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CENTRAL AMERICA & MEXICO POLICY INITIATIVE

CLANDESTINE MIGRATION AND MIGRANT RISK IN CALIFORNIA

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POLICY RESEARCH PROJECT REPORT

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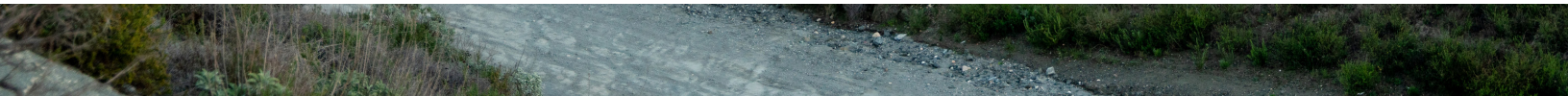

Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Policy Research Project Report

Number 228

Clandestine Migration and Migrant Risk in California

Project Directed by

Stephanie Leutert

A report by the Policy Research Project

on Clandestine Migration Along the U.S.-Mexico Border

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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.

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List of Acronyms

BSITS	Border Safety Initiative Tracking System
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DIF	Comprehensive Family Development (*Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*)
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
IID	Imperial Irrigation District
PACER	Public Access to Court Electronic Records
RV	Recreational Vehicle

Foreword

The Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) 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

In November 2022, two young Guatemalan women met in a small hotel room in northern Mexico. Both women were traveling as clandestine migrants to the United States and would soon cross the U.S.-Mexico border together by boat. In the early morning hours, the two women took a taxi to the beach in Tijuana and boarded a small fishing boat with six other migrants. Each migrant wore a life jacket and the boat captain told everyone to "hold on" as they took off for San Diego. Yet, as the group approached the California coastline, a large wave hit the boat and flipped it over. The two women were thrown into the water and caught underneath the boat, where they drowned just yards from the California shore.

For decades, hundreds of thousands of migrants have attempted to enter the United States through the country's southern border.[i] These individuals have made the journey to escape conflict and violence, poverty and a lack of economic opportunity, or to reunite with loved ones, among other reasons. In recent years, many of these individuals have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border to seek asylum. However, other migrants travel as clandestine migrants and attempt to avoid detection. These clandestine migrants take dangerous routes and face various obstacles throughout their journeys, whether by land or by sea. While clandestine migrants traverse the entire U.S.-Mexico border, this report focuses on their movement through the California borderlands.

In particular, this report seeks to answer three research questions related to clandestine migration: 1) How do clandestine migrants transit through California's borderlands? 2) What are the risks to migrants during their journeys? and 3) Who are the individuals that facilitate clandestine migration in California? To answer these questions, we use a mixed methods approach. We rely on two original datasets—the Smuggling Incident dataset and the Migrant Testimony dataset—that examine the different migration phases, migrants' experiences during their journeys, and migrant smugglers' demographics. Additionally, we rely on three migrant death datasets from the Border Patrol, the San Diego County Medical Examiners' Office, and the Imperial County Coroner to understand the risks for migrants during each clandestine activity. Finally, to supplement this information, we conducted 11 interviews with federal and local law enforcement, journalists, academics, and civil society organizations.

This research report has three primary findings. First, the report finds that migrants' journeys vary significantly by their route and final destination. Depending on where and how migrants cross the border, their journeys may include three to five migration phases (such as crossing the border, getting picked up in a vehicle, etc.). Further, the risks faced by migrants also vary by phase, with the most commonly reported risks being drowning in the Pacific Ocean or the All-American Canal, followed by environmental exposure in remote border areas. Finally, the report finds that smugglers' demographic profiles shift by migration activity. For example, from 2014 to 2024, U.S. citizens were the primary smugglers that moved migrants into the United States at ports of entry, but Mexican men were the primary population that transported migrants in boats across the Pacific Ocean.

The report is structured into four chapters. The next chapter outlines the report's methodology and its mixed methods approach. The following three chapters (Chapters One, Two, and Three) each address one of the report's three research questions. Chapter One examines the different migration

routes and smuggling phases for clandestine migrants in California. Chapter Two delves into the risks associated with each clandestine migration phase. Finally, Chapter Three analyzes the roles, demographics, and motivations for the smugglers involved in guiding and transporting clandestine migrants through California.

Methodology

This report employs a mixed methods approach to analyze clandestine migration in California. First, we created and reviewed two original datasets that cover migrant smuggling events. The first dataset includes migrant smuggling incidents in California from 2014 to 2024 (the Smuggling Incident dataset) and the second dataset compiles clandestine migrant testimonies (the Migrant Testimony dataset). Second, to assess the risks for migrants during each migration stage, we used migrant death data from the Border Patrol, the San Diego County Medical Examiners' Office, and the Imperial County Coroner. We merged the two latter datasets into a single source, which we refer to as the Local Actors dataset. To address the remaining questions, we also conducted 11 interviews with members of federal and local law enforcement, journalists, academics, and civil society organizations.

To build the Smuggling Incident dataset, we identified and coded migrant smuggling events in California. We used local and national news reports and government agency press releases, such as from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). For each identified incident, we coded 49 separate variables, including the smuggling incident's location, the event's specific details, the apprehended migrants' demographics, and the smugglers' demographics and motivations. In total, this dataset includes 108 smuggling incidents in California from 2014 through 2024, with 93 arrested smugglers and more than 1,000 apprehended migrants.

Once we coded these variables, we searched for each case in the Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) database, which is the federal court case documentation system. In particular, we looked for criminal complaints and indictments that outlined the case's details. For the 108 cases in the Smuggling Incident dataset, we obtained court documents for 34 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 federal court documents from PACER. Some of the criminal complaints included testimonies from apprehended migrants who were serving as material witnesses. Of the 34 cases with court documents, 23 cases contained these testimonies. These cases had between one and 30 testimonies per case. For each migrant testimony, we coded variables, which included information on the migrant's demographics and their experience during each migration phase. Overall, our Migrant Testimony dataset includes 131 migrant testimonies. We used this dataset to better understand smuggling activities, the conditions for migrants during each phase, and any associated risks.

This methodological approach has several limitations. First, the two datasets' cases only cover events where the smugglers and migrants were caught. This means that this report does not analyze successful migrant smuggling attempts, and 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 bias the dataset toward more newsworthy events. Third, 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. However, due to these limitations, we do not attempt to quantify any of the information regarding migration phases.

Next, to analyze the risks that clandestine migrants face in California, we relied on three migrant death datasets. First, we reviewed the Border Patrol's person-level migrant death data to analyze historical trends. Since October 1997, the Border Patrol has collected migrant death data through its Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS). We obtained this data through multiple sources, including various Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.[ii] This data includes more than 325 cases of migrant deaths in California from 2014 to 2024.[1] It includes information on the general location of the recovered remains, the cause of death, and any available information on the migrant's sex, age, and nationality. However, our dataset only includes geo-coordinates through fiscal year 2017. As a result, it was not possible to use the Border Patrol's data to map more recent migrant death trends.

Instead, to understand current migrant mortality dynamics, we used two additional migrant death datasets. These datasets were from the San Diego County Medical Examiners' Office and the Imperial County Coroner.[iii] The San Diego County Medical Examiner's data includes 160 migrant deaths from 2018 to 2023. It covers variables such as the recovered remains' location (with geo-coordinates for all of the cases), cause of death, and information on the migrant's sex, age, and race. Similarly, the Imperial County Coroner's data includes 184 migrant deaths from 2015 to 2023. It covers variables such as the recovered remains' location (with geo-coordinates for nearly all of its cases), the cause of death, and the migrant's sex age, and race.

Figure 1: Migrant Death Datasets

Dataset	Years	Case Total
Border Patrol Dataset *(San Diego Sector, El Centro Sector, and some Yuma Sector)*	2014 - 2024	325
San Diego County Medical Examiners' Office	2018 - 2023	160
Imperial County Coroner	2015 - 2023	184

Source: Authors' elaboration

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 10 miles of the border

[1] There are 325 migrant death cases that can be definitively linked to California. There are another 50 cases in the Yuma Sector that may be either in Arizona or in California, since the sector covers both states.

