students of diverse disciplines and academic backgrounds on a policy issue of concern to a government or nonprofit agency. This “client orientation” brings students face-to-face with administrators, legislators, and other officials active in the policy process and demonstrates that research in a policy environment demands special knowledge and skill sets. It exposes students to challenges they will face in relating academic research and complex data to those responsible for the development and implementation of policy, and teaches them how to overcome those challenges.

The curriculum of the LBJ School is intended not only to develop effective public servants, but also to produce research that will enlighten and inform those already engaged in the policy process. The project that resulted in this report has helped to accomplish the first task; it is our hope that the report itself will contribute to the second. Neither the LBJ School nor The University of Texas at Austin necessarily endorses the views or findings of this report.

JR DeShazo
Dean

Executive Summary

On February 16, 2021, Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) special agents received a report about a missing person near Fort Huachuca, Arizona. The missing individual was a 23-year-old woman who—along with her two sisters and a family friend—had hired a guide to smuggle them into the United States on foot. The guide led the group on a remote and rugged route through the Huachuca Mountains, navigating harsh conditions that included freezing temperatures, snow, and limited access to food and water. Over the course of the journey, the woman became unable to walk, eat, or respond to simple commands, and eventually, the guide abandoned her in the mountains. She remained missing for nine months until law enforcement officers finally discovered her remains.

For more than 140 years, individuals have clandestinely crossed into the United States through Arizona. These migration routes often circumvent official ports of entry and expose individuals to the state's harsh terrain, including extensive deserts and mountain ranges.¹ In the summer, temperatures can soar well above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, while winter temperatures in the mountains can plummet to below freezing. These extreme conditions make the Arizona borderlands a treacherous and often deadly crossing zone for unauthorized migrants entering the United States.

This research report focuses on clandestine migration in Arizona and aims to address three key questions. First, how do clandestine migrants currently transit through the Arizona borderlands? Second, what are the associated safety risks for migrants? Third, who are the people arrested for engaging in migrant smuggling activities in Arizona? To address these questions, this report employs a mixed-methods approach. To identify routes, risks, and smuggler demographics, it uses two original datasets that document 119 migrant smuggling incidents and associated material witness testimonies from January 2014 to August 2024. To assess migrant risks and mortality, the report analyzes the Border Patrol's Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS) migrant death records and recovered remains data from medical examiners in Pima County and Yuma County. It also relies on interviews with federal officials, civil society organizations, and scholars to fill in any gaps.

The report has three primary findings. The first finding is that clandestine crossings in Arizona generally follow either a three-phase or a five-phase process, depending on geography. In urban border areas, the journey typically follows a five-phase process: migrants cross the border, are picked up by a vehicle, taken to a stash house near the border, transported through or around a Border Patrol checkpoint, and then taken to a stash house in Phoenix. In contrast, in remote desert areas, the process may involve as few as three phases. In this simplified three-phase route, migrants cross the border, hike past a checkpoint, and then head directly to a stash house in Phoenix.

The two additional findings are related to migrant risks and smugglers. The second finding is that migrants face risks across all these phases, but those walking through the Arizona desert face the greatest risks. While the third finding was that there was no single demographic profile of an arrested migrant smuggler in Arizona. Overall, the primary demographic was male U.S. citizens residing in Arizona. However, the report's dataset included men and women, U.S. citizens and

¹ The Arizona border comprises a mix of public, private, and Native American lands.

Mexican nationals, as well as individuals from Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Nevada. Notably, the arrested individuals' demographic profile varied by smuggling activity.

This report is structured into four chapters. The following section outlines the report's methodology, including the data collection process and its limitations. The subsequent chapters each address one of the three research questions. Chapter One offers an in-depth analysis of clandestine migration routes and phases in Arizona. Chapter Two details the risks that migrants face during their journeys through Arizona. Finally, Chapter Three details the migrant smugglers' roles, demographics, and motivations for guiding and transporting migrants through the state.

Methodology

To answer the research questions in this report, we employed a mixed-methods approach. First, we created and analyzed two original datasets. The Smuggling Incident dataset covers migrant smuggling incidents, and the Migrant Testimony dataset documents clandestine migrant testimonies. Next, to analyze migrant risk and mortality, we used two additional datasets: the Border Patrol's person-level death data and data from the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner. To address any remaining questions, we also conducted nine interviews with federal officials, civil society organizations, and academics in the United States and Mexico.

The Smuggling Incident dataset is the report's primary dataset. We constructed this dataset by identifying and coding migrant smuggling events in Arizona. We used local news articles and press releases from government agencies, such as from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). For each incident, we coded 49 variables, including the location of the smuggling event, the means of transportation, the number of smuggled migrants and their demographics, and the smugglers' demographic information. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes 119 migrant smuggling incidents in Arizona from 2014 to 2024. These incidents include 173 arrested smugglers and 187 apprehended migrants.

Once we coded these variables, we accessed the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) database, a federal court case documentation system. For each case that included a smuggler's name, we searched in PACER for any relevant court documents, such as criminal complaints or indictments. For the 119 cases in the Smuggling Incident dataset, we found court documents for 47 cases. Once we located these documents, we reviewed them and updated the Smuggling Incident dataset to include any new information. Overall, we used this dataset to analyze smuggling activities and clandestine migration routes, risks to migrants, and the smugglers' demographic profiles and motivations.

To create the Migrant Testimony dataset, we also relied on the court documents from PACER. Some of the criminal complaints included testimonies from apprehended migrants who were serving as material witnesses. Of the 47 cases with court documents, 22 cases contained material witness testimonies. We compiled these testimonies into the Migrant Testimony dataset and coded the migrant's demographics and experiences during each smuggling activity. Overall, our Migrant Testimony dataset includes 64 migrant testimonies. We used this dataset to gain first-hand accounts of smuggling activities, the conditions for migrants during each phase, and any associated risks.

While these two datasets address the report's research questions, this methodological approach has several limitations. First, the Smuggling Incident dataset does not represent all smuggling cases in Arizona. Instead, it captures a small subset of cases where the smugglers and migrants were caught, which may not reflect the full range of possible smuggling methods. Second, it only includes cases where newspapers and governmental agencies published an article or press release about the event, which may skew the dataset toward more newsworthy events. Finally, the information in these articles and press releases was not standardized, which made it difficult to compile complete

information for each case. We attempted to overcome these limitations by triangulating our data sources and conducting expert interviews.

Next, we analyzed several datasets related to migrant risk and mortality across Arizona. First, we reviewed the Border Patrol’s person-level migrant death dataset that it maintains through BSITS. In this dataset, Border Patrol agents track migrant rescues and fatalities throughout the United States’ border regions. The Border Patrol does not publish this data, but has released it to researchers through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.¹ For Arizona’s two Border Patrol sectors—the Tucson Sector and the Yuma Sector—the dataset contains 1,141 migrant death cases from January 2014 through August 2024. This dataset tracks a range of variables, including the general location of the recovered remains, the cause of death, and any available information on the migrant’s sex, age, and nationality. However, since the Border Patrol’s dataset undercounts migrant death in the Tucson Sector—which has been documented by the U.S. Government Accountability Office—we did not use this dataset in our analysis.²

Instead, to gain a deeper understanding of more recent migrant mortality trends, we utilized two additional datasets. These datasets came from the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner. The two datasets track recovered migrant remains in Pima County, Yuma County, and certain surrounding counties.ⁱⁱ From January 2014 to July 2024, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset includes 1,760 recovered migrant remains. While from September 2018 to December 2022, the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset contains 134 recovered migrant remains. Both datasets contain information on the location of the recovered remains, the cause of death, and any available demographic information on the migrant’s sex and age. Notably, these two datasets also include geo-coordinates for each set of recovered remains, which enabled us to map the data.

ⁱⁱ The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset also includes cases from Santa Cruz County, Pinal County, Cochise County, and Maricopa County.

Figure 1: Migrant Deaths in Arizona Counties by Dataset

Border Patrol Sector	County	Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner Data ⁱⁱⁱ	Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner's Data
Tucson	Pima	1,386	-
	Santa Cruz	124	-
	Pinal	29	-
	Cochise	125	-
	Maricopa	90	-
Yuma	Yuma	5	134
Total	-	1,760	134

Source: Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner & Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner

In order to match the migrant death data to the associated migration phase, we had to make several determinations. First, migrants may walk from the border to a point north of the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. Using the identified migration phases (described in Chapter One), we could either code these deaths as "crossing the border" or "circumventing the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints on foot." In this report, we classified exposure deaths within 15 miles of the border as "crossing the border" and deaths beyond this point as "checkpoint circumvention on foot." We made similar determinations for vehicle accident deaths throughout the borderlands.

The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner datasets also have various limitations. First, the datasets fail to capture the true number of deceased migrants. For example, they do not count migrants who died in Arizona, but whose remains were never recovered. Second, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset does not include nationality information for recovered remains, which made it impossible to track death trends across certain populations.

ⁱⁱⁱ There was one case with an unknown county.

Chapter 1: Clandestine Migration in Arizona

In Arizona's borderlands, clandestine migrants travel along five primary routes. These routes are shaped by geography, longstanding smuggling patterns, and border enforcement efforts, among other factors. The routes have different border crossing locations, which include urban areas (e.g. Yuma and Nogales) and remote border zones (e.g. Organ Pipe National Monument and the Tohono O'odham Nation's land). However, once clandestine migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border, all of the routes through Arizona generally converge in Phoenix.

Figure 2: Primary Migration Routes in Arizona



Migrants move through various phases as they follow these routes. First, migrants must cross the U.S.-Mexico border through ports of entry or navigate the harsh desert terrain. Once across the border, migrants are either quickly picked up by vehicles or they may walk an extended distance to a vehicle pick-up point deep in the state's interior. If migrants are immediately picked up at the border, they may be taken to nearby stash houses and then guided around or through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. Finally, once the migrants reach Phoenix, they are taken to another stash house, where they pay the remainder of their smuggling fee. Depending on the specific route, migrants may pass through three to five of these smuggling phases.

This chapter aims to answer the report's first research question: how do clandestine migrants currently transit through the Arizona borderlands? Specifically, it outlines the various migration phases in Arizona's border region. To undertake this analysis, the chapter relies on the Smuggling Incident and Migrant Testimony datasets to provide insight into the different phases and migrants' experiences during their journeys. To fill in the gaps, it also uses interviews with federal officials,

academics in the United States and Mexico, and civil society organizations in Arizona. The following sections detail each clandestine migration phase along the Arizona border.

