

Clandestine Migration and Migrant Smuggling in South Texas



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INTRODUCTION

On June 27, 2022, the San Antonio Police Department began receiving calls from concerned citizens regarding a trailer that was parked in the southwestern part of the city. When the first officers arrived on the scene, they found deceased individuals sprawled inside the trailer, lying on the ground outside, and motionless in the nearby brush. On this hot Texas summer day, more than 53 people died from the heat inside the trailer and 11 more were injured—making it the largest mass casualty event for migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border. The numbers were a new record, but the risks and smuggling methods were far from new. Smuggling people through South Texas is an everyday occurrence and one that is rooted in more than 100 years of history.

The clandestine movement of people through South Texas began as soon as the U.S. Congress started passing restrictive immigration policies in the late 1800s. At this time, eligible immigrants and visitors continued to enter the United States through ports of entry. However, ineligible individuals did not have this option, and some sought to enter the United States through clandestine routes in order to work, reunite with family and friends, or find safety. To achieve this goal, some banned individuals also began contracting smuggling services.

This report focuses on the time period from 2014 to 2022 and attempts to answer two broad questions. The first question is related to clandestine migration dynamics, asking: how do migrants currently transit through South Texas?¹ While the second question is related to the facilitators of this migration, and asks: who are the people charged with migrant smuggling throughout the region?² Building on the previous excellent scholarship around this topic, this report roots migrant smuggling in its historical context and then focuses on contemporary clandestine migration and migrant smuggling practices.³

To answer the two research questions, this report uses a mixed methods approach. It relies on two original datasets. The first dataset includes 184 migrant smuggling incidents with 289 arrested individuals. While the second dataset covers 150 testimonies of migrants who served as material witnesses in federal court cases. To address the remaining gaps, the report's authors conducted interviews with law enforcement officers in five South Texas counties and analyzed migrant smuggling arrest data from the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS).

The report has three key findings. First, current clandestine migration and smuggling methods in South Texas are not new. In fact, migrants and smugglers have used similar methods for more than 100 years. Second, while U.S. authorities often present clandestine migration and migrant smuggling as a single activity, this report finds that ongoing clandestine migration in South Texas is a four-stage process, with different actors and risks during each phase. Finally, third, there is no single demographic profile for a migrant smuggler in South Texas. Instead, the report illuminates arrested individuals' diverse demographics and backgrounds and how these individuals' demographics vary by migrant smuggling activity.

METHODOLOGY

This report uses a mixed methods approach to answer the research questions. It relies primarily on two original datasets. The first dataset covers 184 migrant smuggling incidents in South Texas from 2014 to 2022 and includes 289 people who were arrested on migrant smuggling charges during these incidents. It contains a wide range of information for each event, including the discovered location, means of transportation, migrant demographics, and arrested individuals' demographics.

To build this first dataset, the report's authors combed through news articles in local and national media outlets to identify cases of migrant smuggling within the target geographic area and time period. When the articles named the arrested individuals, the authors used Pacer—the federal court case documentation system—to search for the court documents. If the authors located the case in Pacer, they retrieved and coded the criminal complaint and any other available and relevant documentation. The authors located 137 cases on Pacer—out of the total 184 cases—and incorporated these court documents into the dataset.

In the second separate but linked dataset, the authors recorded the testimonies of 150 migrants who served as material witnesses in the federal migrant smuggling cases. Criminal complaints frequently include the material witness testimonies, and they were present in 81 cases out of the 137 total cases on Pacer.⁴ The authors coded the testimonies into a dataset, documenting the witness's demographic information, border crossing location, and clandestine journey narrative. These testimonies helped to demonstrate how migration and smuggling activities build on one another across the region.

The authors also used additional, complementary methods, such as semi-structured interviews and data analysis on separate datasets. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with law enforcement officials in five South Texas counties to provide additional insights on interior brush guides' demographics. The report's authors also analyzed Texas DPS arrest data, which was obtained through a public records request.⁵ In total, the DPS data contained 6,118 cases of individuals arrested in Texas for migrant smuggling between 2015 and 2022. The researchers used this data to map arrests and compare the report's dataset to this broader set of arrest records.

This report's methodology has limitations. In particular, the first dataset is not representative of all smuggling incidents within South Texas, since the cases come from published news articles. News outlets generally cover migrant smuggling when it involves a large number of migrants, injuries and fatalities, or creative smuggling methods. Given that this dataset is then skewed toward these types of cases, the report relies only on its qualitative descriptions. The material witness dataset helps to offset this limitation by providing individuals' full migration trajectories.

MIGRANT SMUGGLING'S LONG HISTORY IN SOUTH TEXAS

In 1848—following the end of the Mexican American War—the Rio Grande became the United States and Mexico's international boundary. The river's conversion into the dividing line suddenly turned regular, regional commerce into cross-border movements, which likely marked the area's first smuggling incidents. Since then, the clandestine movement of goods only continued, with U.S. merchandise (such as televisions and microwaves), cotton, weapons, and ammunition heading south into Mexican markets, and narcotics, alcohol, and, eventually, people traveling north.⁶

In the late nineteenth century, smugglers began to move people along the region's clandestine pathways in response to stricter U.S. immigration policies. In the late 1880s, the U.S. Congress passed multiple pieces of legislation that introduced the country's first immigration restrictions.⁷ These bills included the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which blocked Chinese laborers from entering the country, and the Immigration Acts of 1882 and 1891, which banned various categories of immigrants, such as paupers and individuals with a contagious disease. In response, some of these banned individuals began looking to enter the United States between ports of entry and contracted smugglers to reach the U.S. interior.

These smuggling operations took various forms. In the book *Imaginary Lines: Border Enforcement and the Origins of Undocumented Immigration, 1882-1930*, historian Patrick Ettinger tells the story of a typical migrant smuggling operation near Laredo, Texas in 1906.⁸ At this time, a Mexican smuggler would guide his Greek and Lebanese clients to a place where the Rio Grande was shallow. The group would wade to the U.S. side and wait for a driver to pick them up and take them to a nearby town.⁹ Alternatively, some smugglers attempted to disguise their banned clients as Mexicans in order to move them undetected through ports of entry.¹⁰ Until the Immigration Act of 1917 imposed a literacy test and an \$8 head tax on all immigrants, there were no general immigration restrictions for Mexican nationals and this population could enter and depart the United States with limited inspection.