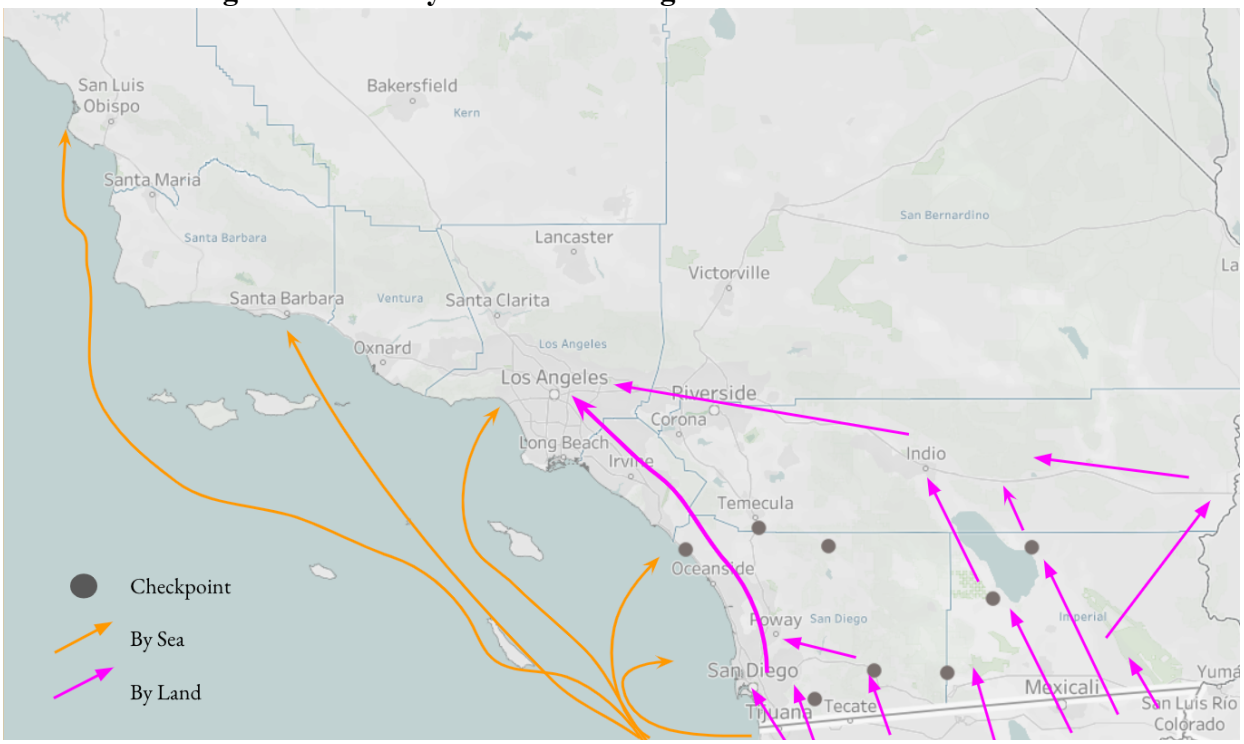
as “crossing the border” and deaths beyond 10 miles as “circumventing the Border Patrol’s highway checkpoints on foot.” We made similar determinations for vehicle accident deaths throughout the borderlands.

The Border Patrol’s migrant death dataset and the datasets from the San Diego County Medical Examiners’ Office and the Imperial County Coroner also had various limitations. First, the datasets fail to capture the true number of deceased migrants. For example, they do not count migrants who died in California, but whose remains were never recovered. Second, given that the Border Patrol dataset did not include geo-coordinates after fiscal year 2017, we could not use this dataset to map current migrant death trends. Third, in the Local Actors dataset, there was more detailed information for recent migrant deaths, but some of these cases were still missing specific location or cause of death information. This made it challenging to match each death to its appropriate migration phase. To address these issues, we also relied on the Smuggling Incident dataset and the Migrant Testimony dataset, along with expert interviews, to illustrate general risks for migrants during each smuggling phase.

Chapter 1: Clandestine Migration in California

In California's borderlands, clandestine migrants move across the terrain along several primary routes. These routes may entail travel by sea and by land. The routes by sea involve migrants traveling on boats from Mexico's Pacific Coast to beaches near San Diego, Los Angeles, and as far north as Santa Barbara. While land routes involve migrants crossing into the United States near San Diego, Tecate, Calexico, or Yuma, or through the Otay Mountain Wilderness area, the Jacumba Mountains Wilderness area, or in the Imperial Valley. Once clandestine migrants cross the border, they travel toward San Diego and Los Angeles. Migrants crossing in the Imperial Valley or near Yuma may also travel into Arizona.

Figure 2: Primary Clandestine Migration Routes in California



Source: Authors' elaboration

Migrants move through various migration phases as they follow these routes. These phases include crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, getting picked up by vehicles near the border, spending time in nearby stash houses, circumventing or passing through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, and staying in final stash houses in the U.S. interior. Depending on migrants' routes and final destinations, they may pass through three to five of these migration phases. For example, a migrant whose final destination is Los Angeles may cross the border by boat, get picked up by a vehicle near the beach in Los Angeles, and then taken to a stash house in the city. This individual would only pass through three phases.

This chapter aims to answer the first research question regarding how clandestine migrants move through California's borderlands. 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 and local law enforcement, journalists, academics, and civil society organizations. The following sections detail each clandestine migration phase along the California-Mexico border.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

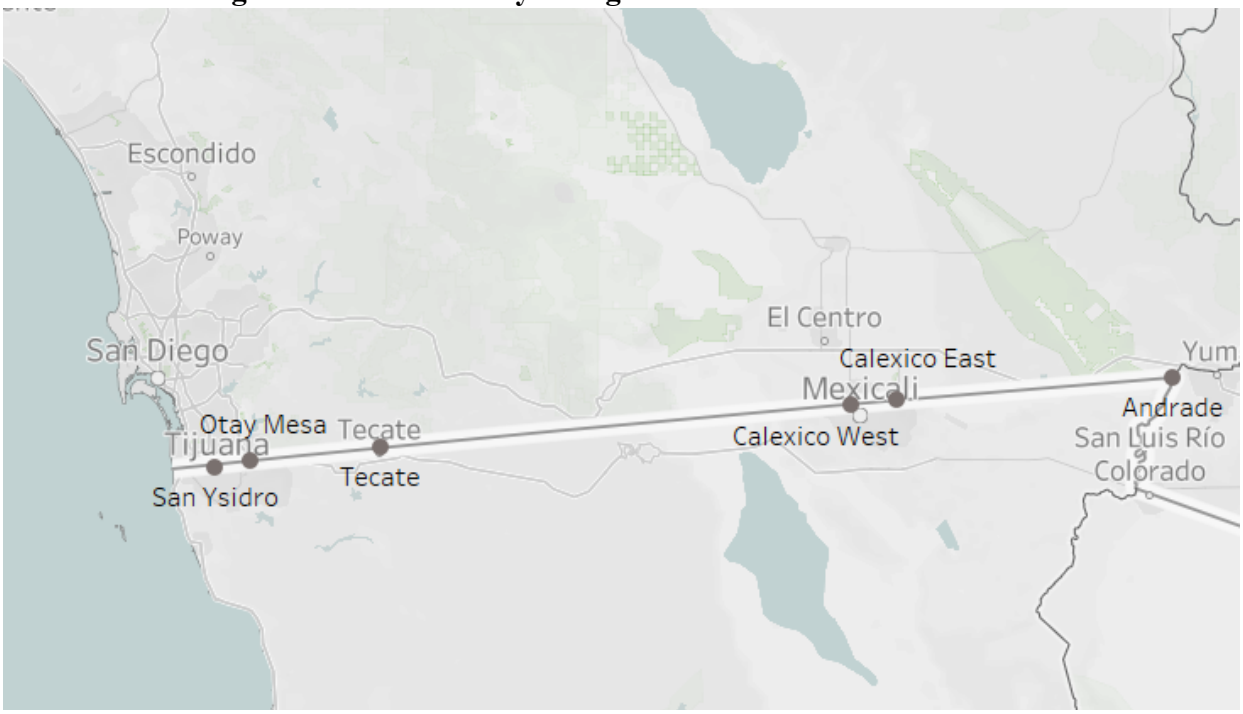
The first clandestine migration phase in California involves crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. Overall, migrants can cross the border in two ways: at a port of entry or between ports of entry. At ports of entry, migrants may cross on foot using pedestrian lanes or inside a private or commercial vehicle. While between ports of entry, smugglers may transport migrants by sea or by land. This includes transporting and guiding migrants on boats, across the open desert and wilderness areas, over the All-American Canal, and through underground tunnels and sewer pipes. The following subsections explore these various forms of clandestine border crossing.