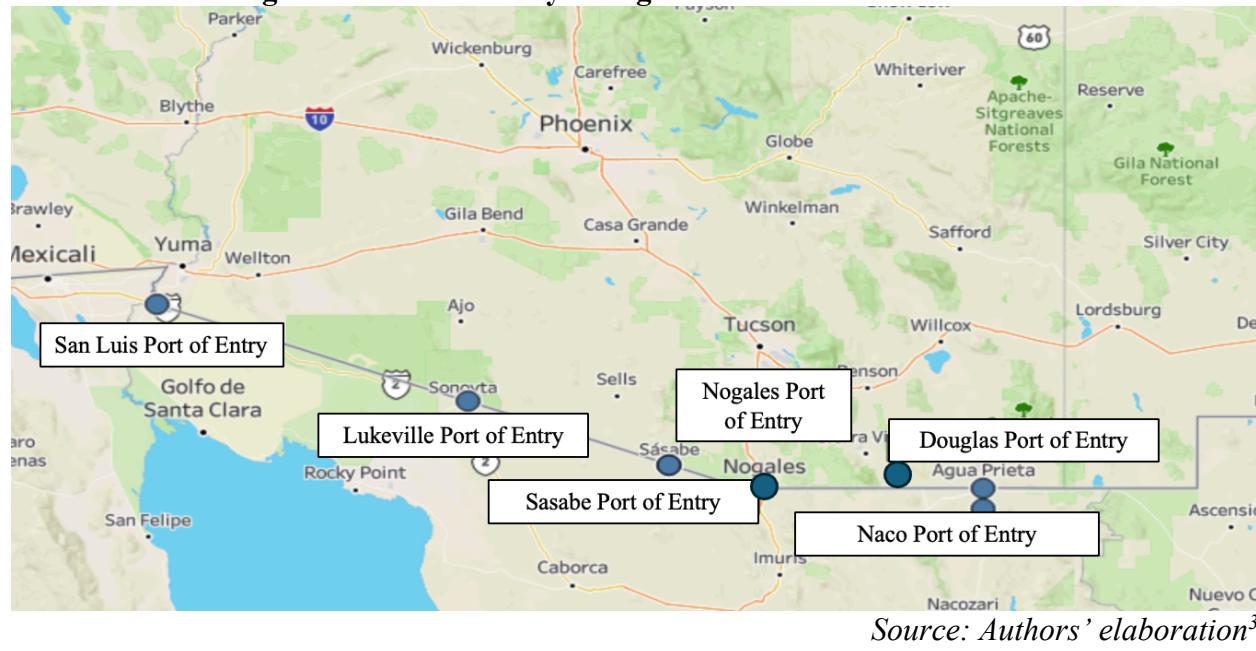
Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

The first migration phase involves crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. There are two ways that clandestine migrants can cross the border: at a port of entry and between ports of entry. To cross the border at a port of entry, clandestine migrants either falsely present themselves as having the appropriate status or documentation to enter the country or they are concealed inside a private or commercial vehicle. Conversely, migrants crossing between ports of entry on foot into the country may have to navigate a range of obstacles, including border barriers and the state's rugged terrain. The following subsections explore these various forms of clandestine border crossing.

Port of Entry

Along the Arizona border, there are six ports of entry. These ports of entry involve larger ports of entry, such as in Nogales and Yuma. They also involve smaller ports of entry, such as in Naco and Sasabe. At each port of entry, all individuals crossing the border—regardless of their means of transportation—must undergo a primary inspection. During this inspection, a CBP officer reviews the border crosser's travel documents and may grant entry to the United States or refer the individual for secondary inspection.

Figure 3: Ports of Entry Along the Arizona-Mexico Border



The Smuggling Incident dataset contained only a few cases where clandestine migrants attempted to enter the United States at a port of entry. These clandestine migrants used various methods to pass through the ports of entry. One method involved smugglers or migrants using travel documentation that are false or do not belong to the migrants. For example, in an August 2024 case, a driver attempted to smuggle two minors—aged 8 years old and 11 years old—through the

San Luis Port of Entry in a private vehicle. The smuggler presented U.S. birth certificates for the minors that did not correspond to the transported individuals. The smuggler also gave the minors sedatives to keep them quiet and help evade detection.

Smugglers also attempt to cross migrants at ports of entry by concealing them in private or commercial vehicles. These concealment locations vary but may include vehicle trunks or other small spaces. For example, in December 2017, a driver attempted to smuggle migrants through the Nogales Port of Entry in her Chevy Malibu's trunk. CBP officers referred the vehicle to secondary inspection, where they discovered three individuals from Guatemala and Mexico.

Between Ports of Entry

Crossing the Border in Urban Areas. Migrants may cross the border in urban areas, such as in Douglas, Naco, Nogales, and Yuma. These cities vary in size, ranging from slightly more than 100,000 residents in Yuma to less than 2,000 residents in Naco. Migrants that cross the border in these areas may traverse the border above ground—with the border barrier acting as the primary obstacle—or they may pass underground through tunnels or pipes. The Smuggling Incident dataset included two cases of migrants crossing between ports of entry in urban areas. In both of these cases, the migrants crossed above ground, with only one or two migrants crossing the border at a time.

If migrants transit across the border above ground, they must contend with border barriers that mark the international dividing line in Arizona's cities. These barriers are frequently made of steel bollards and can reach up to 18 to 30 feet in height. Some urban areas, like Nogales, have only one border barrier separating the United States from Mexico. However, other cities, such as Douglas and Yuma, have two to three layers of barriers that are often separated by sandy corridors. These barriers may be topped with concertina wire and are often lined by stadium lighting and surveillance cameras. To pass these barriers, clandestine migrants use ladders to climb over the barriers, tunnel or crawl underneath them, and drill or cut through them. Conversely, if migrants transit underground, they pass through hand-dug tunnels or water drainage pipes that pop out in U.S. territory near the U.S.-Mexico border.

Crossing the Border in Rural Areas. Migrants may also cross the border in remote, desert areas. Arizona's borderlands are desert, with steep mountains and plateaus, sandy dunes, rocky hills, and sparse vegetation with little shade or water. The temperatures can be extreme, ranging from more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer to below freezing in the winter. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were six cases of migrants crossing the border in rural areas. Guides often led larger groups of 5 to 12 people across the border in these areas, where they would hike for short periods, ranging from a few hours to multiple days.

Migrants crossing through Arizona's desert areas may also contend with various forms of border barriers. These barriers include both pedestrian and vehicle barriers. For example, the barriers that line parts of the Tohono O'odham Nation are vehicle barriers that resemble World War II anti-vehicle and anti-tank fortifications. These are typically heavy, partially buried steel or concrete barriers that are designed to stop cars or trucks from driving across the border. However, in the

remote desert area near Organ Pipe National Monument, the border is lined with 30-foot tall pedestrian fencing that is designed to block individuals transiting on foot.⁴

Migrants transiting through remote areas also face the challenging desert terrain. Once migrants cross into U.S. territory, they hike to a vehicle pick-up location. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, some migrants walked for 15 to 30 minutes to their pick-up location. However, other individuals walked for multiple days to reach a point north of the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. At times, a brush guide led the migrants to these pick-up locations. However, in some cases, the guides stayed in Mexico and provided the migrants with cell phones. These smugglers either guided the group remotely over the phone or put geo-located pins on a map and told the migrants to walk to the points.

Vehicle Pick-Ups

Once migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border, the next migration phase involves vehicle pick-ups. During this phase, drivers pick up migrants hiking from the border and transport them to either a stash house near the border or a stash house in an interior city. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 53 cases that involved vehicle pick-ups at or near the Arizona-Mexico border. These vehicle pick-ups occurred in each of Arizona's four border counties.

After migrants reach their designated vehicle pick-up locations, they must first identify their assigned vehicles. The migrants who walked alone to geo-located points tagged in their cellphones reported receiving guidance on how to identify their pick-up vehicles. For example, the smugglers told some of these migrants that the driver would give them a signal, such as a hand motion, a honk, or a code word, such as "Phoenix." Conversely, in an August 2024 case, the smugglers guided the migrants remotely over cellphones and instructed the group to enter a specific waiting vehicle.

When migrants board the vehicles, the drivers often provide them with instructions. In testimonies, migrants recalled how drivers told them to sit in the backseats and keep their heads down or to squeeze into specific locations, such as the space between seats. In a December 2021 case, a driver in a hearse picked up migrants near Sasabe. The driver instructed the migrants to hide in the back, where the coffins are generally placed.

Overall, the pick-up vehicles varied in size, make, model, and color. Some of the most used pick-up vehicles in the Smuggling Incident dataset were Toyota Camrys and Ford Explorers. The vehicle's size often determined the number of migrants who could fit inside, with one migrant being the minimum number (in a sedan) and 15 to 20 migrants being the maximum number (in a truck). In this latter case, the Cochise County Sheriff's Office attempted to stop a Toyota Tundra in September 2023. However, as the truck stopped on the side of the road, between 15 and 20 people fled into the brush.

Stash Houses at the Border

The pick-up vehicles may transport migrants to a third clandestine migration stage: stash houses near the border. These stash houses serve as a location to consolidate migrants until drivers can transport them to points beyond the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. In the Smuggling

Incident dataset, there were eight cases involving stash houses near the border. These stash houses were spread across multiple cities, including Yuma, Bisbee, and Sells.

These border stash houses took various forms. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, the most common form of stash houses were residential homes, which involved six cases. However, smugglers also used other types of locales, including an abandoned church, a small trailer, and a parked recreational vehicle (RV) with a wooden fence around it.^{iv} These stash houses were often in poor condition and frequently lacked basic amenities, such as running water and air conditioning, even during periods of extreme heat. In interviews, law enforcement officers reported finding stash houses with urine-filled water bottles, due to the absence of restrooms. Additionally, the stash houses were often overcrowded. For example, in an August 2023 case, near Bisbee, Arizona, authorities discovered 15 migrants inside an RV, which is above the recommended capacity of six to ten people for even the largest RVs.⁵

During their time at stash houses near the border, the migrants were almost always confined to the structure. As such, they relied on the stash house operators for basic supplies. For example, in an August 2024 case, migrants testified that smugglers brought them pizza and soda, but that not all migrants received sufficient food. In these stash houses, the Smuggling Incident dataset documented that smugglers held between 1 and 24 migrants at a single residence, and migrants spent anywhere from 2 to 15 days at these locations.