In the early part of the twentieth century, banned individuals continued to enter the United States between ports of entry. In response, in 1924, the U.S. Congress put aside US\$1 million for “additional land border patrol,” which served as the basis for today's Border Patrol. The original group of 450 men was spread across the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders and charged with stopping clandestine migration and alcohol smuggling. Yet migrant smuggling along the U.S.-Mexico border emerged as a significant issue during the July 1924 congressional hearing on the Border Patrol. At the time, Assistant Secretary of Labor E. J. Henning requested federal support for a patrol by noting that current border agents were outgunned by smugglers. He claimed that the smugglers had “little houses” on each side of the border, which served for “shielding the aliens before and after being shipped across into the United States.”¹¹

During the following decades, the Border Patrol slowly expanded and developed into a more professional agency. In the 1940s, the Border Patrol set up permanent checkpoints on South Texas highways to apprehend migrants traveling north in vehicles. In response, smugglers diversified their tactics, and either waited for the understaffed checkpoints to shut down or concealed the migrants in vehicles or trucks. In 1945, a Border Patrol agent near Refugio, Texas discovered 59 Mexican laborers inside of a truck that was supposedly carrying lemons.¹² While a 1948 *Valley Morning Star* news article mentioned that people had been smuggled into the

U.S. interior “in the tanks of gasoline trucks and in the water tender of a railroad locomotive.”¹³

At times, smugglers also dropped migrants off prior to the checkpoints, guided them through the thick Texas brush, and then picked them up at a point north of the checkpoints. In July 1948, the San Antonio district officer for the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) confirmed this circumvention, stating that migrants who enter the United States by truck, “stop a mile or two before the check station, get off the truck and sneak through the brush to a designated meeting place a short distance beyond the station. There the truck driver picks them up again.”¹⁴

Over the following decades, changes in U.S. labor policies and enforcement efforts shaped clandestine migration in South Texas. In 1942, the U.S. government created the Bracero Program to address World War II labor shortages, which provided a short-term legal pathway for Mexican laborers to work in the U.S. agricultural sector.¹⁵ However, the program was not initially implemented across the entire border, with Mexico banning Texas from joining the agreement until 1949 due to its “racist and discriminatory treatment of Mexicans.”¹⁶ This did not stop Texas growers from seeking out Mexican laborers and many continued to cross without authorization and often with a smuggler. Similarly, not all Mexicans qualified for inclusion as Bracero workers, and the program did not cover workers’ spouses and children.¹⁷ Even after Texas agricultural employers were allowed to contract Bracero laborers in 1949, unauthorized migrants continued to enter the state.

In 1964, the Bracero Program came to an end. One year later, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which subjected Mexicans to general immigration quotas for the first time. This shift was particularly destabilizing for Mexico, which—in just a few years—went from 450,000 guest worker visas under the Bracero Program and an average of 50,000 resident visas to zero guest worker visas and 20,000 resident visas.¹⁸ As legal pathways disappeared, southwestern farmers still maintained the same high demand for workers. This led Mexican laborers, who would have likely come to the United States through legal pathways only a few years prior, to travel along clandestine migration routes.

By the 1960s and 1970s, migrant smuggling in South Texas looked similar to today’s dynamics. In the late 1960s, people walked or waded across the Rio Grande, and some smugglers offered ferry services.¹⁹ Once on U.S. territory, drivers picked up migrants and concealed them in vehicles heading north. In 1968, 44 migrants paid a driver to take them from Eagle Pass to Chicago in a rental truck.²⁰ Several years later, in 1971, the chief of the U.S. Border Patrol in Laredo said that smugglers were hiding migrants “inside trucks, trailers, campers, car trunks, and in secret compartments.”²¹ In 1971, smugglers in Zapata County were also caught flying migrants to interior U.S. cities on private planes.²²

In the 1980s and 1990s, clandestine migration along the U.S.-Mexico border emerged as a top national issue. In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) aimed to reduce this migration by 1) prohibiting U.S. employers from hiring individuals without valid work authorization; 2) increasing resources for the Border Patrol; and 3) providing a legalization pathway for more than 2 million individuals who were already in the United States. However, while the legislation was supposed to stop clandestine migration, scholars have concluded that it did not change people’s calculus regarding whether or not to migrate.²³

As unauthorized migration continued, border enforcement steadily increased. In 1993, the Border Patrol implemented its “Prevention Through Deterrence” strategy in El Paso through Operation Hold the Line, which

aimed to deter migrants from crossing the border in urban areas and push them into more rural areas.²⁴ In 1997, the Border Patrol expanded its Prevention Through Deterrence strategy to South Texas through Operation Rio Grande, which surged enforcement resources to the region. These changes included 100 additional Border Patrol agents, night-vision scopes, motion sensors, floodlights, 46 surveillance towers, helicopters, and patrol boats.²⁵ In Laredo, the Border Patrol built 240 miles of dirt roads, and in 1999, the agency began using drones for aerial surveillance.²⁶ For individuals entering in between ports of entry, this influx of enforcement personnel and resources made clandestine journeys even more dangerous.²⁷

The increased border enforcement—alongside the rise in Mexican drug trafficking organizations—also shifted migrant smuggling activities’ structure. Initially, smugglers countered the Border Patrol’s increased surveillance by increasing their operations’ size and complexity.²⁸ However, in 2004, organized criminal groups in Tamaulipas began charging smugglers a US\$100 fee to pass through their territory, which increased to US\$1,000 in 2012.²⁹ Sociologist Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios documented that smugglers did not increase their prices proportionally, and some smugglers downsized their operations as the criminal groups’ fees began to cut into their income.³⁰ By 2011, there were both smaller, simple smuggling operations and larger, more complex operations that moved migrants through northern Mexico and into South Texas.³¹

However, even as migrant smuggling structures transformed and the number of Border Patrol agents and surveillance technology increased, clandestine migration methods barely changed. In 2004, anthropologist David Spener conducted fieldwork in South Texas and documented migrants wading or rafting across the Rio Grande and hiking through ranchlands to circumvent Border Patrol checkpoints.³² In these interviews, which were published in his book *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border*, migrants reported that, over the decades, the conditions in South Texas had shifted but overall migration methods remained the same.³³

CONTEMPORARY MIGRANT SMUGGLING METHODS AND RISKS

After 100 years, migrants continue to move along clandestine routes in South Texas and smugglers continue to facilitate this transit. In general, there are two broad migration routes through the region: the Laredo area to San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley to Houston. Currently, migration along these routes involves at least four separate activities. The following sections follow the chronology of a clandestine migratory route: beginning with the border crossing, the drive to a stash house, waiting in the stash house, and then passing through or circumventing Border Patrol checkpoints.