At Ports of Entry

Ports of entry are the official crossing points along the U.S.-Mexico border, with hundreds of thousands of people crossing through them each day. In California, there are six ports of entry: San Ysidro, Otay Mesa, Tecate, Calexico West, Calexico East, and Andrade (see Figure 3).[2] 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.

[2] Some ports of entry may have multiple entrances. For example, the San Ysidro Port of Entry includes two separate bidirectional pedestrian crossings: the eastern pedestrian crossing (PedEast) and the western pedestrian crossing (PedWest).

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



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Clandestine migrants attempt to cross at ports of entry on foot or while traveling in a private or commercial vehicle. These migrants use various methods to gain entry, such as presenting false documentation or hiding in a concealed space in a private or commercial vehicle. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 13 cases where smugglers attempted to cross migrants through ports of entry. Twelve of the cases involved smugglers transporting migrants in private vehicles, at times with the help of corrupt CBP officers.[iv] These cases occurred at the San Ysidro, Otay Mesa, Tecate, and Calexico West Ports of Entry. Additionally, one case involved smugglers concealing 30 migrants in a tractor-trailer's cargo area at the Otay Mesa Port of Entry.

Overall, smugglers transported migrants in various private vehicles at ports of entry, including sedans, SUVs, trucks, and recreational vehicles (RVs). Additionally, drivers hid migrants in a range of concealed areas. For example, in a July 2024 case, the driver hid a migrant under a Volkswagen SUV's third-row seat, and, in March 2015, a couple attempted to smuggle a migrant into the United States by hiding him in their vehicle's spare tire compartment. Further, a December 2019 incident at the San Ysidro Port of Entry involved eleven Chinese migrants who were concealed inside furniture in a moving van.

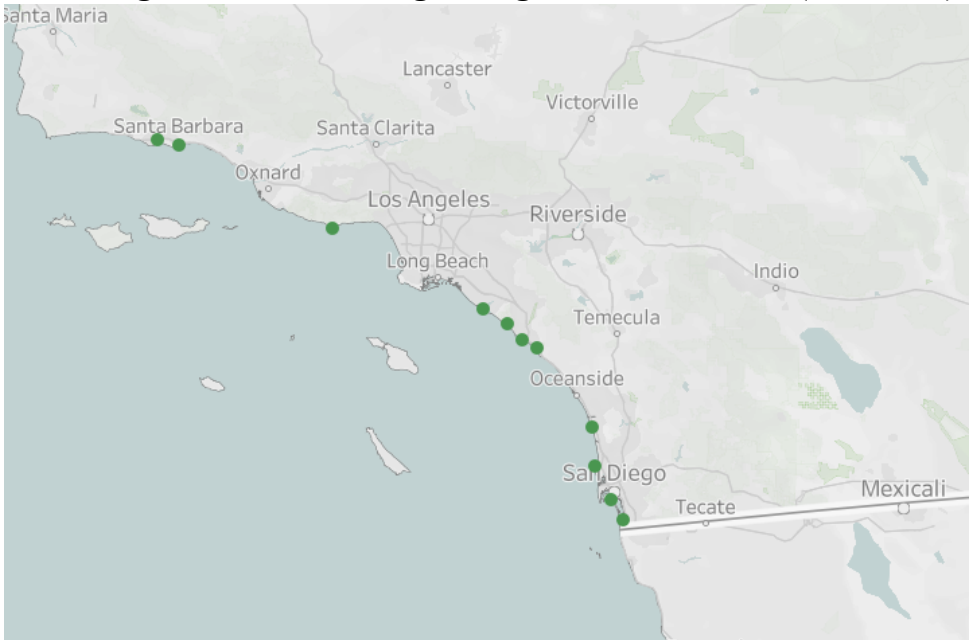
Between Ports of Entry

Clandestine migrants also cross into the United States between ports of entry. In California, these individuals cross U.S. territory by sea or by land. When crossing by sea, migrants may swim across the international maritime boundary or smugglers may transport migrants by boat or other watercraft, such as jet skis. Alternatively, when crossing by land, migrants may climb the border wall, hike through wilderness areas, swim across the All-American Canal or transit underground

in tunnels and sewer pipes. The following subsections cover each of these border crossing methods between ports of entry.

Crossing the Border by Sea. To cross the border by sea, smugglers transport migrants on boats or other watercraft or migrants may swim around the border wall. For boats transporting migrants from central or northern Mexico, there are two primary routes. The first route involves boat landings in or around San Diego, and the second route involves boat landings near Los Angeles or Santa Barbara. However, migrants have also landed as far north as San Luis Obispo, which is nearly 200 miles north of Los Angeles.[v] In the Smuggler Incident dataset, there were 45 cases where smugglers transported migrants on boats and other watercraft. This involved 29 cases where boats landed near San Diego and 16 cases where they landed near Los Angeles.

Figure 4: Boat Landings Along California's Coast (2014-2024)



Source: Smuggling Incident dataset

To move migrants up the Pacific Coast, smugglers used various types of vessels. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, smugglers most frequently used panga boats—small open-faced fishing boats—that carried anywhere from one to 27 migrants. However, smugglers also used jet skis that each transported between two and three migrants.[vi] Interviews suggested that jet skis were useful given that they could reach high speeds and allow smugglers to swiftly drop migrants off on California's beaches. These boats either traveled alone or as part of a coordinated group. For example, in April 2022, CBP Air and Marine agents intercepted three separate panga boats traveling together near Sunset Cliffs in Point Loma, San Diego that were carrying a combined 72 migrants.

Migrants also had varying experiences on these boats. In the Smuggling Incident and Migrant Testimony datasets, court documents and migrants described the boats as being generally small and crowded. At times, boat captains provided migrants with water and snacks (such as taquitos), but other cases did not mention any food or drinks. Migrants also had varying access to life jackets. In an August 2024 case, a migrant testified that he and seven other migrants were never

provided with life jackets. Conversely, in a November 2022 case, migrants testified that the boat captain provided them with life jackets but then instructed them to remove the life jackets as they got closer to shore, in order to avoid attracting attention. In this particular case, the boat overturned as it approached the beach and three migrants drowned.

Clandestine migrants may also attempt to swim across the international maritime border. Migrants do this by swimming around the end of the border barrier that juts out about 300 feet into the Pacific Ocean between Playas de Tijuana and Imperial Beach, California.[vii] However, this is a challenging undertaking, as the waves crashing against the border wall's metal posts create a rip current around the barrier. In April 2021, the head of Tijuana's Secretariat of Safety and Citizen Protection (*Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana*) described the waves near the border barrier as "extraordinary" and noted that they can cause "even a good swimmer to go under."[viii] The Smuggling Incident dataset includes a case from April 2021 where a Cuban man drowned while attempting to swim around the border wall.