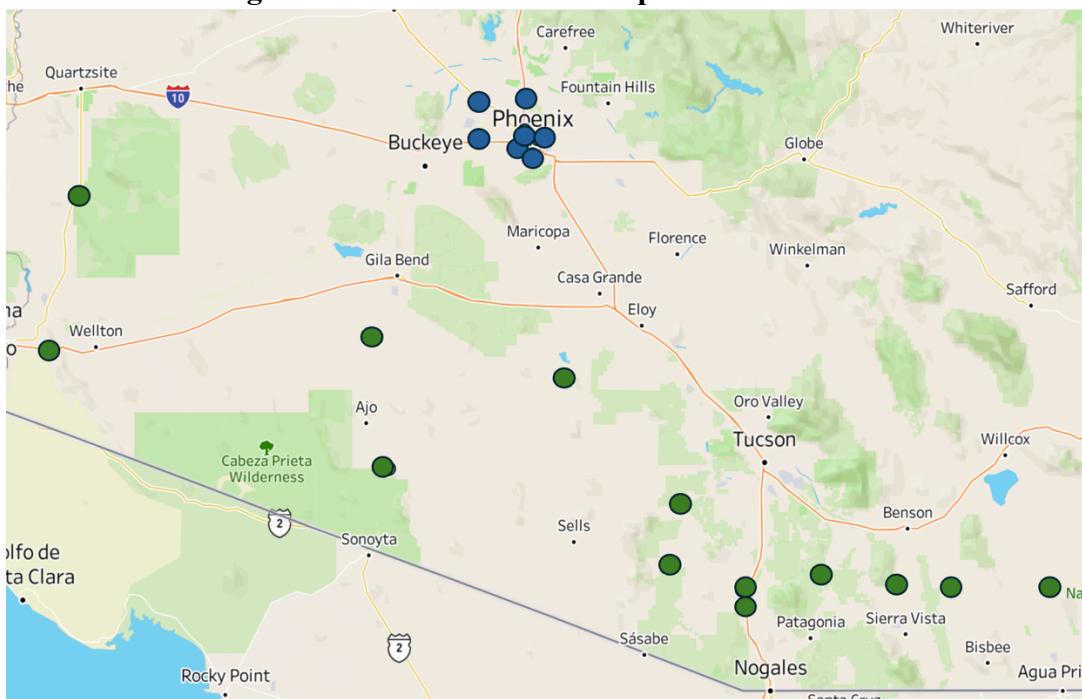
Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention

Across Arizona, the Border Patrol operates 13 highway checkpoints.^{v6} These checkpoints are located at varying distances from the U.S.-Mexico border. Border Patrol agents at these checkpoints inspect all vehicles transiting north or toward Tucson, and attempt to establish the passengers' U.S. citizenship or another form of legal residency. They may also inspect the vehicles' interiors for any concealed migrants and use trained dogs to find hidden individuals. If Border Patrol agents suspect possible criminal activity, they may send the vehicle for a secondary inspection.

^{iv} We define a stash as a secure structure that smugglers use to hide migrants until they are moved to their next migration stage.

^v The Tucson Sector Border Patrol operates 11 highway checkpoints and the Yuma Sector oversees the remaining two checkpoints in Arizona.

Figure 4: Border Patrol Checkpoints in Arizona



Source: Cato Institute, Checkpoint America⁷

Federal law permits the Border Patrol to erect both permanent and temporary (tactical) checkpoints within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. However, Arizona's state-level restrictions limit the establishment of permanent checkpoints. This means that the Border Patrol only employs temporary checkpoints in Arizona, which can be relocated based on operational needs.⁸ These temporary checkpoints consist of portable buildings that perform the same functions as permanent checkpoints.

To reach the Arizona interior, smugglers and migrants attempt to circumvent or pass through these checkpoints undetected. To do so, they may hike around checkpoints or conceal migrants in private vehicles or tractor-trailers.^{vi} In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 42 cases where migrants attempted to bypass the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. The following sections each cover a specific method of circumventing or passing through the checkpoints.

^{vi} Smugglers and criminal organizations may attempt to transport migrants past Border Patrol checkpoints by flying them to Arizona's interior cities. However, interviews with experts in Arizona suggest that these incidents are rare. Interviews suggest that small planes fly over the border with drugs and people. For a full list of airstrips within 100 miles of the Arizona-Mexico border, see:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1u91qviHChSdxjEA36Dp8no19C2ffKC6pCz3k0r6jwvk/edit?usp=sharing>.

Hiking Around the Checkpoint

To reach a point beyond the checkpoints, some migrants walk through the surrounding terrain. As previously mentioned, some migrants walk directly from the U.S.-Mexico border to a location north of the Border Patrol’s highway checkpoints. In other cases, smugglers drop the migrants off at a location before the checkpoint and then a guide leads the group around the checkpoint on foot. Once the guide and migrants reach a point beyond the checkpoint, a vehicle—which can be the same vehicle that previously transported the group or a different one—picks them up and takes them to their next destination. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were three cases where drivers picked up migrants after they hiked around a checkpoint.^{vii} These cases involved groups of six to seven migrants that walked around the checkpoints on foot.

Overall, clandestine migrants can have varying experiences during this phase. A trip’s duration depends on a range of factors such as the specific route, the drop-off points, and the guide’s tactics. Migrants may walk for just a few miles to more than 55 miles, and their time in the desert varies from less than a day to more than a week. For example, migrants attempting to bypass the I-19 checkpoint north of Nogales may be dropped off in Tubac, just south of the checkpoint. From there, they are guided through rugged brush and desert terrain toward Amado in a route that spans approximately 12 miles and can take up to 10 hours. Conversely, smugglers may lead migrants from the border west of Lukeville, through the Cabeza Prieta Wilderness, and to a pick-up destination on I-8 near Dateland—which bypasses two Border Patrol checkpoints. This particular journey spans approximately 50 to 55 miles and can take anywhere from days to weeks to complete on foot.

Concealed in Private Vehicles

Smugglers and migrants also use private vehicles to pass through or circumvent the Border Patrol’s highway checkpoints. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 21 cases that involved drivers transporting migrants in vehicles through checkpoints. In these cases, the drivers often hid migrants in the vehicle’s trunk or other compartments to avoid detection. However, certain routes near the New Mexico border allow smugglers to bypass checkpoints entirely. For example, a driver picking up migrants at the border near Douglas could take Highway 80—which heads into New Mexico before eventually reaching I-10—to Tucson or Phoenix without encountering a Border Patrol checkpoint.

Drivers transporting migrants in private vehicles did not have a specific vehicle type. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, the reported vehicles ranged from Ford F-150s to Nissan Maximas, which carried between one and four individuals. However, in August 2021, migrant smugglers near Sells embarked on one of their more creative vehicle smuggling attempts. In this case, the smugglers disguised a 2010 white Chevrolet Tahoe as a Border Patrol vehicle, complete with a CBP seal. The vehicle even passed through the Three Points Border Patrol checkpoint on State Route 86 without any problems. However, agents—tipped off about a cloned vehicle—became suspicious of the truck’s pristine condition. When the agents ran a license plate check, they found

^{vii} This report’s methodology makes it be challenging to distinguish whether apprehended migrants were walking from the border or were dropped off prior to a checkpoint. To address these dataset limitations, we relied on interviews with law enforcement officials and civil society organizations, as well as secondary literature.

that the vehicle was a fake. However, the license plate did match a real Border Patrol truck that was parked at the Three Points Border Patrol Station.⁹

Concealed in Tractor Trailers

Smugglers also transport migrants in tractor-trailers to pass through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints.^{viii} The Smuggling Incident dataset includes six cases that involved migrants being transported in this mode of transportation. In these cases, smugglers concealed the migrants both in the tractor trailers' cab area—alongside the driver—and in the back cargo area. These tractor-trailers generally transited through Pima County and Santa Cruz County along primary transportation corridors, where there is significant commercial traffic. Tractor trailers were less common in rural border areas.

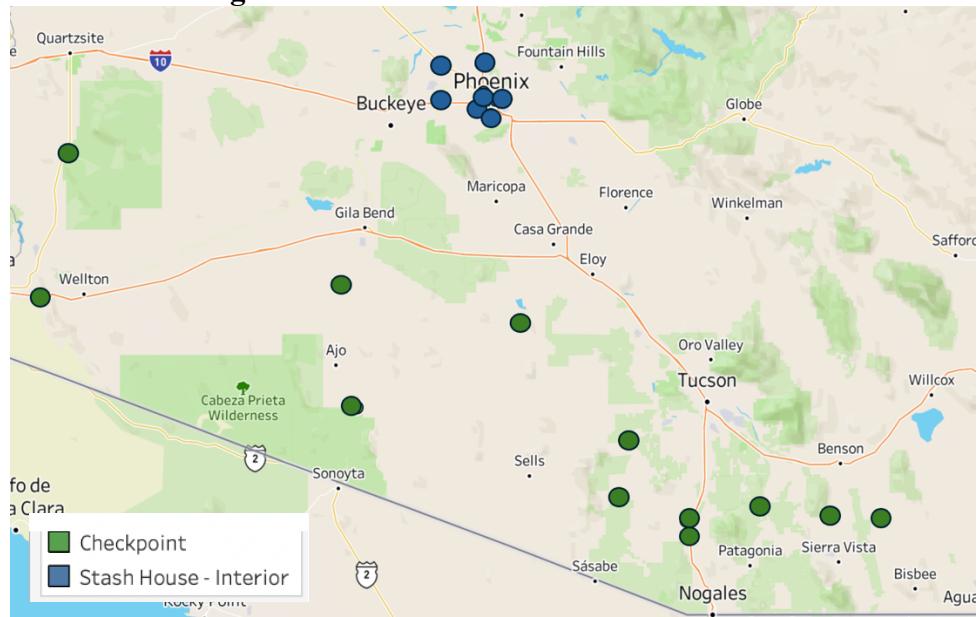
Smugglers generally load migrants into the tractor trailers at stash houses or other locations near the border. The Smuggling Incident dataset included one case where smugglers concealed migrants in the tractor trailer's cab area. In this July 2024 case, the smugglers hid four individuals from Mexico in this space. The dataset also included five cases where migrants were loaded in the tractor trailer's cargo areas. In these cases, the smugglers loaded between nine and 31 people into the vehicles. Once migrants are inside a trailer, they may spend several hours inside the cab or cargo areas before they reach their final destinations.

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

After circumventing the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, migrants reach the final migration stage: stash houses in Arizona's interior cities. At these locations, smugglers collect the remaining smuggling payments and then either release the migrants into the city or coordinate the transportation to their final destinations. In Arizona, these stash houses are generally located in Phoenix. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, all nine cases that involved interior stash houses were in Phoenix or its surrounding areas. These stash houses took various forms, including residential homes, apartment buildings, and even a mechanic shop.