CROSSING THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

There are two ways to cross the U.S.-Mexico border without authorization: at a port of entry or between ports of entry. At ports of entry, individuals can attempt to enter U.S. territory as pedestrians or in vehicles. Within the dataset, all individuals seeking to pass undetected through ports of entry were traveling in vehicles.³⁴ These cases involved a range of smuggling methods, such as a woman claiming nonexistent family relationships with minors,³⁵ a man hidden inside a car trunk, and a Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officer who purposefully

overlooked a vehicle passenger in his inspection lane.³⁶

In between ports of entry, individuals have to cross the Rio Grande to enter U.S. territory. There are several ways to cross the river, including wading, swimming, floating on a raft, or riding on a boat. The exact crossing method appears to vary by geographic location—likely due to the shifting river depth and specific smuggler tactics. For example, within the dataset’s eight river crossing testimonies near Laredo, all migrants reported wading through the water. By comparison, there was a wider variety of river crossing methods in the Rio Grande Valley, with individuals noting that they swam, waded, and floated across on rafts. Less frequently, border crossing guides transported people on boats from Mexico to the United States. These smuggling incidents involved a small fishing vessel near Brownsville and a speedboat near McAllen.

There is no standard group size for people entering the United States between ports of entry. The dataset’s average river crossing group consisted of eight to nine people but ranged from two to thirty individuals.³⁷ Most of these groups crossed with one or two guides. However, an August 2017 case near Laredo involved three to four guides, who led a group of approximately thirty people across the Rio Grande. The guides generally stayed with their groups until the next smuggling stage.

Drowning is the greatest risk for individuals crossing between ports of entry. The Rio Grande has strong currents and an uneven, muddy bottom, which can lead people to lose their footing while wading across. This risk is heightened if the individual is a weak swimmer, carrying children, or is helping someone to cross. In one 2017 incident, three people drowned while crossing the river near Laredo. In this case, the brush guides asked adults in the group to help carry three children. During the crossing, a man carrying one of the children was swept away by the currents and another adult also drowned. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated case, and hundreds of people drown each year while crossing the Rio Grande.

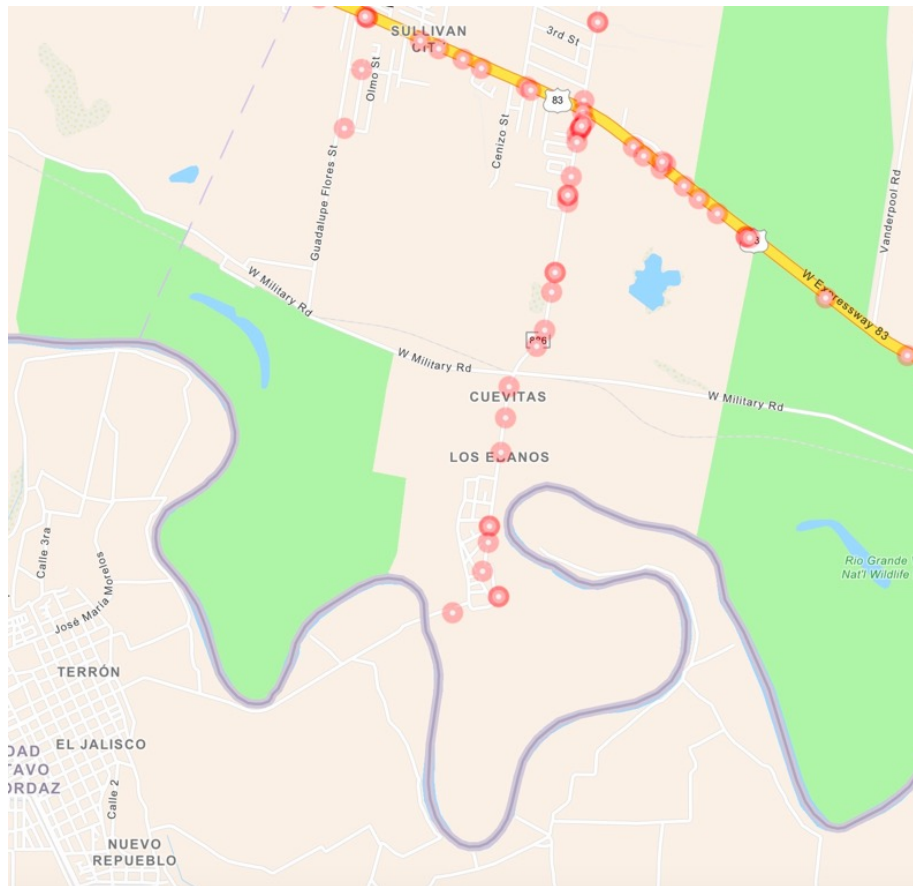
RIVER PICK-UP TO STASH HOUSE

Once the border crossers reach the U.S. side of the river, they must walk to their next destination. This stage varies significantly by migration route. Some migrants reported simply running up the riverbank and arriving at a vehicle pick-up spot. Other migrants reported walking eight hours or “all night” to reach their pick-up locations. Generally, the guides stayed with the group as they traveled, at times using maps on their phones to avoid getting lost. However, some migrants reported that their guides separated from them after crossing the Rio Grande and provided simple instructions such as “walk straight until you reach a road.”