Crossing the Border by Land. Migrants may also cross the border by land. The California terrain shifts along the length of the U.S.-Mexico border. The state's western boundary is the Pacific Ocean, with sandy beaches, rough and steep cliffs, and multiple layers of border fencing.[3] Farther east, there are sparsely populated mountainous areas—such as the Otay Mountain Wilderness area and the Jacumba Mountains Wilderness area—along with vast tracts of farmland. While even farther east lies a 40-mile stretch of sand dunes in the Imperial Valley, and the 80-mile, fast moving All American Canal that runs parallel to the border. To cross the border by land, migrants may have to climb the border wall, hike through wilderness areas, swim or float across the All-American Canal, or crawl underground through tunnels and sewer pipes. The following paragraphs cover each of these border crossing methods by land between ports of entry.

Border Wall. For migrants crossing by land, the first obstacle is generally the United States' border wall. The vast majority of the California-Mexico border has at least one layer of border fencing, and some areas—such as from San Diego to the Otay Wilderness—have multiple layers. For example, near San Diego, there are two border fences that run parallel to one another and are 18 and 30 feet tall.[4] These two walls are separated by a 100 to 200-yard zone, with the tallest fence closest to the U.S. interior. In the Imperial Valley desert, the wall is a 15-foot steel bollard barrier known as the "floating fence" that stands on sand dunes and shifts with the moving sand.[ix] In other areas—notably where the fence is less than 30 feet—the beams are overlaid with concertina wire. Prior to 2019, the tallest border fence along the California border was 17 feet tall. However, at this time, the Department of Homeland Security replaced much of the existing wall with a 30 foot fencing system.[x]

[3] Two–sometimes three–layers of fencing exist near San Diego.
[4] Throughout certain stretches of San Diego County, there is an additional layer of fencing, totaling three layers.

Figure 5: Border Barriers in California

Region	Layers of Fencing	Height (ft)	Material
San Diego	2 to 3	18 and 30	Steel bollards, anti-climbing plates, concertina wire[5]
Tecate and Campo	1	30	Steel bollards, anti-climbing plates
Jacumba Hot Springs	1	30	Steel bollards, anti-climbing plates, concertina wire
Imperial Valley	1	15	Steel bollards[6]
Calexico	1	30	Steel bollards
Eastern Imperial County to Yuma	1	15 to 20	Steel bollards, concertina wire

Source: Authors' elaboration

Clandestine migrants crossing into these areas must pass over the border barrier or through any existing holes. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were four cases where migrants climbed over a border barrier. Three of these cases occurred between the San Ysidro and Otay Mesa Ports of Entry near San Diego, where the border wall is 30 feet high. The fourth case also occurred in San Diego County but did not list a specific location. Migrants crossing these barriers risk falling from significant heights. In a March 2022 case, smugglers led a group of migrants through an area where there are two border walls. A Mexican woman later recounted that while crossing the first barrier, she felt her grip on the metal begin to slip. When she approached the second barrier—a 30-foot wall—she thought that it would be impossible for her to cross safely and stayed behind. She later discovered that her 14-year-old daughter—who continued on with the group—had fallen off the 30-foot wall and fractured her skull, neck, and back.[xi]

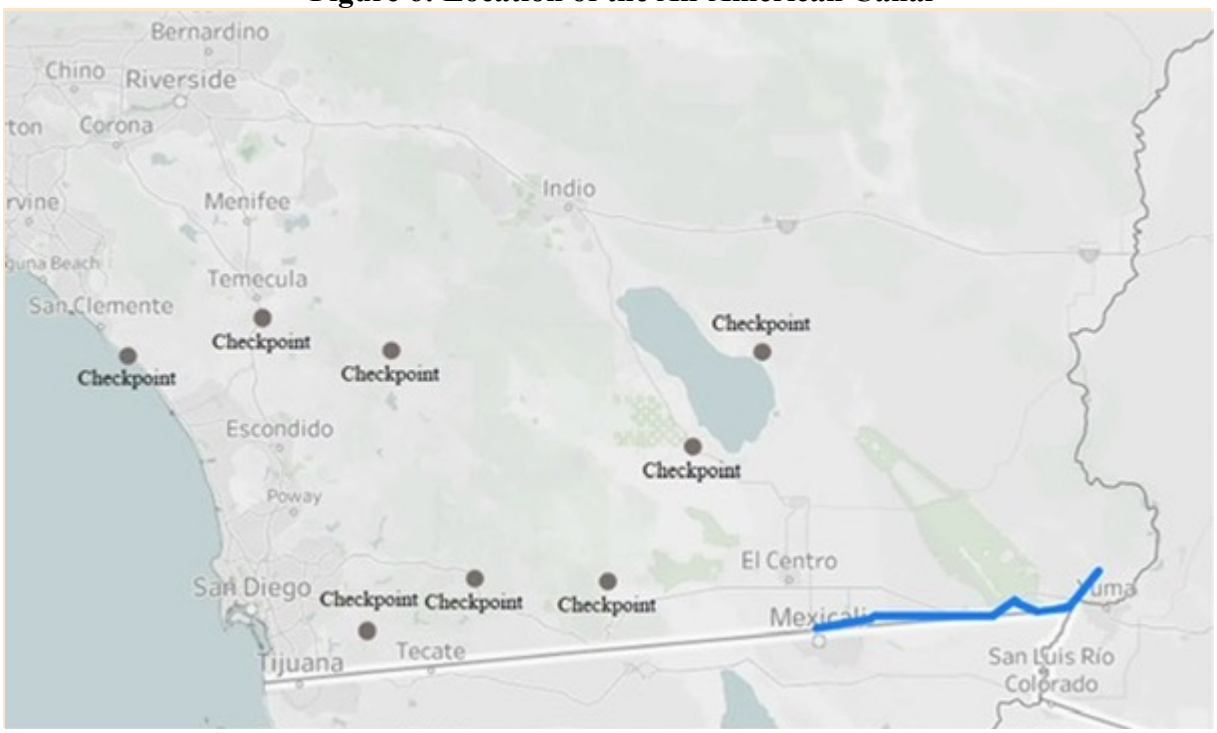
Wilderness Areas. While most of the California-Mexico border has some form of border barrier, there are two stretches without any walls: the Otay Mountain Wilderness area and the Jacumba Mountains Wilderness area. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were five cases where migrants crossed in these areas.[7] In these cases, brush guides led groups of 1 to 14 migrants across the rugged terrain in a journey that can take anywhere from several hours to multiple days. Interviews suggest that these groups hike to locations north of the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints and then get picked up by drivers. In a June 2022 case, ten migrants—including a 17-year-old girl—hiked for more than six miles from the U.S.-Mexico border to the Lower Otay

[5] In some areas, the secondary (southern) fence is topped with concertina wire and/or anti-climbing plates.
[6] The barrier fence in the Imperial Sand Dunes is known as the "floating fence" as it sits on shifting sand.
[7] This number is likely an undercount. It was difficult to determine the starting location of these incidents in the Smuggling Incident dataset. However, based on interviews and migrant death data from the U.S. Border Patrol dataset and the Local Actors dataset, we know that wilderness areas are common crossing locations for migrants.

Lake in the Otay Mountain Wilderness Area. The group's brush guide later admitted to leading at least 25 migrants across the border along the same route.

All-American Canal. Migrants crossing the border on foot in Imperial County may also need to traverse the All-American Canal. The All-American Canal is an 82-mile-long aqueduct with swift currents that carry water from the Imperial Dam in southeastern California to its end point at the Yuma Canal located northeast of Yuma, Arizona. The canal runs nearly parallel to the U.S.-Mexico border and serves as a significant obstacle for migrants—stretching 150 to 200 feet across and measuring 7 to 20 feet deep.[xii] To cross the canal, migrants may swim or use rafts. For example, in a January 2024 case, a group of six migrants successfully floated across the canal on one raft.