^{viii} In the Smuggling Incident dataset, most of the vehicles were traditional tractor trailers. However, there was also a U-Haul truck and a work truck with an attached camper

Figure 5: Interior Stash Houses in Arizona



Source: Cato Institute and Smuggling Incident Dataset

Clandestine migrants in interior stash houses often had varying experiences. In some cases, smugglers provided strict instructions to the arriving migrants. For example, in a November 2023 case, stash house caretakers kept migrants barefoot in a crowded bedroom, confiscated their cell phones, and told them not to leave the room except to use the bathroom. These caretakers also provided migrants with food and drinks. For example, in a January 2014 case, a male migrant stated that the stash house caretakers would bring the migrants chicken or other food from a nearby Rancho Market grocery store.

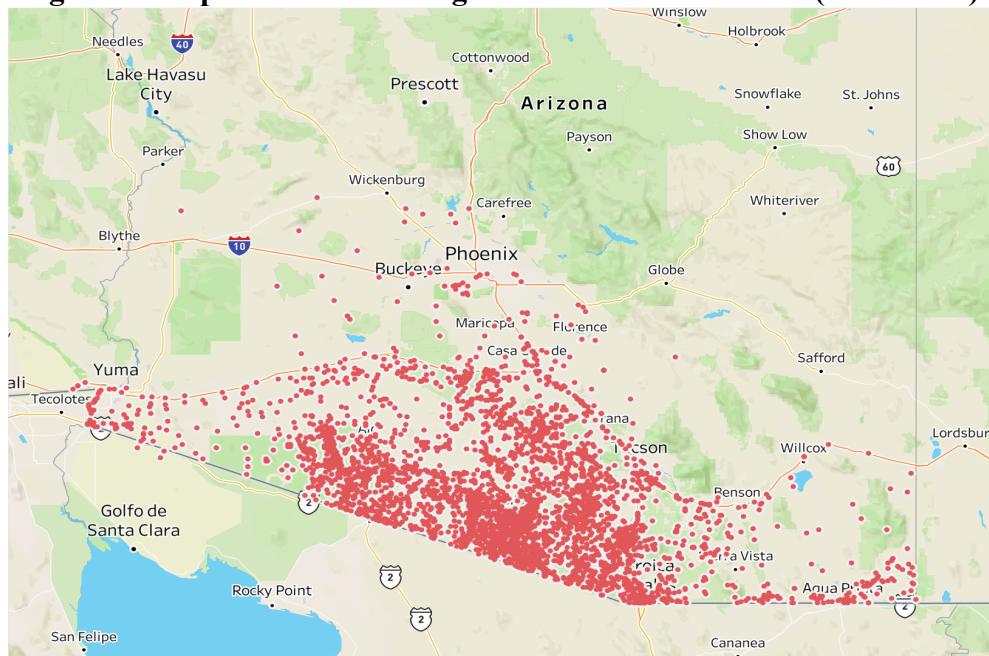
The Phoenix stash houses held varying numbers of migrants. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, stash houses typically held between 20 and 50 migrants. Some operations were constantly active, and others were more sporadic or smaller in size. In a December 2020 case, a group of 12 smugglers ran several stash houses around the city. The primary stash house held 54 migrants, and the smugglers kept detailed records of the more than 7,000 migrants who passed through their operations. In another May 2024 case in the Phoenix outskirts, the smugglers held fewer individuals—closer to 100 migrants—over six years.

Chapter 2: Migrant Risk and Mortality in Arizona

During each clandestine migration phase in Arizona, migrants face various safety risks. These risks include falling from the border wall, exposure to the elements in the desert, and vehicle crashes, among other dangers. Overall, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset (January 2014 to July 2024) and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset (September 2018 to December 2022) documented the remains of 1,894 migrants who died while attempting to transit through Arizona.

For these recovered migrant remains, the vast majority of the cases (92 percent) were likely due to exposure to the elements and dehydration.^{ix} These remains were recovered across the entire state, but there were high concentrations of deaths in the Tohono O'odham Nation, near Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, and in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. These areas are all far from major population centers and have extreme environmental conditions. There were also smaller numbers of deaths that could be linked to motor vehicle accidents, falls from the U.S.-Mexico border barriers, and drownings in canals and small creeks.

Figure 6: Map of Recovered Migrant Remains in Arizona (2014–2024)



Source: Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner

This chapter aims to address the second research question regarding the risks for clandestine migrants in Arizona. The following subsections outline the risks faced by migrants during each migration phase. This includes the risks while crossing the border, after vehicle pick-ups, at border stash houses, while circumventing or passing through the Border Patrol's checkpoints, and at stash houses in interior cities. For each section, the chapter outlines the risks, the associated migrant death data, and the deceased individuals' demographics.

^{ix} This includes cases with a cause of death labeled as "Exposure to the Elements" and "Undetermined."

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

Clandestine migrants begin facing risks as soon as they attempt to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. These risks are shaped by a migrant's crossing location and method. At ports of entry, migrants attempting to falsely present themselves as having legal status to enter the United States are unlikely to face any more risk than a regular border crosser. However, if the smuggler conceals the migrant inside a private or commercial vehicle, then that migrant faces the risk of suffocation, heat exposure, or carbon monoxide poisoning. Similarly, migrants who cross between ports of entry face a range of risks that depend on their specific migration route. These risks may include falling from the border wall, exposure to the elements in the Arizona desert, or drowning in canals or flash floods. The following subsections detail the various risks that migrants face as they cross the U.S.-Mexico border.

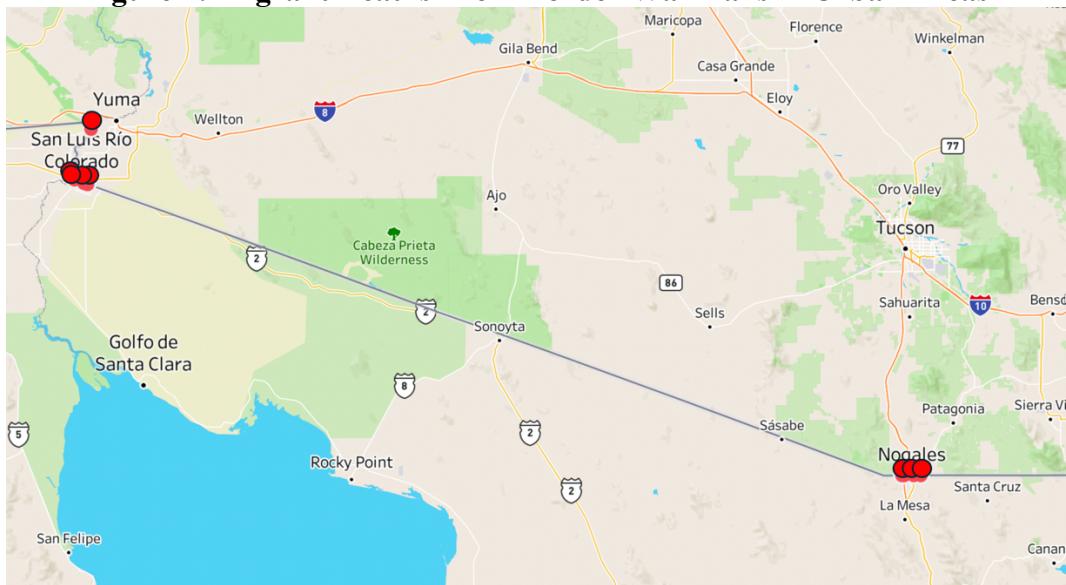
Ports of Entry

Clandestine migrants may attempt to enter the United States through a port of entry. While crossing at a port of entry is generally the safest way to enter the United States, various crossing methods carry different risks. For example, if migrants are smuggled through ports of entry in vehicle trunks or other concealed spaces, they risk suffocation, heat exhaustion, or carbon monoxide poisoning. There were no deaths in the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset or the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset that could be clearly linked to ports of entry. However, in the Smuggling Incident dataset, there was an August 2024 case where a smuggler attempted to move minors into the United States through the San Luis Port of Entry. This smuggler gave the minors sedatives to help avoid detection, which highlights an additional set of health-related risks for clandestine migrants.

Between Ports of Entry

Crossing the Border in Urban Areas. Clandestine migrants who cross the border in urban areas face multiple safety risks. The first risk is falling from the border barrier. In Arizona's border cities, the border barriers can reach up to 30 feet tall and be topped with concertina wire. Falling off the barrier can result in injuries ranging from a sprained ankle to a brain injury or even death. In the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset, there were ten cases where migrants died after falling from the border wall in urban areas. These deaths were located near San Luis and Yuma (six cases) and Nogales (four cases).

Figure 7: Migrant Deaths From Border Wall Falls in Urban Areas



Source: Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner

Overall, there was not one single demographic profile of a migrant who died after falling from the border wall in an urban area. All of the cases included the migrants' sex, and 60 percent were men and the remaining 40 percent were women. There was nationality information for six cases, with most deceased individuals from Mexico (four cases), and one decedent from both Guatemala and Colombia. The median age for the deceased migrants was 35 years old, but the ages ranged from 28 years old to 55 years old.

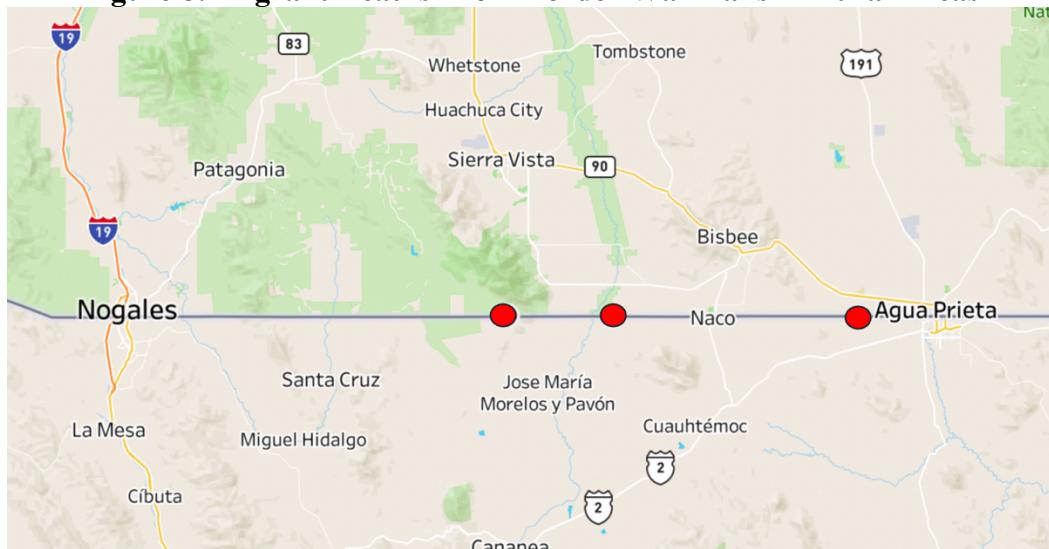
Migrants crossing in urban areas may also have to immediately cross rivers or canals. While Arizona's terrain is primarily arid, there are several bodies of water that pose a risk to clandestine migrants transiting through the state. First, Arizona's western border with California is defined by the Colorado River, and there is a network of canals that provide irrigation water to the area. Migrants crossing in this zone risk drowning in the fast-moving bodies of water. From March 2020 to December 2022, the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner's dataset documented five cases of migrants who drowned in these bodies of water. Second, migrants who cross in and around Nogales may walk in dry creek beds near the city, which can be prone to flash flooding. The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner's dataset documented three migrant deaths from 2019 and 2021 that involved migrants who drowned in these spaces.