At the designated pick-up location, the migrants boarded the vehicles—or multiple vehicles, depending on the group size—to travel to a stash house. There is no single vehicle type for this migration stage, with river pick-up vehicles including Toyota Corollas, Nissan Sentras, Cadillacs, and Ford F-150 trucks. At times, migrants were given instructions on how to recognize their pick-up-vehicle. In some cases, the car would stop and honk its horn. In 2016, a Salvadoran female said that her pick-up driver was supposed to whistle twice. Notably, one border crossing group walked directly from the Rio Grande near Laredo to a tractor trailer, foregoing a river vehicle pick up. However, interviews with local law enforcement suggest that these cases are uncommon.

Border Patrol and law enforcement generally discovered the pick-up vehicles after spotting groups as they crossed the border or boarded vehicles. According to Texas DPS data, arrested pick-up drivers were often concentrated in small border towns such as Sullivan City in Hidalgo County and Roma in Starr County. While in the Laredo area, most pick-up vehicle arrests occurred in South Laredo.

Figure 1: Geolocated Arrests for Migrant Smuggling in Sullivan City, Hidalgo County (2015-2022)



Source: Texas Department of Public Safety

Car accidents posed the greatest risk during this migration stage, and frequently occurred during a Border Patrol or law enforcement pursuit. Within the dataset, there were 11 cases of pick-up vehicles that crashed during a pursuit—often resulting in injured or deceased migrants. For example, in 2018, a driver with 16 migrants in his vehicle reached speeds of 100 miles an hour near Donna, Texas, before losing control and flipping the car in a field. Five individuals were injured in the crash, including a minor. At times, the pursuits also ended with the driver pulling over and the passengers rushing outside to hide or run away.

This migration stage also involves additional risks. In November 2021, an SUV hit a woman as her group was crossing Texas Highway 83 near Laredo. Additionally, migrants on longer walks to pick-up points also risked exposure to the elements and dehydration. For example, in June 2021, a group became lost on a ranch near

Laredo. Eventually at least two individuals passed away from the Texas summer heat. Similarly, in February 2018, a migrant fainted while walking through a Laredo ranch to the vehicle pick-up spot, and a rancher later discovered his remains.

STASH HOUSE NEAR THE BORDER

Pick-up drivers transport border crossing groups from the Rio Grande to a nearby stash house. Within the migrant smuggling incident dataset, there was no single type of stash house and these locations included houses, mobile homes, a warehouse, a tire shop, and a hotel. At stash houses, caretakers enforced specific rules, such as requiring that migrants turn off their cell phones, remove their shoes, shower, or remain in a certain room. Migrants also either had to cook for themselves—frequently with explicit instructions on when they could prepare food and the acceptable types of food—or caretakers dropped off already prepared food. In 2022, a Salvadoran woman who crossed into the United States near McAllen reported a combination of the two approaches, noting that stash house caretakers fed her group two times a day but sometimes also asked them to cook.

Migrants often reported varying experiences during this part of their migration journey. Some migrants reported that they were held in a stash house for just one night, while others reported waiting for up to 20 days. Additionally, some people remained at one stash house until they traveled north, while others were shuttled between multiple stash houses. The number of people within each stash house also varied, ranging from two people to one hundred people. The most crowded stash houses often housed the migrants who would be traveling north in tractor trailers.

There are also risks inherent with staying at a stash house. Within the dataset, there were several cases of aggressive or violent caretakers. In two cases, caretakers sexually assaulted women who were staying in the houses. While in a 2014 incident, caretakers in McAllen tied up and beat two migrants on camera after their families failed to pay smuggling fees. Similarly, in a 2015 case, a stash house caretaker pointed his gun at migrants, pumping the handle and telling them that he was going to shoot them.

BORDER PATROL CHECKPOINTS

To reach the U.S. interior, migrants must pass Border Patrol checkpoints. Within South Texas, there are nine Border Patrol checkpoints that are located along major north-south highways in Maverick County, Webb County, Jim Hogg County, Brooks County, and Kenedy County.³⁸ Border Patrol agents and trained canines inspect each car and truck and may send certain travelers for a secondary inspection. Migrants attempt to pass through or circumvent these checkpoints using various methods, such as hiding in car trunks or inside tractor trailers, walking through nearby ranchland, traveling by boat, or flying north on a plane. The following sections cover each of these clandestine migration methods.

Private Vehicles. Migrants frequently attempt to pass through Border Patrol checkpoints in private vehicles.

Within these vehicles, some migrants may be hidden in the trunk or other spaces in an attempt to avoid detection. Alternatively, other migrants may sit in the vehicle's seats and seek to pass as a U.S. citizen passenger. These individuals often have specific instructions for how to interact with Border Patrol agents at the checkpoints. For example, in a 2015 case, a Salvadoran woman reported that the vehicle driver told her to respond "yes" to any Border Patrol questions at the Falfurrias checkpoint.

Separately, drivers may use private vehicles to circumvent Border Patrol checkpoints on ranch roads. To gain access to these roads, drivers either cut locks on ranch gates or pay an individual to leave the gates open. Within the dataset, there was only one example of this type of checkpoint circumvention. In this case, a Ford pickup truck was pulling a horse trailer with 51 migrants inside. The vehicle and horse trailer entered private ranchland prior to the checkpoint and returned to the highway once it was north of the checkpoint.

Migrants reported that they boarded the private vehicle through one of two methods: 1) the vehicle driver picked them up at their stash house or 2) a stash house driver transported them to a separate location—such as a parking lot—where the private vehicle would be waiting. At this point, drivers or other involved individuals would provide the migrants with specific instructions, such as to get in the trunk of the car or hide in another space. Drivers passing through the checkpoints generally transported one to three people in private vehicles, but larger vans held up to ten people. Drivers circumventing the checkpoints on ranch roads transported greater numbers of migrants.

Within the dataset, there was no single type of vehicle for passing through checkpoints, with vehicles ranging from Hyundai Sonatas to Dodge Caravans to Ford Explorers. Interviews with local law enforcement suggest that many of these vehicles may be stolen. In rare instances, the vehicles were disguised, such as a white Ford cargo van that appeared to be part of an adult daycare. Other creative smuggling attempts involved an alive migrant traveling through a checkpoint in a coffin and a healthy migrant traveling in an ambulance. Border Patrol agents discovered most cases after a driver appeared nervous, the passengers responded suspiciously, or a trained canine signaled that there were concealed individuals in the vehicle.