Figure 6: Location of the All-American Canal



Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office & Imperial County Coroner

***Tunnels and Sewer Pipes*.** Smugglers also cross migrants underneath the border through tunnels or sewer pipes. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were two cases that involved these underground routes. In San Diego County, California authorities open sewer pipe grates during heavy rains.[xiii] In a January 2024 case, a smuggler guided seven migrants through sewer pipes near the San Ysidro Port of Entry during these conditions. However, when authorities detected the group, the smuggler and migrants subsequently ran into the Tijuana River, where San Diego lifeguards ultimately had to rescue the group. In another case from August 2017, smugglers guided 30 migrants through a tunnel underneath the border near the Otay Mesa Port of Entry in San Diego.

Vehicle Pick-Ups

Once migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border, the next migration phase involves vehicle pick-ups.[8] During this phase, drivers pick up migrants at locations near the border—ranging from parking lots in urban areas, Pacific Ocean beaches, or the side of the road in remote areas—and take them to their next destination. For example, in April 2022, roughly 20 migrants came ashore in affluent Newport Beach in Orange County, north of San Diego. Bystanders reported that the migrants fled the area through tennis courts and into a waiting vehicle.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were ten cases that involved vehicle pick-ups. In these cases, the pick-up drivers connected with migrants through various signals. For example, in a January 2024 case, the driver of a white Toyota Camry flashed his vehicle's headlights as a sign to migrants who had just crossed the border. Further, drivers often gave the migrants specific instructions. In August 2024, a Mexican migrant testified that his pick-up driver instructed the group to lay down in the truck bed and then covered them with a white tarp.

Overall, the pick-up vehicles ranged in size, make, model, and color. The Smuggling Incident dataset's cases involved five sedans, three SUVs, one minivan, and one truck. In general, the type of vehicle influenced the number of migrants that could ride inside. In the dataset's cases, the pick-up vehicles transported anywhere from 2 to 14 migrants, depending on the type of vehicle. At times, these migrants were all sitting in seats and, at other times, there were more migrants in the vehicle than available seats. For example, in a March 2019 case, Border Patrol agents discovered seven migrants lying on top of each other inside of a Dodge minivan.

Stash Houses Near the Border

The pick-up vehicles may transport migrants to a third migration phase: stash houses near the border. These stash houses hold migrants after they cross the U.S.-Mexico border and serve as consolidation points before migrants attempt to pass the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints to reach a final stash house.[9] In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were ten cases that involved stash houses near the border, with six stash houses in San Diego County and three stash houses in Imperial County.

The stash houses took various forms. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were cases where stash houses were apartments in multi-family complexes, residential houses, and ranches. For example, in a December 2014 case, a landowner held migrants on her 76-acre ranch in San Diego County. Interviews suggest that stash houses are usually private properties, such as a rented or privately-owned home, and that smugglers use motels and hotels for shorter periods of time.[xiv] In the Smuggling Incident dataset, these stash houses held anywhere between 2 to 45 migrants, with migrants remaining in the locations for anywhere form a few hours to several days, and potentially

[8] Smugglers may also drive migrants into the United States. The dataset included a case from September 2017 where two drivers cut through the border fence near Calexico and drove SUVs into U.S. territory, with a combined 43 migrants inside the two vehicles.

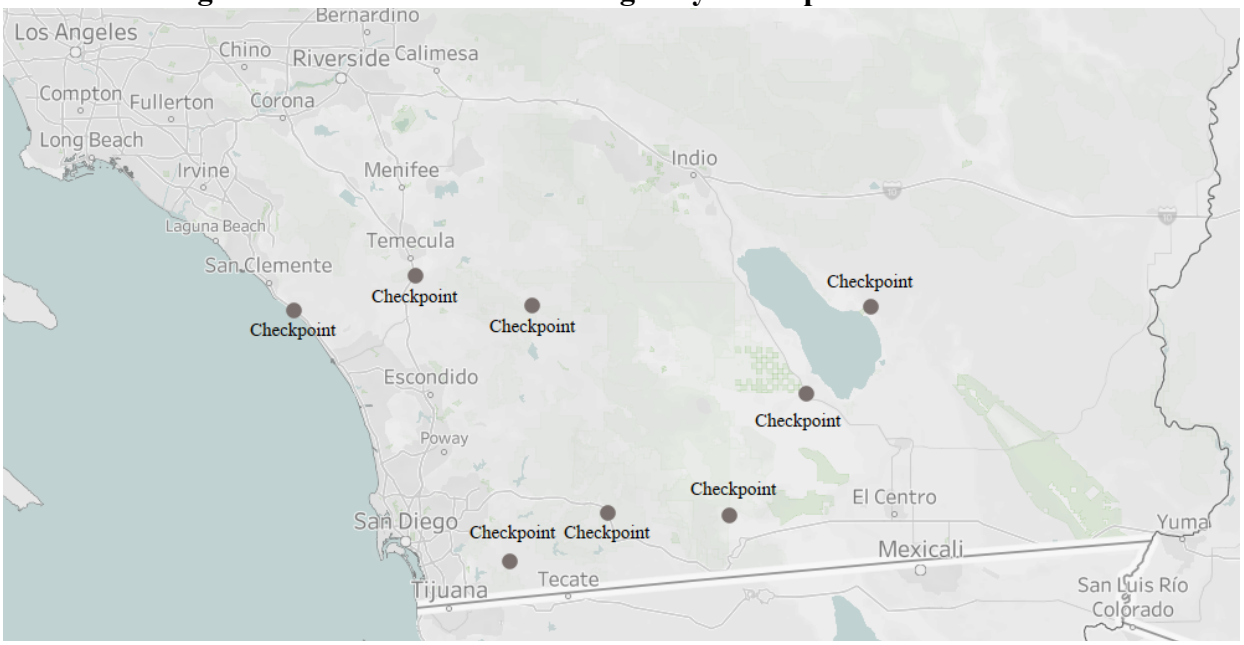
[9] Some migrants may only go to one stash house. For example, there may be a small number of Mexican migrants whose final destination is San Diego. These migrants make their final smuggling payments in San Diego and avoid going to a second stash house.

being shuffled between stash houses.[10] These stash houses may be dirty or so crowded that migrants have to sleep in shifts.[xv]

Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention

Across California, the Border Patrol operates eight highway checkpoints. These checkpoints are located at varying distances from the U.S.-Mexico border. For example, the two largest and northernmost checkpoints are the San Clemente and Temecula checkpoints, which are about 90 miles north of the border. Meanwhile, the Jamul checkpoint—between Tecate and San Diego—is only about 7 miles from the border. Border Patrol agents at these checkpoints inspect all vehicles transiting toward San Diego and Los Angeles and attempt to establish the passengers' U.S. citizenship or another form of legal residency. Migrants traveling north to California's interior cities must circumvent or pass through these checkpoints.

Figure 7: The Border Patrol's Highway Checkpoints in California



Source: Authors' elaboration

In recent years, the Border Patrol has frequently shut down its highway checkpoints in California. During periods with high numbers of arriving asylum seekers, the Border Patrol has closed its highway checkpoints and sent agents to the border to increase overall processing capacity.[xvi] In response, smugglers have attempted to take advantage of these checkpoint closures, and may send an initial scout car or drone to assess whether a Border Patrol checkpoint is open or closed. However, in recent months, as the number of asylum seekers arriving at the border has decreased, the Border Patrol has moved agents back to the highway checkpoints. For example, in January 2025, the Border Patrol reopened the San Clemente checkpoint between San Diego and Los Angeles after it was closed for several years.[xvii]

[10] Inside stash houses, smugglers also organize migrants into groups according to their final destination.

Notably, not all clandestine migration routes in California have Border Patrol checkpoints. For example, migrants who cross the border by land near the Pacific Ocean and then travel north to San Diego do not encounter any highway checkpoints during that portion of their journey. Migrants who cross in Imperial County near Calexico may also travel north toward the city of Blythe, where they can pivot back toward Los Angeles and avoid any highway checkpoints.

The Smuggling Incident dataset includes ten cases of migrants attempting to pass through or circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. The following subsections look at clandestine migrants' primary methods of bypassing checkpoints. These methods include walking on foot around the checkpoints and concealing migrants in private vehicles and tractor-trailers.