There was not one single demographic profile of a migrant who drowned while crossing in urban areas. In total, the cases in western Arizona and near Nogales involved eight individuals. Among these decedents, 88 percent (seven people) were men and 12 percent were women (one person). There was nationality information for three individuals, who were from Mexico, Honduras, and Peru. Overall, the ages ranged from 27 years old to 60 years old.

Crossing the Border in Rural Areas. If migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border in rural areas, they also face various risks. First, these migrants also risk falling from the border wall, which can vary in height and composition. However, migrants in rural zones may not be discovered as quickly,

not have cell service to call for help, and are farther away from medical assistance. In the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset, there were three cases of migrants who died after falling from the border wall in rural areas. These deaths were all located in Cochise County, with two deaths occurring between Nogales and Naco, and one death between Naco and Douglas. These individuals were all men between the ages of 25 years old and 35 years old.

Figure 8: Migrant Deaths From Border Wall Falls in Rural Areas

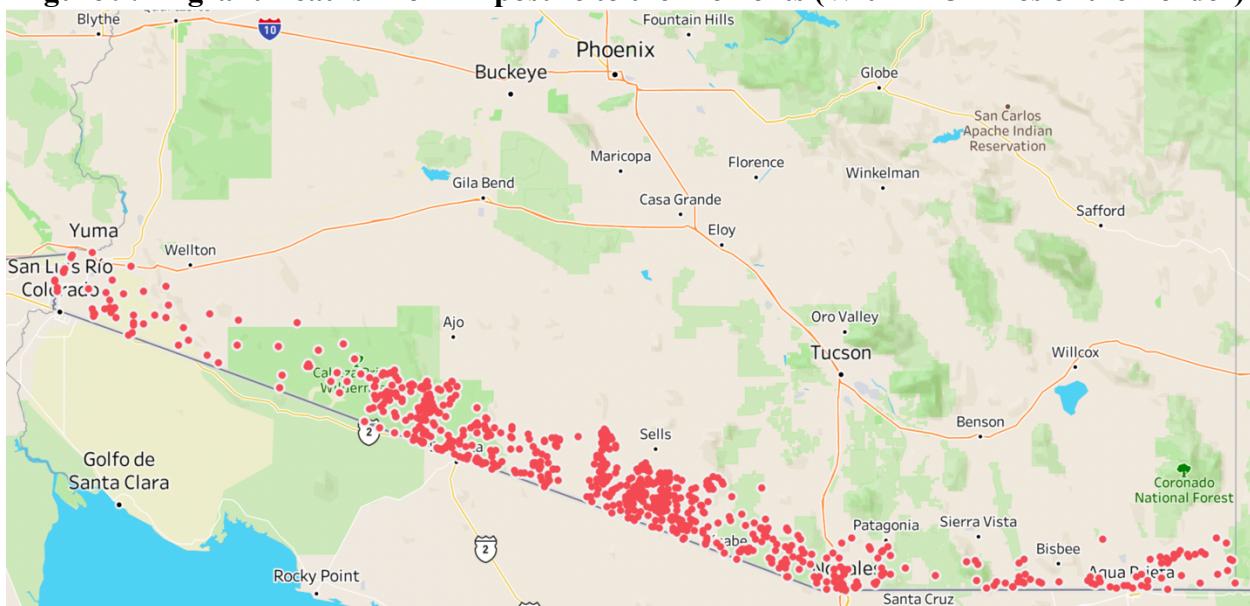


Source: Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner

The second risk for migrants crossing in remote terrain comes from hiking through the desert after crossing the border. The region's terrain is rugged desert, and migrants may walk for hours or days in extreme temperatures with little access to water. As a result, migrants are at risk of exposure to the elements—such as hyperthermia and hypothermia—and dehydration. Between January 2014 and July 2024, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner's dataset included 818 migrant deaths from exposure to the elements within 15 miles of the border.^x Border crossing deaths from exposure to the elements occurred throughout the entire region, but were concentrated in several hot spots in the Tohono O'odham Nation, near Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, and in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge.

^x This includes cases listed as "Exposure to the Elements," "Unidentified," and "Pending."

Figure 9: Migrant Deaths From Exposure to the Elements (Within 15 Miles of the Border)



Source: Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner

There was no single demographic profile of a migrant who died from exposure to the elements within 15 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. In the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner's dataset, 94 percent of the cases had information about the deceased migrants' sex. Of these cases, 85 percent were male and the remaining 15 percent were female. Only 57 cases had a listed nationality, and of these cases 72 percent of the deceased individuals were from Mexico. There were also small numbers of individuals from Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Peru. The median age of the deceased migrants was 32 years old, but the migrants' ages ranged from 6 years old to 93 years old.

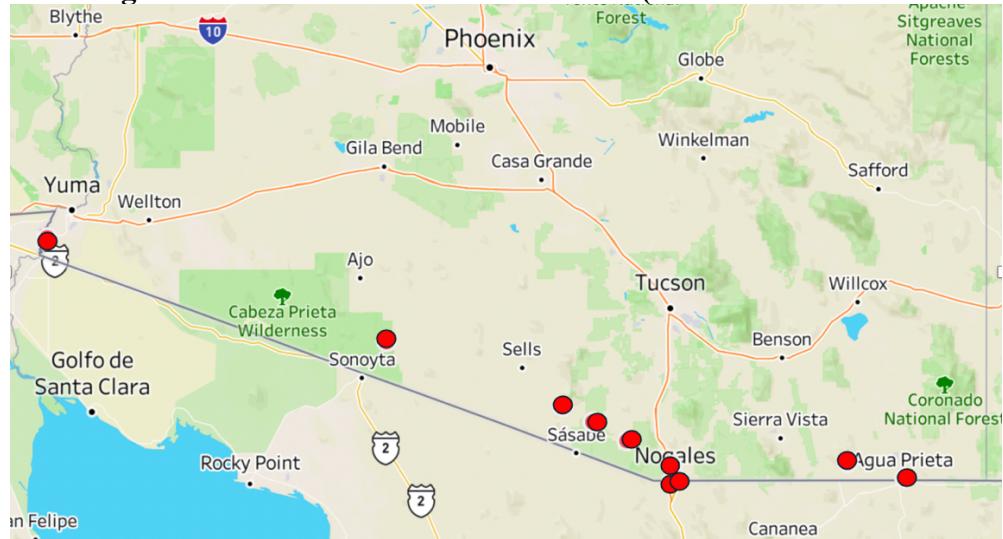
Vehicle Pick-Ups

Once migrants reach their pick-up vehicles, they face a new set of risks. During this phase, the most common risk is car accidents, particularly while in high-speed vehicle pursuits with law enforcement. These accidents are exacerbated by unsafe conditions inside the cars, such as too many people inside the vehicles and a lack of appropriate safety precautions such as seatbelts. In the Migrant Testimony dataset, some migrants reported that their pick-up drivers engaged in reckless driving. For example, in a January 2015 case, two male migrants explained that their driver immediately exceeded the speed limit after they boarded the vehicle and eventually crashed into another car. The driver and the brush guides fled the vehicle, and authorities took the two migrants to a hospital for treatment.

However, most migrant deaths were related to vehicle pursuits with law enforcement. In the Migrant Testimony dataset, migrants reported that the drivers often increased their speeds after Border Patrol agents or other law enforcement officers attempted to stop the vehicles. For example, in August 2024, the Border Patrol conducted a traffic stop for a Chevrolet Tahoe with fake license

plates near the border. The driver did not pull over and instead drove faster, which led to a vehicle pursuit. The driver ultimately crashed the car, and all seven migrants were ejected from the vehicle—killing one migrant and leaving another seriously injured.

Figure 10: Migrant Deaths From Vehicle Accidents (Within 15 Miles of the Border)



Source: Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner

To analyze vehicle deaths near the U.S.-Mexico border, this section looks only at the cases that occurred within 15 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border. From January 2014 to July 2024, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner dataset and the Yuma County Medical Examiner dataset documented 13 deaths by blunt force trauma from vehicle accidents near the border. These deaths occurred in ten separate vehicle crashes, which occurred along local roads, state highways, and interstates.

There was no single demographic profile for the migrants who died from vehicle accidents near the U.S.-Mexico border. For the cases with information about the decedents' sex, 62 percent were men and the remaining 32 percent were women. There were only two individuals with a listed nationality and both were Mexican citizens. The median age of the decedents was 27 years old, but their ages ranged from 15 years old to 64 years old.

Stash Houses at the Border

Drivers may pick up migrants from the border and take them to nearby stash houses, where they face additional risks. While the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Medical Examiner datasets did not include any deaths that could be connected to stash houses, migrants still face dangers during this phase. These risks come primarily from unhygienic environments, overcrowding, and mistreatment by smugglers.

The Smuggling Incident dataset includes cases that highlight some of these risks. First, there were three cases where authorities described the stash houses as overcrowded or unsanitary. For example, in November 2023, authorities in Yuma County discovered a stash house near the border.

A male smuggler admitted that he knew the individuals staying there were migrants and described them as “wet and afraid.” Law enforcement officers investigating the site found evidence that migrants had been confined to an attic crawl space that was covered with mud and dirt tracks on the floor. In a December 2015 case, the judge characterized the stash house as having “deplorable conditions,” with rodent and pet droppings, along with evidence of cockroaches, accumulated throughout the trash-strewn residence. Border Patrol agents also reported that these stash houses often lacked air conditioning and running water, making them especially dangerous during hot summer months.

This lack of appropriate conditions is not only a risk during migrants’ time in stash houses but can also affect subsequent migration activities. Specifically, when migrants do not receive adequate food, water, or supplies while at stash houses near the border, they are not well prepared for the next phase of their clandestine migration journey. For example, when these migrants begin hiking around the Border Patrol’s highway checkpoints, their weakness can make them more susceptible to exposure to the elements and dehydration in the Arizona desert.