There are two primary risks related to private vehicle transport: suffocation in a car trunk or other hidden space and car crashes. Migrants cannot exit a vehicle trunk without assistance and may struggle to breathe in the enclosed space. Additionally, temperatures can rise in the trunk, particularly during South Texas summers. Migrants traveling through checkpoints in vehicles are also at risk for car crashes, particularly during Border Patrol or law enforcement pursuits.

Tractor Trailers. Tractor trailers are another method for moving people through Border Patrol checkpoints. Migrants who are concealed in a trailer may travel in the cargo section or in the cab. In this report's dataset, the number of people discovered in the cargo area ranged from 10 to 115 individuals, while the number of people traveling in the cab ranged from 2 to 8 individuals. These tractor trailers are often refrigerated and may also hold goods such as fruits and vegetables.

To begin the journey, a driver generally transports migrants from the stash house to a separate location—such as a tire shop, a field, a warehouse, or the side of the road—where the trailer is waiting. Smuggling organizers load migrants into the trailers and provide instructions on where to hide or stand. Most trailers were discovered at checkpoints after a driver appeared to be nervous, there were documentation inconsistencies, or trained canines

signaled that there were concealed individuals inside the trailer.

Passing through a checkpoint in a trailer poses significant risks for migrants and high profile tragedies underscore the dangers. The biggest risks are a lack of ventilation or refrigeration, and extreme temperatures inside the cargo area. In 2021, a truck carrying 12 people from Laredo to San Antonio lacked ventilation, and the concealed migrants reported that they were struggling to breathe. Additionally, individuals may be exposed to frigid cold if they are in a refrigerated truck without appropriate clothing or blankets. In March 2022, Border Patrol agents discovered 31 individuals hiding behind a load of produce in a cargo area that was set to 41 degrees Fahrenheit.

Hiking Around the Checkpoint. A third method for circumventing Border Patrol checkpoints is to walk around them. During this stage, drivers pick up the migrants at a stash house or separate location—such as a parking lot—and transport them to a predetermined location south of the checkpoint. At this point, the group members get out of the vehicle with one or two guides and begin walking north. Each member of the group carries a backpack with food, water, and other basic items. Depending on the checkpoint and the migration route, migrants may spend as little as 30 minutes in the brush or up to several days.

In South Texas, private ranches surround the Border Patrol checkpoints. Groups traversing through the brush may follow electricity lines or gas pipelines and walk just inside the brush line to remain out of view. To cross between ranches, the group may climb over the ranch fences or cut holes in them. When the group arrives at the pre-arranged pick-up location north of the checkpoint, they wait for a vehicle—or multiple vehicles depending on the group size—to pull over on the side of the road. Groups hiking through the brush are commonly discovered by surveillance cameras and aerostat balloons, which track the migrants' or their vehicles' movements.

Hiking around Border Patrol checkpoints entails serious risks. The brush is often dense and difficult to traverse, with thorny plants, bristly cactuses, deer ticks, and rattlesnakes that reside in the grasses. The mesquite thickets can also be disorienting, making it easy to get lost. Additionally, migrants on longer, multi-day trips often cannot carry sufficient water, and must rely on finding water along the way. In South Texas, at least one hundred people die each year from dehydration, heat exhaustion, or hypothermia while walking around Border Patrol checkpoints.

Airplanes and Boats. There are two additional methods for circumventing Border Patrol checkpoints: traveling by airplane or by boat. To fly over a checkpoint, organizers can charter a plane or find a pilot with a private plane who is willing to transport the group. Within the dataset, there were three cases where smugglers attempted to fly migrants from South Texas airports to interior cities. These groups ranged from 4 to 13 individuals.

To circumvent Border Patrol checkpoints by boat, there are also two general approaches. First, boat captains can take migrants through the Gulf of Mexico until a predetermined point north of the checkpoint. These boats may attempt to blend in with regular boat traffic as fishing or tourist vessels. Second, guides may lead the group north through South Padre Island. Since South Padre Island is bifurcated by the Port Mansfield Channel, guides may move the group using a combination of vehicles and boats. These groups ranged from 3 to 6 individuals.

Traveling on airplanes and boats tends to be less risky than other forms of transit through or around checkpoints,

but these transportation methods can be dangerous also. In one of the dataset's cases, a boat broke down and began to sink while transporting people to South Padre Island. The boat passengers had to exit the vessel and swim to shore. Additionally, some boats are overcrowded and do not carry lifejackets on board.

WHO IS CHARGED WITH MIGRANT SMUGGLING?

At each migration stage, smugglers transport people from one point to another or provide basic housing and food. Specifically, smuggler roles can include acting as a river brush guide, a checkpoint brush guide, a private vehicle driver, a tractor trailer driver, a boat captain, an airplane pilot, a stash house caretaker, a food provider, a guard, a scout, or a coordinator, among other potential roles. Arrested smugglers' demographic profiles vary with each smuggling activity. The following sections outline each migration phase and the arrested individuals' profiles.

CROSSING THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

The report's dataset includes 16 people who were charged with smuggling migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border. Six of these individuals sought to move people through a port of entry and the remaining ten individuals aimed to move people in between ports of entry.³⁹ The arrested individuals' demographics differed depending on their border-crossing method.

At a Port of Entry. The dataset includes six people who were arrested and charged with migrant smuggling at a port of entry. The most common demographic for this activity was a U.S. citizen woman.⁴⁰ The arrested women—aged 21 to 48 years old—were either attempting to smuggle minors into the United States or transport an adult sitting in the passenger's seat or hidden in a car trunk. The lone man was a CBP officer who appeared to be collaborating with one of the arrested women to allow her and an unauthorized passenger to cross into the United States.

Between Ports of Entry. The report's dataset included 10 individuals who were arrested and charged with migrant smuggling between ports of entry. The most common demographic profile for this activity was a Mexican citizen man (eight individuals). Although the dataset also included one Honduran man and one U.S. citizen man. The men's ages ranged from 18 to 38 years old, with the median age in the early 20s.