Circumventing Checkpoints on Foot

To reach a point beyond the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, some migrants walk around them. As previously mentioned, some migrants walk from the border to a location north of the nearest checkpoint. This is often the case with the Border Patrol's Jamul checkpoint on Highway 94 and Boulevard checkpoint on I-8 West, which are located roughly 7 miles and 14 miles from the border, respectively. The Smuggling Incident dataset included six cases that appeared to include migrants hiking at least 10 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border to points beyond these checkpoints.

For checkpoints that are farther into California's interior, some smugglers may drop migrants off prior to the checkpoint and have them hike north. This may be the case for the I-8 West checkpoints in Pine Valley, which are 60 miles north of the border. However, the Smuggling Incident dataset did not include any cases where migrants were circumventing these checkpoints –or any other checkpoints far into the state's interior—on foot.

Passing Through Checkpoints in Vehicles

Smugglers transport migrants through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in private vehicles. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were three cases that involved private vehicles attempting to pass directly through a checkpoint. To conceal the migrants, the drivers placed them inside car trunks or in other hidden spaces. For example, in a March 2014 case, Border Patrol agents at a checkpoint near Indio, California discovered three migrants—including a minor—inside a wooden box under an RV. For this transportation method, there was no specific vehicle type, with the dataset's cases including a sedan, a Jeep Wrangler, and the aforementioned RV. Within these vehicles, smugglers attempted to transport between one and three migrants.

Smugglers may also clone larger commercial or even law enforcement vehicles to transport migrants through highway checkpoints. To clone these vehicles, smugglers bring the cars, trucks, and vans across from Mexico, and then paint them and add false decals once they are in U.S. territory.[xviii] For example, smugglers may disguise a vehicle as a UPS or FedEx truck, and then attempt to transport between 15 and 30 migrants through a checkpoint.[xix] Additionally, smugglers have also attempted to clone the construction vehicles that bring workers to repair the border fence. This allows smugglers to avoid detection while driving up to the border barrier to pick up migrants.

Passing Through Checkpoints in Tractor-Trailers

Smugglers also transport migrants through checkpoints in tractor-trailers. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there was one case that involved migrants using this mode of transportation. In this case, Border Patrol agents at the I-8 West checkpoint near Manzanita, California discovered 12 migrants who were hidden among tightly packed hay bales in the back of the tractor-trailer. However, interviews with federal and local law enforcement indicated that smugglers do not commonly use tractor trailers to transport migrants through checkpoints.

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

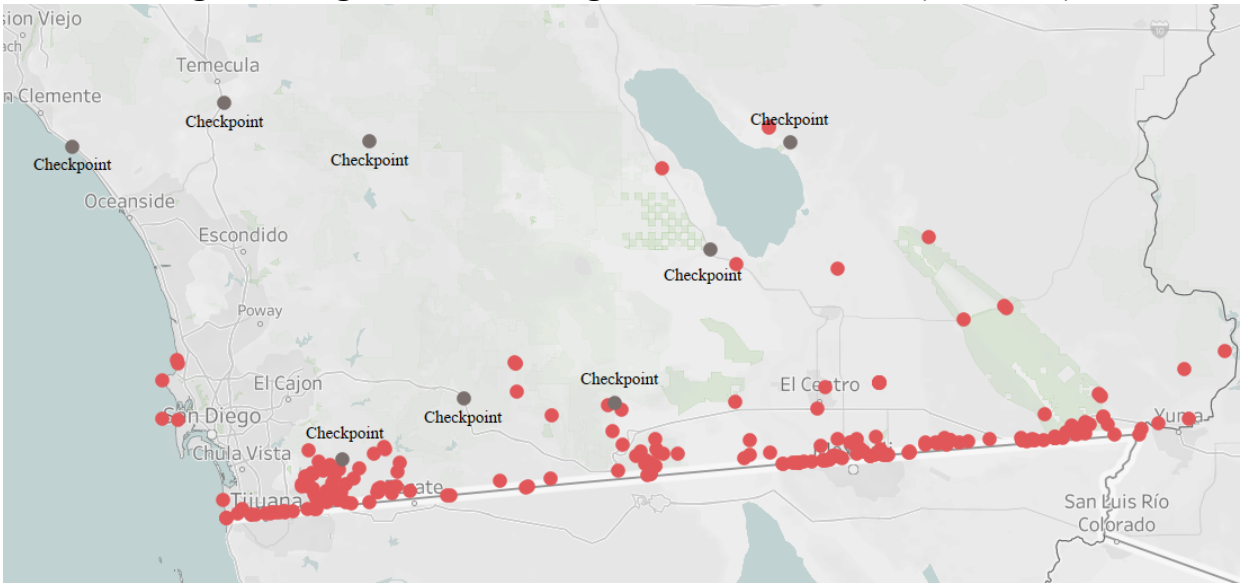
After circumventing the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, drivers take migrants to the final clandestine migration stage in California: stash houses in interior cities. According to interviews with local and federal law enforcement, Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Valley were the most common locations for these stash houses. Migrants arrive at these locations after traveling by boat or being transported north over land. Once inside the stash houses, smugglers hold migrants until their family or friends pay the remainder of their smuggling fees. After the fees are paid, the smugglers release the migrants into the city or organize their transit to a final destination.

These interior stash houses are often overcrowded, unsanitary, and unsafe. According to interviews with local law enforcement, the stash houses are often single-family residences and may have unpermitted construction and gas lines added to the house. There may be four to five migrants per room and buckets set out for migrants to use as toilets. In certain cases, stash house caretakers also put gas stovetops in the rooms for migrants to cook for themselves, which increases the risk of fire.

Chapter 2: Migrant Risk and Mortality in California

Clandestine migrants face a wide range of risks when attempting to enter the United States through California. These risks are influenced by migrants' migration routes, authorities' enforcement efforts, and smuggling conditions. Specifically, migrants traveling by sea risk drowning in the Pacific Ocean, while migrants traveling by land risk falling from the border wall, suffering from dehydration and extreme temperatures in remote wilderness areas, drowning or All American Canal, suffocating in car trunks or tractor-trailer cargo areas, and being in a car accident.

Figure 8: Migrant Deaths Along the California Border (2014-2024)



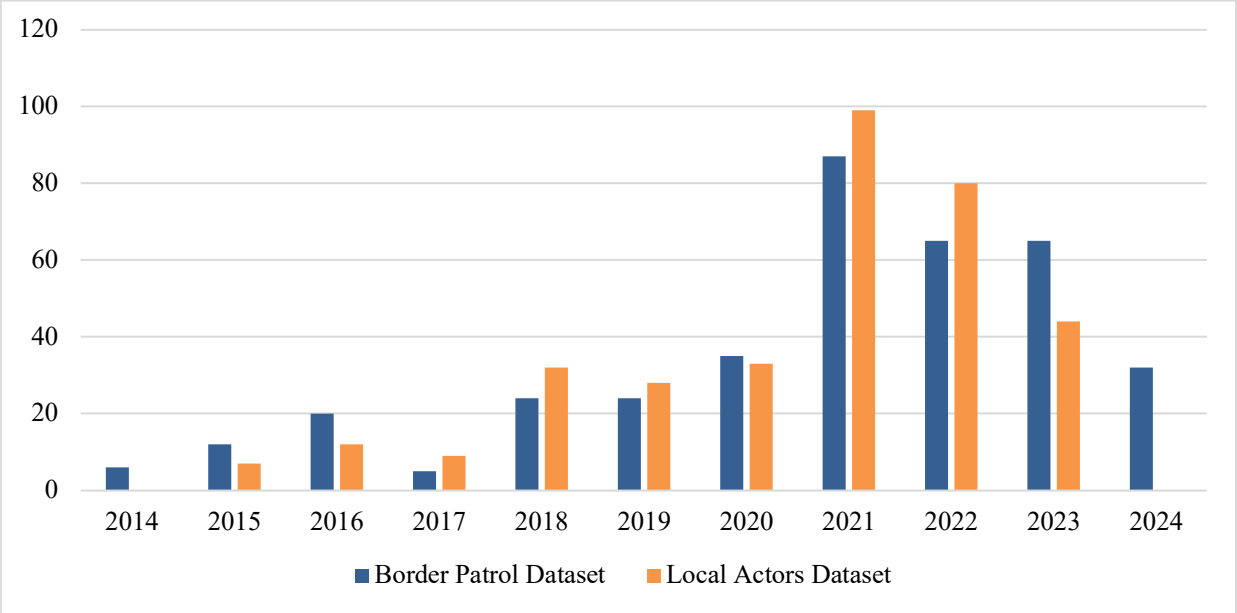
Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office & Imperial County Coroner