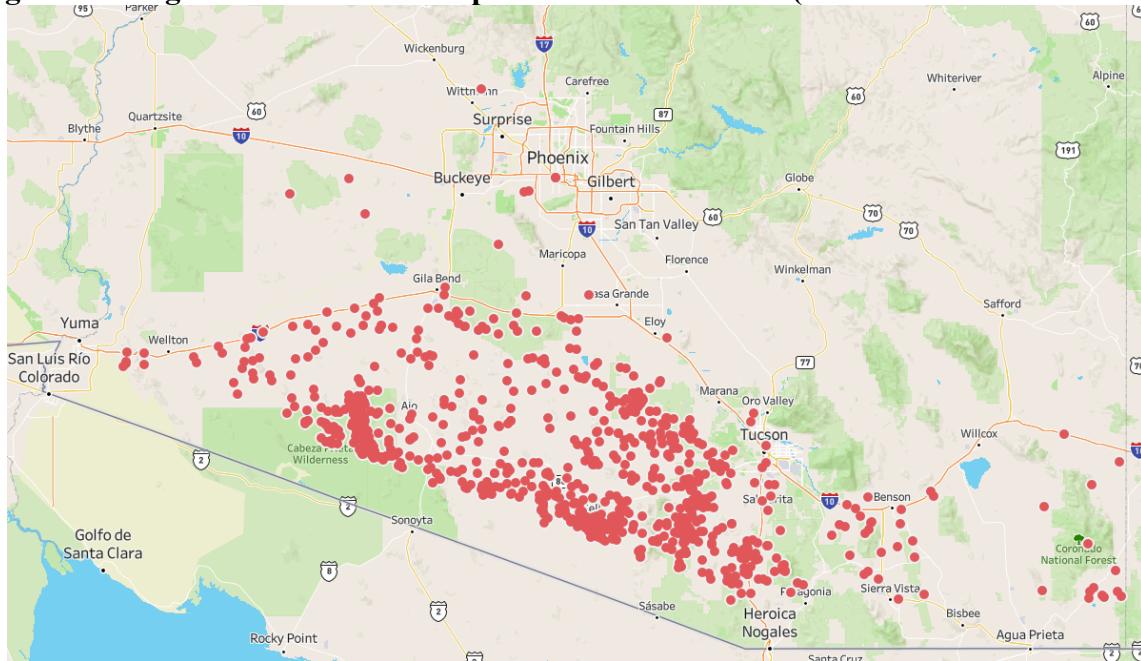
Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention

To reach Arizona’s interior, migrants need to circumvent or pass through one of the Border Patrol’s highway checkpoints. During this phase, migrants face significant risks that vary depending on their mode of transportation. Migrants who walk through the Arizona desert on foot are vulnerable to heat exhaustion, hypothermia, dehydration, and injuries such as sprains, fractures, and cuts from rugged terrain and cacti. While migrants traveling in private vehicles or tractor trailers may be at risk of car crashes—particularly during vehicle pursuits—suffocation, and exposure to extreme temperatures. The following subsections cover each of these transportation methods and the associated risks.

Hiking Around the Checkpoint

To get past the Border Patrol’s checkpoints in Arizona, the most dangerous form of travel is hiking around them on foot. Migrants who use this form of transit may walk for hours or days through the desert until they reach a point north of the checkpoint. Some migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border and trek for long distances to a point beyond the checkpoints. However, migrants also get dropped off and hike around certain Border Patrol checkpoints in the region, such as those that are farther from the border. This subsection on checkpoint circumvention by foot analyzes migrant deaths that occurred more than 15 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border.

Figure 11: Migrant Deaths From Exposure to the Elements (15+ Miles from the Border)



*Source: Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner
and Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner*

From January 2014 to July 2024, the Pima and Yuma County Medical Examiner's offices recorded 954 cases of likely exposure-related deaths that occurred more than 15 miles from the border.^{xi} This was the most common cause of death for migrants circumventing the Border Patrol's checkpoints. These deaths were spread across the entire state, which suggests that there is no single route to the state's interior. However, these deaths were concentrated in the area stretching from the Cabeza Prieta Wilderness Refuge to Nogales.

There was no single demographic profile of a migrant who died from exposure to the elements while circumventing the Border Patrol's checkpoints on foot. For cases with demographic information, 91 percent of the decedents were male and 9 percent were female. The nationality was listed in 36 cases, with Mexican citizens constituting the most common nationality (75 percent). However, there were also deceased individuals from Guatemala, Ecuador, Honduras, and Belize. The median age of the deceased was 30 years old, with ages ranging from 14 years old to 65 years old. Nine cases involved minors who were between the ages of 14 years old and 17 years old.

After circumventing the Border Patrol's checkpoints on foot, drivers pick up migrants in vehicles and take them to interior cities. During this activity, migrants face continued dangers from car crashes, particularly during high-speed law enforcement pursuits. In July 2024, deputies in Cochise County attempted to stop a Chevy Camaro for a traffic violation north of the Border Patrol's Tombstone checkpoint. Instead of pulling over, the driver hit speeds up to 120 miles per hour, forcing other vehicles off the road. During the chase, a man in camouflage clothing—who had likely just trekked around the checkpoint—exited the vehicle and fled on foot. The pursuit ended

^{xi} This includes cases listed as "Exposure to the Elements," "Unidentified," and "Pending."

when Arizona's Department of Public Safety (DPS) troopers used tire deflation devices and disabled three of the car's tires.

Concealed in Private Vehicles

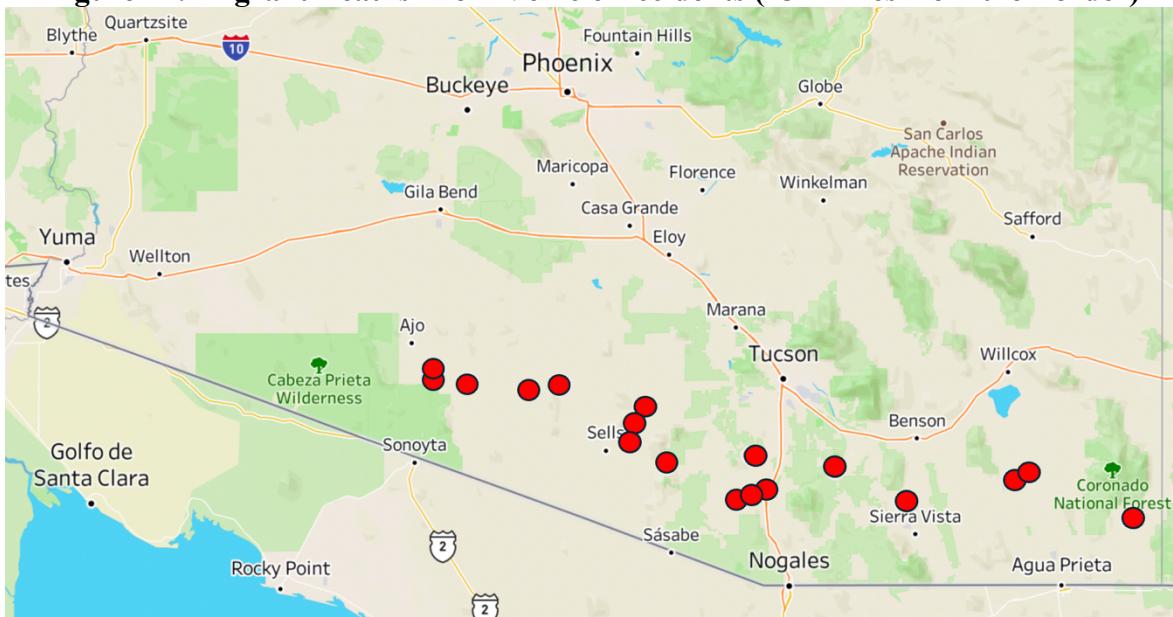
There are also risks for migrants attempting to pass through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in private vehicles. The two primary risks are suffocation in concealed spaces and deaths during car crashes, particularly during vehicle pursuits. First, smugglers often conceal migrants in vehicle trunks to pass through the Border Patrol's checkpoints, which puts them at risk of suffocation and heat exposure. This method of transportation is always risky, but especially dangerous during the summer months when temperatures in Arizona regularly exceed 100 degrees Fahrenheit. In a December 2016 case, a driver abandoned his vehicle near the Willcox Border Patrol checkpoint with two migrants hidden in the trunk. By the time Border Patrol agents gained access to the locked trunk, they found two migrants—one from Honduras and the other from Mexico—both suffering from severe heat exposure.

Second, migrants also risk injury and death during car crashes. In an October 2015 incident near the I-19 checkpoint, Border Patrol agents discovered a Mexican-citizen man with cuts, scrapes, and bruises. He told the agents that he had been inside the trunk of a Dodge Ram truck that was directed for secondary inspection. When Border Patrol agents flagged the vehicle for further inspection, the driver attempted to flee by speeding from the checkpoint at over 100 miles per hour. The driver then instructed the man to jump out of the moving vehicle during the ensuing high-speed chase, which led to his subsequent injuries.

Between 2014 and 2024, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner documented 20 cases of migrant deaths that appeared to be associated with vehicle crashes near Border Patrol checkpoints.^{xii} These deaths were located in a geographic stretch between 15 miles to 45 miles from the border, which aligns with the majority of Arizona's Border Patrol checkpoints.

^{xii} There were additional deaths that were more than 45 miles from the border. However, these deaths are presumed to belong to a different migration phase.

Figure 12: Migrant Deaths From Vehicle Accidents (15+ Miles from the Border)



Source: Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner

There was no single demographic profile of a migrant who died during a vehicle accident while passing through or circumventing a Border Patrol checkpoint. For cases with demographic information, 85 percent of the decedents were male and 15 percent were female. There were no listed nationalities for these deceased individuals. The median age was 30 years old, with ages ranging from 20 years old to 46 years old.

Concealed in Tractor Trailers

Migrants who attempt to pass through Border Patrol checkpoints while hidden in tractor trailers also experience various risks. These risks include a lack of ventilation, extreme temperatures, dehydration, overcrowding, and car crashes. The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner's datasets do not specifically categorize fatalities that are associated with tractor trailers in Arizona. However, the Smuggling Incident dataset and Migrant Testimonies dataset document some of the dangers that are related to this specific mode of transit.