The arrested individuals' specific river crossing methods varied by nationality. The Mexican men guided migrants on rafts or waded and swam across the Rio Grande. By contrast, the U.S. citizen man shuttled people across the river on a speedboat. The river crossing method was not specified for the Honduran man.⁴¹

Yet, the report's dataset misses Mexican minors, who frequently act as river brush guides between ports of entry. Unlike adults, Mexican minors do not face legal consequences if they are apprehended in the United States. Instead, Border Patrol agents return the minors to Mexican territory, where they are temporarily put into Comprehensive Family Development System shelters (*Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*, DIF) until a family member can pick them up. Since Mexican minors are quickly returned to Mexico

and do not enter the U.S. criminal justice system, these individuals do not show up in the report's dataset.

In September 2019, scholars Oscar Hernández and Tamara Haydée Segura Herrera co-authored a study on the minors who move people across the U.S.-Mexico border in South Texas.⁴² In 2015, Hernández and Segura Herrera conducted interviews with seven teenage boys in DIF shelters who had acted as river brush guides.⁴³ From their interviews, they reported that Mexican minors engaging in migrant smuggling often lived in Tamaulipas border towns, were from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and could be even younger than 15 years old.⁴⁴ The minors generally crossed with groups of five to ten people, and would be paid by person (US\$70 to US\$100 in 2015) or by group (up to US\$1,000 in 2015).⁴⁵

There appears to be a link between river brush guides and the Mexican organized criminal groups that control border zones, such as the Gulf Cartel (*Cartel del Golfo*) and the Northeast Cartel (*Cartel del Noreste*). Hernández and Segura Herrera report that river brush guides include both individuals who are on a criminal group's payroll and those who pay to use the territory.⁴⁶ In the case of Mexican minors, the authors found that friends or family members recruited some minors into migrant smuggling and criminal groups directly recruited others.⁴⁷ Law enforcement interviews suggest that this same dynamic extends through Nuevo Laredo.citizen man. The men's ages ranged from 18 to 38 years old, with the median age in the early 20s.

RIVER PICK-UP TO STASH HOUSE

The dataset contained 30 individuals who were arrested after picking up groups at the Rio Grande. For this activity, U.S. citizen males were the most common demographic (60 percent of the cases). Mexican citizen men were the second most common demographic at 20 percent of the cases, followed by U.S. citizen women at 17 percent. The arrested individuals' ages ranged from 17 to 39 years old, with an average age of 27 years old.

Most pick-up drivers came from cities or towns that were located near where they were arrested. All of the arrested individuals with listed residency information (13 of the 30 cases) lived in Texas. Within Texas, the majority of the individuals were from cities and towns along the border, such as Laredo, McAllen, Mission, Donna, Pharr, Roma, and Rio Bravo.

Several river pick-up drivers reported their motivations for transporting groups of migrants. The drivers' most common explanation was monetary gain, and one driver noted that she had been struggling with financial difficulties. The payment range—for the five cases with information—was between US\$100 and US\$500 per migrant. However, two drivers also noted that they were transporting migrants to further their own migration journeys or those of their loved ones. One Mexican man stated that he was driving migrants in order to pay for his smuggling fee to Houston, and a U.S. citizen man stated that smuggling coordinators had promised to cross his family if he worked as a driver.

STASH HOUSE NEAR THE BORDER

The dataset contains 49 people who were arrested while engaging in stash house related activities. The most common demographic profile for these activities was a U.S. citizen man (45 percent of the cases). Mexican citizen men constituted another 20 percent of the cases, followed by U.S. citizen women at 14 percent and Mexican citizen women at 10 percent. The arrested individuals' ages ranged from 19 to 60 years old, with a median age of 34 years.⁴⁸

Some of the arrested individuals owned or lived in the stash houses, while others only participated in a specific stash house activity. These activities include providing food to the waiting migrants, guarding the stash house, and providing transportation between stash houses or to a vehicle for the next migration stage. Some individuals performed only one stash house related activity and other people engaged in multiple activities. An individual's nationality did not seem to influence their assigned stash house activity, with a fairly even nationality breakdown across the different activities.

Most stash house caretakers came from the cities or towns where they were arrested. All of the arrested individuals with listed residency information (21 of the 49 cases) lived in Texas. Within Texas, the majority of the individuals were from cities and towns along the border—particularly where the stash houses were located—such as Laredo, Edinburg, Brownsville, Donna, San Juan, Mission, Pharr, and McAllen.

Notably, there were five couples and a family among the arrested individuals. In total, six of the twelve arrested women (50 percent) were in a relationship or had direct family ties to another arrested individual. These relationships may provide insight into gendered labor within migrant smuggling and women's recruitment into stash house related activities.

BORDER PATROL CHECKPOINTS

Private vehicles. The dataset contains 34 people who were arrested while transporting migrants in private vehicles through Border Patrol checkpoints. The most common demographic profile for this activity was a U.S. citizen man (74 percent of all cases). U.S. citizen women constituted another 24 percent of arrested individuals, along with one U.S. permanent resident man (2 percent). All of the arrested drivers were U.S. citizens or U.S. permanent residents.⁴⁹

The report's dataset has a sex breakdown of 76 percent male drivers and 24 percent female drivers. This matches Texas DPS's data for drivers who were arrested for migrant smuggling in interior South Texas counties that have Border Patrol checkpoints (specifically, Jim Hogg County, Dimmit County, Brooks County, and Kenedy County).⁵⁰ From 2015 to 2022, DPS recorded 683 arrests in these four counties. For the arrested individuals, the average sex breakdown was 75 percent male and 25 percent female, with slight variation by county.⁵¹

In contrast to most river pick-up drivers and border stash house caretakers, private vehicle drivers transporting migrants through checkpoints were not always local residents. In fact, most drivers were from Texas cities

outside of South Texas, including Houston, San Antonio, and El Paso. An additional eight drivers were from out of state, with residences in Georgia, New York, and Michigan. The arrested individuals' ages ranged from 19 to 61 years old, with a median age of 29 years.