This chapter addresses the report's second research question and outlines the risks for migrants crossing through California. Overall, from 2014 to 2024, the Local Actors dataset and the Border Patrol dataset counted between 344 and 375 migrant deaths in California.[11] From 2014 to 2021, both datasets show a general upward trend in deaths throughout the state, with a peak in 2021. In recent years, the datasets also record a decreasing number of migrants dying in the state. For migrants, the most significant risks were environmental exposure—constituting 32 percent of deaths in the Local Actors dataset and 52 percent of deaths in the Border Patrol dataset—and drowning in the Pacific Ocean and All-American Canal (which accounted for 33 percent and 27 percent in the two datasets, respectively).[12]

[11] The Local Actors dataset includes migrant death data from the San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office and the Imperial County Coroner. In the Border Patrol's dataset, there are 325 migrant death cases that can be definitively linked to California. There are another 50 cases in the Yuma Sector that could not be definitively linked to either Arizona or California, since the sector covers both states.

[12] The Border Patrol dataset included 52 percent of migrant deaths from environmental exposure (calculated by combining environmental exposure deaths with undetermined deaths) and the Local Actors dataset included 32 percent of environmental exposure deaths (calculated by combining environmental exposure deaths with undetermined deaths).

Figure 9: Migrant Deaths in the Border Patrol and Local Actors Datasets (2014-2024)



Source: Border Patrol and Local Actors datasets

The following sections document the risks for migrants during each migration phase. This includes the risks while crossing the border, after vehicles pick up migrants near the border, during their time at border stash houses, while circumventing or passing through checkpoints, and during their time at stash houses in interior cities. In order to conduct this analysis, we used the Border Patrol and Local Actors datasets. For risks that did not result in death, we used the Smuggling Incident and Migrant Testimony datasets to highlight the full scope of risks that migrants face during their journeys. Each of this chapter's sections covers the risks for a specific migration phase, and, if relevant, the resulting deaths and deceased individuals' demographics.

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 or being exposed to extreme temperatures. Similarly, between ports of entry, migrants also face various risks that correspond to their specific crossing methods and routes. For migrants crossing the border by sea, this involves drowning in the Pacific Ocean. While for migrants crossing by land, this includes falling from the border wall, suffering from extreme temperatures and dehydration in remote wilderness areas, or drowning in the All-American Canal, among other dangers. The following subsections detail the various risks that migrants face as they cross the U.S.-Mexico border.

At Ports of Entry

Clandestine migrants attempting to cross the border at a port of entry face varying risks depending on their means of transportation. When migrants present themselves as having the appropriate status or documentation to enter the United States, or are part of a CBP corruption scheme, they generally have the same experience as any person traveling through the port of entry. However, migrants may also attempt to pass through a port of entry while concealed in small spaces, such as in a car trunk or a make-shift compartment. When smugglers transport migrants in these spaces, they risk suffocation, exposure to extreme heat, and physical discomfort from being contorted in cramped conditions. These risks are exacerbated if the migrant has to spend long periods in the concealed space, such as when there are lengthy wait times at ports of entry.

There were no deaths in the Border Patrol or Local Actors datasets that could be clearly linked to ports of entry. However, in the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 12 cases where clandestine migrants attempted to enter the United States through a port of entry. Six of these cases involved migrants concealed in small vehicle spaces, with migrants reporting that they faced physical discomfort and difficulty breathing. For example, in a July 2024 case, smugglers placed a male migrant inside a hidden compartment under the third-row seat.[13] As the vehicle waited in line at the port of entry, the man started to overheat and found it hard to breathe. This migrant ultimately survived. However, in an August 2014 case at the San Ysidro Port of Entry, CBP officers discovered two unresponsive Mexican men inside a Dodge Challenger trunk. Both men ultimately died from heat exposure and suffocation.

Between Ports of Entry

Crossing the Border by Sea. For migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border by sea, the primary risk is drowning. Migrants frequently drown in the Pacific Ocean when their boats flip over or sink.[14] For example, in November 2017, a boat carrying 20 migrants capsized after colliding with a Border Patrol vessel. In this case, one woman drowned and four migrants were hospitalized. Similarly, in November 2022, a large wave capsized a small fishing boat carrying eight migrants, with three people drowning as the passengers struggled to swim ashore.

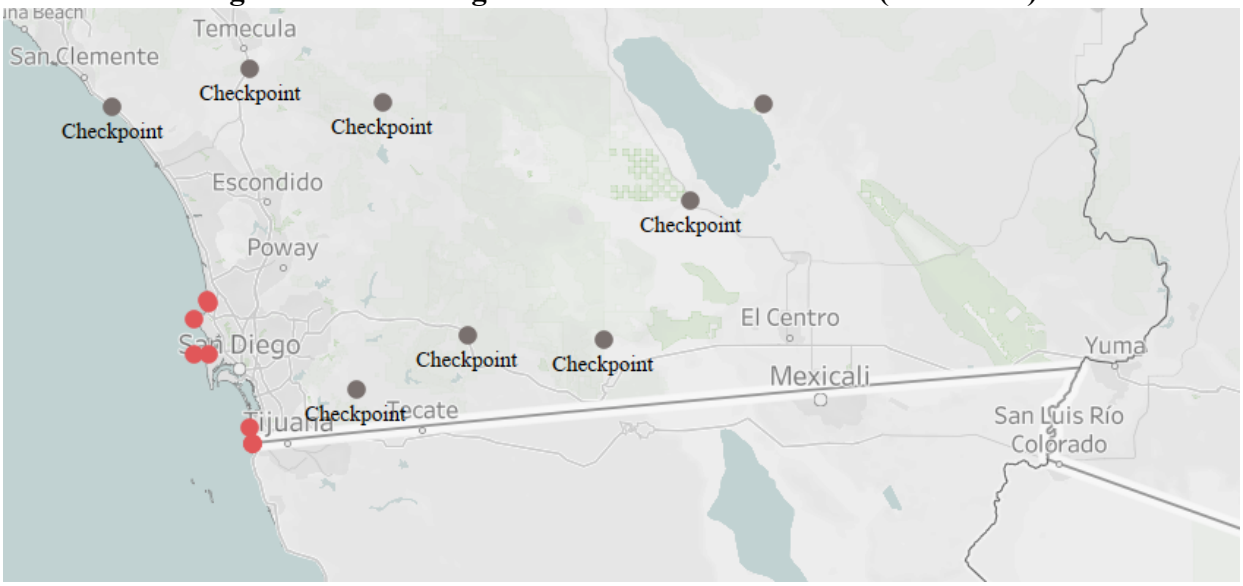
According to the San Diego County Medical Examiner Office's dataset, between 2015 and 2023, 23 migrants drowned in the Pacific Ocean after being transported on boats or another form of watercraft. The data reveals one recorded drowning death in 2019, and then a steady increase each subsequent year to reach nine drowning deaths in 2023. However, this dataset only includes drowning deaths in San Diego County. Migrant smuggling boats also travel to Los Angeles and drop off migrants in other California counties—such as Orange, Ventura, and Los Angeles—which makes it possible that these numbers undercount total migrant drowning deaths.[xx]

Migrants also drown while attempting to swim around the border barrier that extends 300 feet into the Pacific Ocean. As the ocean waves hit the border barrier, they create rip currents and generate dangerous swimming conditions. In the San Diego County Medical Examiner Office's dataset, there were four deaths that occurred in the Pacific Ocean near the border wall. However,

[13] Smugglers may deconstruct parts of a vehicle and add non-factory compartments to conceal migrants.
[14] In a May 2021 incident, the boat stalled in the middle of the ocean because it was overloaded.

this is also likely an undercount, as bodies that wash up on Mexico's beaches are not counted in the Local Actors dataset. For example, this dataset did not include the previously mentioned April 2021 case of the Cuban migrant who drowned while attempting to swim around the border wall.