These cases focused on the risks from a lack of ventilation and extreme temperatures, specifically inside the tractor trailers' cargo areas. While many tractor trailers have some form of refrigeration and ventilation, these systems may not always work. Further, without ventilation, a tractor trailer can quickly heat up to dangerous temperatures, as temperatures inside enclosed trailers can be 30 degrees hotter than the surrounding outdoor environment.¹⁰ For example, in May 2023, Arizona DPS troopers found 14 migrants in an unrefrigerated trailer on I-19 near Sahuarita. The temperature that day was 95 degrees, and some of the migrants were suffering from severe heat exposure. Additionally, the migrants only had one bottle of water to share amongst themselves. Other types of cargo-carrying vehicles may not have any built-in ventilation. In an August 2014 case at the Border Patrol checkpoint near Amado, smugglers hid nine migrants behind mattresses in the cargo area of a U-Haul truck. With no fresh air or ventilation, the temperature inside quickly

began to rise. Trapped in the sealed compartment, the migrants had no way to escape, as the door was locked from the outside.

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

Once migrants pass the Border Patrol’s checkpoints, drivers take them to stash houses in interior cities. These stash houses mark the final migration phase in Arizona’s borderlands, and they also bring a new set of risks. These risks include non-hygienic conditions, physical violence, intimidation, forced labor, and sexual assault. In the Office of the Pima County Medical Examiner and the Office of the Yuma County Medical Examiner’s datasets, there were no migrant deaths associated with interior stash houses. However, the Smuggling Incident cases highlighted the specific dangers for migrants.

The first primary risk was subpar living conditions, including overcrowding, lack of access to basic necessities, and unsanitary environments that pose health risks. For example, in a November 2023 case in Phoenix, the smugglers confiscated the migrants’ cell phones, kept them barefoot in a crowded bedroom, and instructed them not to leave except to use the bathroom.

The second risk was from smugglers intimidating migrants, forcing them to work in the stash house, and engaging in physical and sexual violence. For example, in an April 2021 case, law enforcement discovered a smuggling operation in Phoenix where hundreds of migrants were being held across two stash houses. When a migrant’s loved ones did not pay the smuggling fee, the individual was forced to work in the stash house to earn the necessary money. Further, in the same April 2021 case, three stash house caretakers reportedly sexually coerced or assaulted at least one female migrant.

Chapter 3: Migrant Smugglers in Arizona

During each clandestine migration stage in Arizona, various individuals transport or guide migrants through the borderlands to help them advance in their journeys and evade detection. Law enforcement and government actors often refer to these individuals as "human smugglers" or "migrant smugglers." Migrants may call them "coyotes" or "guides."^{xiii} These people play a wide range of roles, including coordinating transit, guiding migrants at ports of entry or through the desert, picking up migrants in vehicles, maintaining stash houses, acting as guards or scouts, and driving migrants through checkpoints.

This chapter aims to answer the third research question, which asks: who are the people arrested for migrant smuggling in Arizona? To address this question, it relies on the Smuggling Incident dataset, which includes 173 individuals arrested for engaging in migrant smuggling activities across the state. While there is no typical smuggler profile in the dataset, the most common demographic was a U.S. citizen man in his mid-20s who was living in Arizona. Notably, the most common demographic appeared to shift depending on the smuggling activity. For example, Mexican citizen men were the most common demographic for guiding groups of migrants across the border on foot. While U.S. citizen men were the most common demographic for vehicle pick-ups at the border.

The following sections detail migrant smuggling facilitation across Arizona. The first section provides a high-level overview of the arrested individuals' demographics and motivations. The subsequent sections describe the different clandestine migration phases. For each of these phases, the chapter outlines the arrested smugglers' roles, demographics, and motivations.

Clandestine Migrant Smugglers

From 2014 to 2024, the Smuggling Incident dataset includes 173 individuals arrested for migrant smuggling in Arizona. These individuals span a range of demographic profiles. Overall, the most common profile was a U.S. citizen man who was living in Arizona. Of the 156 cases with information about gender, 81 percent were men and the remaining 19 percent were women. For cases with a listed nationality, the majority were U.S. citizens (85 percent), followed by Mexican citizens (12 percent), and individuals from China and Honduras (1.5 percent each). The median age for the arrested individuals was 26 years old, but the ages ranged from 16 years old to 57 years old.

Smugglers' demographic profiles also shifted across the migration phases. For example, Mexican men were the most common demographic for roles that began in Mexico, such as guiding migrants across the border between ports of entry. By contrast, U.S. citizens were the most likely profile for roles that interfaced with U.S. authorities. Specifically, U.S. citizen women were the most common demographic to act as drivers at ports of entry, while U.S. citizen men most frequently transported migrants through Border Patrol checkpoints. Figure 13 details how the arrested individuals' demographic profiles shifted across migrant phases.

^{xiii} This chapter uses these terms interchangeably and seeks to label these smugglers by the particular role that they play.

Figure 13: Smuggler Demographics by Clandestine Migration Phase

Stage	Specifics	Most Common Demographic Profile	Residency Location
1. Border crossing	Port of entry	U.S. citizen female	Arizona
	Between ports of entry	Mexican citizen male	Sonora, Sinaloa (Mexico)
2. Vehicle pick-up at the border	—	U.S. citizen male	Arizona
3. Stash house (pre-checkpoint)	---	U.S. citizen male	Arizona
4. Checkpoint circumvention	On foot	Not enough information	Not enough information
	Private vehicle	U.S. citizen male	Arizona
	Tractor trailer	U.S. citizen male	Arizona
5. Stash house (interior cities)	—	Mexican citizen male	Arizona

Authors' elaboration

In the United States, coordinators recruited these individuals into smuggling activities through various approaches. First, coordinators and other smugglers often used social media platforms like TikTok and Snapchat to target low-income individuals or people who appeared to be having acute financial challenges. These posts presented migrant smuggling as a way to make quick and easy money. This was particularly true when recruiting drivers, either to pick up migrants at the border or to transport them through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. Second, coordinators and other smugglers also approached family members, friends, and romantic partners about engaging in migrant smuggling activities, and often hired migrants in exchange for smuggling fee reductions.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

During the first migration phase, smugglers move migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border and into U.S. territory. At ports of entry, these individuals generally serve as vehicle drivers. While

between ports of entry, they act as brush guides who lead migrants over the border barrier and through the desert. In the Smuggling Incident dataset and through subsequent research, we identified seven individuals who were arrested while helping migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border. Given the limited number of cases, we also conducted interviews with law enforcement in Arizona to better understand these individuals' demographics and motivations. The following sections outline the findings related to the people who drive or guide migrants across the border.

Ports of Entry

To assist clandestine migrants in crossing through ports of entry, smugglers may guide migrants through pedestrian lanes or drive them through vehicle lanes. Overall, we identified three cases where individuals were attempting to smuggle migrants into the United States at a port of entry. These three cases involved three U.S. citizens, including two women aged 20 years old and 28 years old and a 16-year-old man. In this latter case, the 16 year old driver was transporting an adult migrant in the vehicle's front seat. The migrant provided the CBP officer with an Arizona identification card and claimed to be a U.S. citizen. However, during a secondary inspection, CBP officers determined that the identification card belonged to someone else.

Between Ports of Entry

Smugglers also guide migrants across the border between ports of entry. These smugglers are known as "brush guides" or "foot guides," and they lead migrants over the border and to their vehicle pick-up locations. These brush guides may be with migrants for a short period or travel with them for days or weeks. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were four individuals arrested after acting as brush guides in Arizona. All four individuals were Mexican citizen men, with ages ranging from 19 years old to 53 years old. Two men had listed residence locations, with one man hailing from the Mexican border city of Agua Prieta, Sonora, and the other man coming from Mazatlán, Sinaloa.

However, the dataset likely misses a significant demographic: Mexican minors. These minors—who are sometimes referred to as circuit children (*niños del circuito*)—guide groups of migrants over the border. However, since they are minors, Border Patrol agents generally do not detain them or refer them for prosecution. Instead, the children are returned to Mexico through ports of entry. These minors are typically Mexican citizens who live in border cities and are often able to earn hundreds of dollars for each successful crossing.

Vehicle Pick-Ups

Once foot guides and migrants reach a predetermined location, drivers pick them up and transport them to their next migration phase. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 68 individuals who were arrested after picking up migrants near the border. The most common demographic among these drivers was a U.S. citizen man. However, the detained individuals had a range of demographic profiles. For the cases that listed the individual's gender, 85 percent were male, and 15 percent were female. While for the cases with citizenship information, 92 percent were U.S. citizens and 5 percent were from Mexico. The remaining two individuals were Chinese nationals residing in the United States on expired visas. Lastly, the median age among the arrested

individuals was 25 years old, but the ages ranged from 14 years old to 55 years old. In general, nearly 15 percent of the arrested drivers were minors, and included U.S. and Mexican citizens.

Migrant smuggling coordinators recruited vehicle pick-up drivers through various ways. Some of the arrested individuals reported that they were recruited on social media, including through TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook. The social media posts often highlighted how much money the drivers could make and how easy it was to evade law enforcement. Many of the drivers became involved for financial gain. For example, in January 2022, smuggling coordinators recruited two Arizona Christian University football players on Snapchat. These coordinators promised the football players \$1,000 for each person they picked up near the border and transported to Phoenix.

Stash Houses at the Border

Vehicle pick-up drivers may transport migrants to stash houses near the border in Arizona. The individuals working at these stash houses play various roles, including acting as property caretakers, providing food to the migrants, and acting as guards to make sure the migrants do not escape. From 2014 to 2024, the Smuggling Incident dataset included ten individuals who were arrested for running stash houses near the border. At times, teams of smugglers operated the stash houses, and in other cases, a single smuggler independently managed a stash house.

However, all individuals operating stash houses work with migrant smuggling coordinators and drivers. An August 2023 case illustrates this collaboration. In this case, three male smugglers conspired to establish a stash house in Bisbee, Arizona. One individual purchased a parcel of land, placed an RV on the property, and constructed a wooden fence around it. Throughout this process, the man was in constant communication with a migrant smuggling coordinator and provided updates on the stash house's progress. Once the preparations were complete, the man instructed the migrant smuggling coordinator to begin sending people to the location. A third individual then lent his vehicle to various drivers so that they could transport migrants to and from the stash house.

For just the role of a stash house caretaker—which is the person who manages the property and runs the overall operation—the most common demographic among the Smuggling Incident dataset's arrested individuals was a U.S. citizen man. For the nine cases with gender information, eight individuals were male and one individual was female. This female stash house caretaker worked as part of a team, and she managed the stash house alongside a male partner. All ten arrested caretakers were U.S. citizens, although interviews suggest that non-citizens may also run stash houses. Lastly, the median age was 28 years old, with the ages ranging from 23 years old to 52 years old.

Migrant smuggling coordinators recruited the stash house caretakers through various methods. First, there were cases where coordinators recruited people in their social circles. For example, in an August 2024 case, a coordinator recruited a male U.S. citizen who was an acquaintance and promised to pay him in exchange for housing migrants. Second, coordinators also recruited stash house caretakers through social media. For example, in a November 2023 case, smuggling coordinators recruited a Mexican citizen man with legal status in the United States through an Instagram post. Overall, people appeared to become involved in stash house-related activities for financial gain.

Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention

To help migrants circumvent or pass through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, smugglers play various roles. They may act as brush guides and lead migrants through the desert to circumvent checkpoints, or they may act as drivers and attempt to conceal migrants in private vehicles or tractor trailers. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 32 individuals who were arrested while participating in these activities. The following subsections analyze the different smuggler roles, along with the arrested individuals' demographics and motivations.

Hiking Around the Checkpoint

Some smugglers lead migrants around the Border Patrol's checkpoints on foot. These smugglers are known as "brush guides" or "foot guides," and they may be with migrants for a short amount of time—if they were dropped off prior to the checkpoint—or travel with them for days from the border to a predetermined vehicle pick-up location. In the Smuggling Incident dataset's cases, it can be difficult to distinguish an apprehended group's starting point. Individuals who led groups from the border are counted in the previous "border crossing" section. The dataset does not contain any cases where a group is described as being dropped off prior to a checkpoint.

After circumventing the Border Patrol's checkpoints on foot, drivers pick up the migrants and take them to interior cities. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were four arrested drivers who were engaging in this stage. In these cases, three of the drivers were male and one driver was female. All of the smugglers were U.S. citizens, and two of the smugglers were 17 years old.

Concealed in Private Vehicles

Smugglers drive migrants through checkpoints in private vehicles. These drivers hide migrants in their trunks or other concealed spaces, or have the migrants tell Border Patrol agents that they have legal status to reside in the country. Notably, drivers often work with scouts, who drive ahead to do reconnaissance on Border Patrol agents and checkpoints. Smugglers may also circumvent checkpoints by taking alternate routes that combine back roads and major highways. However, this section's analysis involves only drivers who were arrested at a Border Patrol checkpoint.

Using this methodology, the Smuggling Incident dataset includes 27 arrested individuals. The most common demographic for a driver taking migrants through a checkpoint was a U.S. citizen man. However, the arrested individuals had a range of other demographics. For the people with a listed gender, 71 percent were men and 29 percent were women. While for the people with a listed nationality, 92 percent were U.S. citizens and the remaining 8 percent (two people) were Mexican citizens. Of these two Mexican citizens, one was listed as a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipient, and the other was listed as lacking legal status in the country. Most of these individuals resided in Arizona, particularly in Phoenix and Tucson, but there was one case of a driver from Colorado. The median age for the arrested individuals was 30 years old, with ages ranging from 21 years old to 47 years old.

Migrant smuggling coordinators recruited these drivers primarily through social media platforms. For example, in a May 2021 case, coordinators used Snapchat to recruit a 20-year-old U.S. citizen

to transport four migrants from the Tohono O'odham Nation to Phoenix. These drivers appeared to be motivated by the potential for financial gain.

Concealed in Tractor Trailers

Smugglers also transport migrants through checkpoints in tractor trailers. These individuals often travel to areas near the border to pick up the trailer with the migrants inside. Then the drivers follow the smuggling coordinator's instructions to reach their destinations in interior cities. The Smuggling Incident dataset included five individuals who were arrested for transporting migrants through Border Patrol checkpoints in tractor trailers. Of these five individuals, the most common demographic was a U.S. citizen man. There were four people with a listed gender, and all four individuals were male. Additionally, there was a listed nationality for three arrested people, and all three individuals were U.S. citizens. There were only two individuals with listed ages, and they were 30 years old and 40 years old. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, tractor trailer drivers appeared to be primarily motivated by the opportunity to earn large sums of money.^{xiv}

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

Once migrants have passed the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, smugglers take them to stash houses in interior cities. In these stash houses, teams of smugglers work together to collect migrants' smuggling fees and move them to the next phase of their journey.^{xv} In interior stash houses, individuals act as property caretakers, collect smuggling fee payments, provide food for the migrants, and act as guards to make sure that the migrants do not escape.^{xvi} Depending on the stash house's scale, these individuals may perform one or multiple roles.

From 2014 to 2024, the Smuggling Incident dataset identified 24 people who were arrested for operating stash houses in or around Phoenix. These individuals had varying demographics. For the cases with information about the gender, 88 percent were men and 12 percent were women. While for cases with citizenship information, 78 percent were Mexican citizens, and there was one arrested individual from both the United States and Honduras. The arrested smugglers had a median age of 36 years old, but ages that ranged from 25 years old to 52 years old.

Stash house caretakers in interior cities appeared to be primarily motivated by the potential for financial gain. Yet, the amount of promised money appeared to depend on the specific task. For example, in a January 2014 case, a caretaker reported receiving \$100 in exchange for providing food and water to migrants in the stash house. Conversely, a woman working in the same stash house earned \$50 for each \$1,000 that she laundered in her private bank account. However, some of the arrested individuals were also migrants themselves who were seeking to pay off their own smuggling fees. In a 2021 case, a Mexican man reported earning \$500 a week while engaging in a range of activities—such as purchasing food and toilet paper and taking out the trash—in order to pay his fees.

^{xiv} Some drivers reported that they were paid by the number of migrants in their tractor trailer, while others reported receiving a flat fee.

^{xv} In four out of ten cases, stash houses were operated by three or more smugglers.

^{xvi} These smugglers were often found with large sums of money and firearms. In a December 2020 case, the stash house caretakers were discovered with \$1.4 million in cash.

Migrant Smuggling Coordinators

Migrant smuggling coordinators oversee the various phases that make up clandestine migrants' journeys. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 13 individuals who were arrested while acting as migrant smuggling coordinators. These individuals engaged in a range of activities, including recruiting drivers, stash house caretakers, and guides, providing vehicles, receiving migrants' payments, and paying the involved actors.

In the Smuggling Incident, the most common demographic among these coordinators was a U.S. citizen man. For the cases with information about gender, 77 percent were men and the remaining 23 percent were women. While for cases with a listed nationality, 92 percent were U.S. citizens and one person was from Honduras. The median age was 31 years old, but the ages ranged from 20 years old to 52 years old. These coordinators appeared to be primarily driven by financial gain. For example, in a March 2024 case, a 22-year-old male U.S. citizen recruited drivers and earned \$1,000 per migrant transported through his recruitment efforts.

Conclusion

For more than 140 years, migrants have attempted to clandestinely cross the U.S.-Mexico border to reach destinations throughout the United States. This research report explored clandestine migration in Arizona and the various activities that migrants undertake during their journeys. Specifically, this report addressed three research questions: 1. How do unauthorized migrants currently transit through the Arizona borderlands? 2. What are the associated safety risks for migrants? and 3. Who are the people arrested for engaging in migrant smuggling activities in Arizona? To answer these questions, the study used a mixed methods approach. It relied on two original datasets on migrant smuggling, two secondary datasets on migrant deaths, and nine interviews with federal officials, civil society organizations, and academics in the United States and Mexico.

This research report addresses these questions and has three primary findings. First, the report finds that migrants' journeys vary significantly by their route and final destination. Migrants crossing in urban areas pass through five stages (crossing the border, vehicle pick-ups, border stash houses, Border Patrol checkpoint concealment or circumvention, and interior stash houses in Phoenix). However, migrants crossing in remote desert areas may pass through three to five stages, depending on whether they are quickly picked up in a vehicle or if they hike from the border to a point beyond the Border Patrol's checkpoints.

Second, the report also found that migrants transiting through Arizona face dangers not only while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border but also up to 100 miles into the Arizona interior. From January 2014 through July 2024, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner and the Yuma County Office of the Medical Examiner documented the remains of 1,894 migrants who died while attempting to transit through the state. For these recovered migrant remains, the vast majority of the cases (92 percent) were likely due to exposure to the elements and dehydration. However, there were risks to migrants during each migration phase, including psychological and physical trauma that did not result in death.

Third, a wide range of individuals facilitate clandestine migrants' journeys through Arizona. Overall, the report found that these smugglers play a diverse set of roles, including acting as coordinators, drivers, brush guides, and stash house caretakers. The most common demographic was a U.S. citizen man, but smugglers' demographics varied widely. Notably, these individuals' demographic profiles also shifted across the migration phases. For example, Mexican men were the most common demographic for guiding migrants across the border between ports of entry. By contrast, U.S. citizen men were the most likely demographic for roles that interfaced with CBP officers or Border Patrol agents.

This report's analysis can inform a wide range of policies and activities at the federal, state, and local levels. However, there continues to be space for further research. This could include research that explores how U.S. and Mexican policy and enforcement shifts affect clandestine migrants' routes and safety, the relationship between border economies and smuggling activities, and clandestine migration's broader impacts for communities across Arizona.

Endnotes

¹ Bryce Peterson, "FOIA of CBP BSITS data," accessed November 11, 2024, <https://www.elpasomigrantdeathdatabase.org/index.php/foia/>.

² U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Southwest Border: CBP Should Improve Data Collection, Reporting, and Evaluation for the Missing Migrant Program," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office, April 2022.

³ U.S. Customs and Border Protection, "Locate a Port of Entry in Arizona," accessed April 21, 2025, <https://www.cbp.gov/about/contact/ports/AZ>.

⁴ Curt Prendergast, "Border Wall is Quickly Changing Look of Desert in Southwestern Arizona," February 13, 2020, *Tucson.com*, https://tucson.com/news/local/border-wall-is-quickly-changing-look-of-desert-in-southwestern-arizona/article_a37abc98-678b-5d51-9201-9c5c2ace85f1.html.

⁵ Tiffin Motorhomes, "Is a Class A Motorhome Right for You?" Tiffin Tips & Travel Guides, February 29, 2024, <https://tiffinmotorhomes.com/blog/is-a-class-a-motorhome-right-for-you/>.

⁶ "Checkpoint America: Monitoring The Constitution Free Zone," Cato Institute, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.cato.org/checkpoint-america>.

⁷ Cato Institute, "Checkpoint America."

⁸ Interview with law enforcement, February 25, 2025.

⁹ Stephen Dinan, "Smugglers Caught Using Fake Border Patrol Vehicle," *The Washington Times*, August 26, 2021, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/aug/26/smugglers-caught-using-fake-border-patrol-vehicle>.

¹⁰ "Arizona Truck Driver Arrested with 14 Migrants Locked in Unrefrigerated Trailer," *KVOA*, August 24, 2021, https://www.kvoa.com/news/local/arizona-truck-driver-arrested-with-14-migrants-locked-in-unrefrigerated-trailer/article_723c7ed2-058d-11ee-83d0-1f834b7fd878.html.

ISBN: 978-1-951006-24-2