These drivers generally reported that acquaintances, friends, or family had recruited them to transport migrants through checkpoints. However, one active-duty U.S. army soldier—who was arrested at the Falfurrias checkpoint with two migrants in the trunk of his car—said that he saw an advertisement on TikTok offering US\$5,000 to transport people from McAllen to Houston. Another individual reported that he connected with a migrant smuggler after posting on Craigslist that he was looking for work. Other drivers stated that they were seeking to earn money, including a U.S. citizen woman who claimed that she was about to be evicted from her home.

Tractor Trailers. Within the dataset, there were 42 individuals arrested for transporting migrants through Border Patrol checkpoints in tractor trailers. The most common demographic profile was a U.S. citizen man (85 percent). U.S. permanent residents and Mexican citizen men each constituted another 5 percent of arrested individuals, and there was one Nicaraguan man and one Cuban man (2 percent each).⁵² Notably, all 42 arrested individuals were male. The arrested individuals' ages ranged from 24 and 61 years old, with a median age of 41 years.

Similar to the drivers transporting migrants through checkpoints in private vehicles, most of the arrested tractor trailer drivers were not local residents. Fourteen of the 20 arrested drivers with residency information (70 percent) were Texas residents, but they hailed from cities and towns across the state. The remaining six drivers lived outside of Texas, with residences in Louisiana, Georgia, Illinois, Florida, and California.

The tractor trailer drivers generally reported that they were transporting migrants to earn money. In 2018, a driver—en route to the Sarita checkpoint with 86 migrants in his tractor trailer's cargo area—claimed that he was going to be paid US\$215,000. Only one driver reported a slightly different motivation for transporting migrants. In this case, a Mexican citizen driver stated that he was a migrant and had agreed to drive a trailer through the Laredo checkpoint in exchange for a smuggling fee reduction.

Hiking Around the Checkpoint. For individuals acting as brush guides around Border Patrol checkpoints, the most common demographic was either a U.S. citizen man or a Mexican citizen man. The dataset contained only one case for this smuggling activity, which involved two U.S. citizen men who led a group of six migrants around the Sarita checkpoint. One of the arrested individuals was a 27 year old from Harlingen, Texas, and there was no demographic information for the second individual.

The report relied on interviews with law enforcement in five South Texas counties for additional information on checkpoint brush guide demographics. In Brooks County and Kenedy County, brush guides were reported to be generally males between 20 and 30 years old. These guides include both Mexican and U.S. citizens who are from nearby towns such as Kingsville and also larger Texas cities such as Dallas and Houston. In Webb County, Jim Hogg County, and Maverick County, brush guides were reported to generally be U.S. citizen men and Mexican citizen men in their early 20s who are from the local area.⁵³

Airplanes and Boats. The report’s dataset included six individuals arrested for transporting migrants around Border Patrol checkpoints by airplane or boat, with three people transporting migrants by airplane and three people transporting migrants by boat. The most common demographic profile for individuals involved in these activities was a U.S. citizen man (83 percent). The remaining individual was from the Dominican Republic. Notably, everyone arrested for these smuggling activities was male. The arrested individuals’ ages ranged from 23 years old to 80 years old, with a median age of 40 years.

CONCLUSIONS

For more than 140 years, the United States’ restrictive immigration policies and border enforcement efforts have generated clandestine migration along the country’s borders and, by extension, created a booming migrant smuggling business. Over time, some characteristics have changed. Migrants’ demographics shifted—moving from Europeans to Mexicans to today’s diverse range of nationalities—and smugglers altered their structures and tactics in response to evolving U.S. border enforcement and Mexico’s organized crime dynamics. Yet, clandestine migration and migrant smuggling has not slowed down.

Today, clandestine migration in South Texas follows four stages. As detailed in this report, the first stage is crossing the Rio Grande and entering U.S. territory, either at a port of entry or between ports of entry. The second stage is getting picked up at the river and driven to a stash house. The third stage is the time spent in a border stash house. While the fourth stage is attempting to pass through a Border Patrol checkpoint either in a private vehicle or tractor trailer or circumvent the checkpoint by foot, vehicle, plane, or boat. Each stage comes with a series of risks for migrants, and, every year, hundreds of people die while entering or transiting through South Texas.

At each migration stage in South Texas, different people engage in the smuggling activities. The report’s dataset revealed that there is no single smuggler demographic, and arrested individuals included men and women, minors and the elderly, and individuals from various nationalities. The most common demographic profiles varied by smuggling activity. Along the border, U.S. citizen women were the most likely demographic to move people through ports of entry. While Mexican men were the most common demographic to move people in between ports of entry. Inside U.S. territory, U.S. citizen men constituted the most common demographic for all smuggling activities.

Every few years, a tragedy—such as the June 2022 San Antonio trailer mass casualty event—punctuates the news cycle and refocuses national attention on clandestine migration and migrant smuggling in South Texas. Yet, after more than one hundred years, these clandestine movements remain a common and daily occurrence and the activities are unlikely to change. As migrants continue to enter the United States and smugglers are willing to facilitate their movement, the cycle will only continue.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This report focuses on the geographic area that stretches from Piedras Negras / Eagle Pass to Matamoros / Brownsville.
- 2 This report often uses the term smuggler and migrant smuggling, since these are the most conventionally understood terms for these activities. However, whenever possible, the report aims to be more specific about the facilitation role, such as identifying the individual as a driver, brush guide, or stash house caretaker. It also recognizes that the terms smuggler and migrant smuggling have been used to frame border crossing experiences as illicit and predatory. For more on this, see: Gabriella Sanchez, *Human Smuggling and Border Crossings* (London: Routledge, 2014).
- 3 There is excellent scholarship on migrant smuggling along the border. including: David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Gabriella Sanchez, *Human Smuggling and Border Crossings* (London: Routledge, 2014); Gabriella Sanchez, “‘Circuit Children’: The Experiences and Perspectives of Children Engaged in Migrant Smuggling Facilitation on the US-Mexico Border,” *Anti-Trafficking Review*, no. 11 (October 29, 2018); Simón Pedro Izcarra Palacios and Mariana Ortega Breña, “Migrant Smuggling on Mexico’s Gulf Route,” *Latin American Perspectives* 44, no. 6 (November 2017), 16-30; Jeremy Slack and Howard Campbell, “On Narco-coyotaje: Illicit Regimes and Their Impacts on the US–Mexico Border,” *Antipode* 48, no. 5 (2016); Jeremy Slack and Daniel Martinez, “What Makes a Good Human Smuggler? The Differences between Satisfaction with and Recommendation of Coyotes on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 676, no. 1 (2018), 152-173.
- 4 Many cases had more than one material witness.
- 5 The arrest data included information from the Texas Highway Patrol’s Enterprise Model (EM) system and the Texas Ranger Division and Criminal Investigation Division’s State Police Unified Reporting System (SPURS).
- 6 Peter Andreas, “Illicit Americas: Historical Dynamics of Smuggling in U.S. Relations with Its Neighbors,” *Watson Institute for International Studies Research Paper*, no. 2013-03 (Fall 2013).
- 7 In 1875, the U.S. Congress passed the Page Act—which was the first restrictive federal immigration law—banning certain classes of immigrants, such as convicts, prostitutes, and “importation” of anyone from Asia without their consent. Historians view it as a generally ineffective piece of legislation, although it blocked the arrival of Chinese women.
- 8 Patrick Ettinger, *Imaginary Lines: Border Enforcement and the Origins of Undocumented Immigration, 1882-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 118.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 “Border Patrol to Be Increased to Check Influx of Foreigners,” *El Paso Times*, April 19, 1924.
- 12 Harvey Scandrett, “Trailing Wetbacks Main Patrol Task,” *Valley Morning Star*, March 28, 1948.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 International News Service, “Immigration Officials Nab Many Aliens,” *Hartford Courant*, July 15, 1948.
- 15 From October 1948 to August 1949, the Mexican government suspended the Bracero Program. Kelly Lytle Hernandez, “The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (2006), 434.
- 16 Peter N. Kirstein, “Agribusiness, Labor, and the Wetbacks: Truman’s Commission On Migratory Labor,” *The Historian* 40 no. 4 (1978): 650–67.
- 17 Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Migra!: A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 107-108; David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings*.
- 18 In 1976, amendments limited each Western Hemisphere country to 20,000 annual resident visas, which aligned the numbers with visa caps for Eastern Hemisphere countries. Douglas S. Massey and Karen A. Pren, “Unintended Consequences of US Immigration Policy: Explaining the Post-1965 Surge from Latin America,” *Population and Development Review* 38, no. 1 (2012).
- 19 Julian Samora, *Los Mojados: The Wetback Story* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971).
- 20 However, the truck lacked ventilation and two Mexican citizens died from the heat and lack of oxygen. “Two Caught Smuggling Mexicans: Aliens’ Death Clues Sought,” *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, October 2, 1968.
- 21 “In Search of El Dorado: Search Thorough for Aliens,” *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, September 26, 1971.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 Katharine M. Donato, Jorge Durand, and Douglas S. Massey, “Stemming The Tide? Assessing the Deterrent Effects of the Immigration Reform and Control Act,” *Demography* 29, no 2 (1992), 139–57.
- 24 “Border Patrol Strategic Plan 1994 and Beyond,” U.S. Border Patrol, July 1994, <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=721845>.
- 25 David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings*, 48-50.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings*; “Weather Killed Immigrant,” *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, December 28, 1996; Jeremy

Slack and Howard Campbell, “On Narco-coyotaje: Illicit Regimes and Their Impacts on the US–Mexico Border,” 1390.

28 Simón Pedro Izcara Palacios, “La contracción de las redes de contrabando de migrantes en México,” *Revista de Estudios Sociales* 48, (January 2014), 84-99.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 David Spener, *Clandestine Crossings*.

33 Ibid.

34 Four of the five cases listed the mode of transport.

35 These cases are separate from a non-recognized family member attempting to travel with a child. Instead, the adults in these cases stated that they were receiving money to move an unrelated minor from Mexico to the United States.

36 The officials that perform inspections at ports of entry are often referred to as Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers. Their official name is Office of Field Operations (OFO) officers, and both Border Patrol and OFO are part of the larger CBP umbrella.

37 Using the smuggling incident dataset, there were an average of eight migrants per group. Using the migrant testimony dataset, there were an average of nine migrants. The largest number of 30 people is an estimate. It comes from three migrant testimonies for the same river crossing, which estimate that there were between 20 and 40 people in the group. This analysis uses the midpoint of those estimates.

38 There is an additional checkpoint near the border in Cameron County.

39 The dataset also includes one case of a migrant traveling with a minor, who was charged with smuggling. However, this analysis did not include this case since it was unclear if the smuggled minor was a consenting participant in this movement.

40 Four of the arrested women were U.S. citizens and one was a U.S. permanent resident.

41 The Honduran man claimed to be a migrant who knew the route from a previous migration attempt and who was guiding the group to pay for his own smuggling fees.

42 Minors carry out two additional types of jobs: 1) scouting and 2) recruiting other minors. If a minor’s job is scouting, then they also assess whether groups of migrants are using the cartel-controlled clandestine routes without authorization.

43 The boys were between the ages of 15 and 17 years old.

44 Misael Hernández Hernández and Tamara Haydée Segura, “Coyotitos. Menores Traficantes de Migrantes En La Frontera Tamaulipas-Texas,” in *Cruces y Retornos En La Región Del Noreste Mexicano En El Alba Del Siglo XXI*, ed. Socorro Arzaluz and Efrén Sandoval (Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2018), 77-78.

45 Ibid., 85.

46 Ibid., 80.

47 Ibid., 80.

48 It was not possible to determine the sex of three individuals within the dataset.

49 One man was a dual citizen of the United States and Ghana.

50 This analysis does not include border counties with Border Patrol checkpoints given the challenge of distinguishing between pick up drivers and private vehicles that were attempting to pass through or circumvent the checkpoints.

51 Not all arrests included the individual’s sex. This is the sex breakdown for arrests when a sex was listed.

52 One of the arrested individuals did not have a listed nationality and is not included in this count. The percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

53 Law enforcement in Kenedy County and Maverick County reported that they had arrested female brush guides. However, these cases were uncommon.