Figure 10: Drowning Deaths in the Pacific Ocean (2015-2023)



Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office & Imperial County Coroner

Overall, there was not one single demographic profile of a migrant who drowned in the Pacific Ocean. In the San Diego County Medical Examiner Office's dataset, almost all of the deceased migrants had listed demographic information.[15] For the individuals with information about the individual's sex, 66 percent were men and 33 percent were female. The dataset did not list the decedents' nationalities but noted the race/ethnicity, with 96 percent of these individuals being listed as Hispanic or Mexican. Finally, the descendants' median age was 41 years old, but the ages ranged from 17 years old to 62 years old.

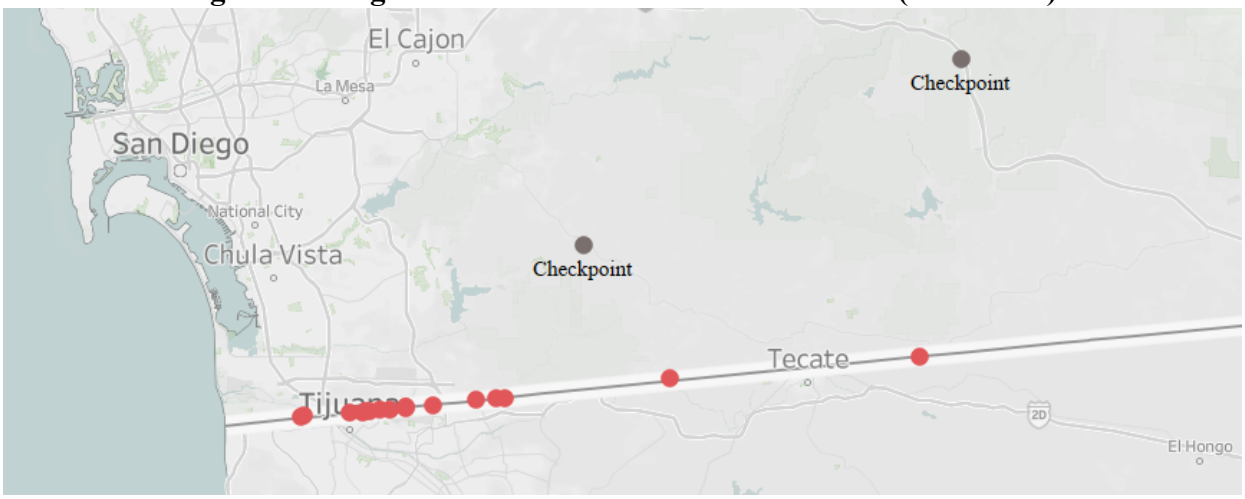
Crossing the Border by Land: Border Barriers. Clandestine migrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border by land also face a range of risks. The first risk involves the border barriers that stretch up to 30 feet tall. Migrants that climb over the border barriers risk falling or having their ladder tip over and sustaining severe or even life-threatening injuries. In 2019, San Diego's two trauma centers collectively recorded 80 border wall related injuries. However, in 2023—after the U.S. Department of Homeland Security increased the wall height from 18 to 30 feet—the two centers recorded 629 border wall related injuries.[16xxi]

Between 2015 and 2023, the Local Actors dataset recorded 29 deaths that involved an individual who fell from the border wall.[17] These deaths first appeared in 2020, and then jumped upwards over the following years. In the Local Actors dataset, 13 deaths out of the total 29 deaths had geo-coordinates. These deaths were concentrated along a 12-mile stretch of land between San Ysidro

[15] There was sex and race/ethnicity information for 26 individuals, and a listed age for 25 individuals.
[16] As of October 2024, this number increased to 993. These numbers excluded children and migrants whose perceived injuries were less severe.
[17] The official cause of death in all but one of these cases was blunt force trauma.

and Escondido, Tijuana. Along this particular stretch of the border, there are two steel bollard fenced walls that run parallel to one another. The fence closest to the U.S. interior is 30 feet tall, while the southern fence ranges in height, but generally stands at 18 feet tall.

Figure 11: Migrant Deaths Near the Border Barrier (2015-2023)



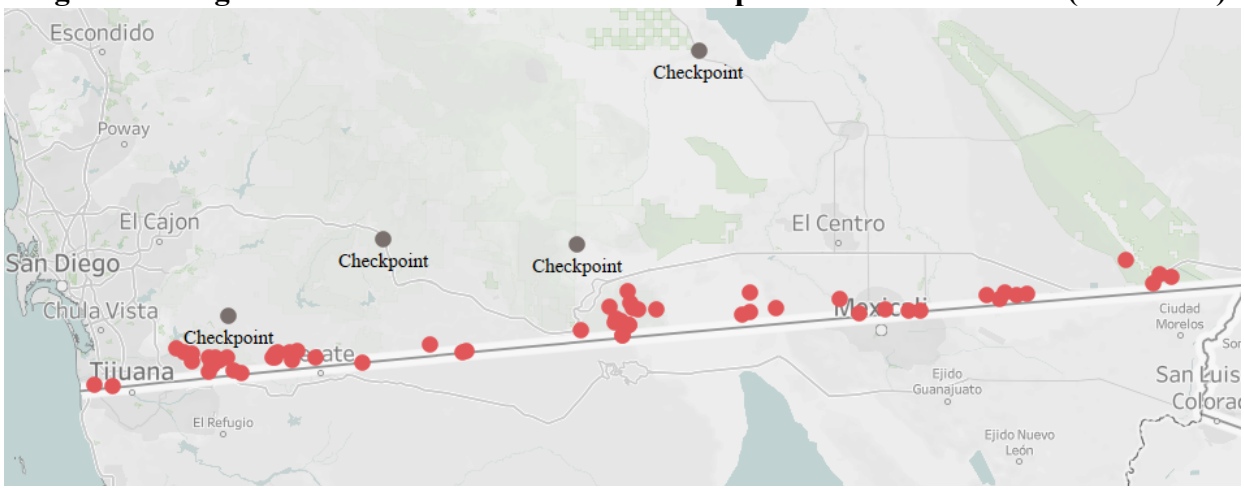
Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office and the Imperial County Coroner

Overall, there was not one single demographic profile of a migrant who died after falling from the border wall. All of the Local Actors dataset cases included some type of demographic information about the individual. For the cases that included the migrants' sex, 83 percent were men and the remaining 17 percent were women. The dataset did not list the decedents' nationalities but noted the race/ethnicity, with all the decedents' labeled as Hispanic. The median age for the migrants was 39 years old, but the ages ranged from a newborn—who was born prematurely when his mother fell from the border wall and then subsequently died—to a 62-year-old man.

Crossing the Border by Land: Walking Through Wilderness Areas. Migrants also cross into the United States on foot and hike to pick-up locations. These migrants cross along the entirety of the California-Mexico border, but are concentrated in four main hotspots. These include the Otay Mountain Wilderness area, the Jacumba Mountains Wilderness area, the Imperial Valley desert, and the easternmost part of the border near Yuma, Arizona. Some migrants walk for short distances to roads near the border and others may walk for days. These migrants risk environmental exposure—such as heat or cold exposure—and dehydration.[18] These risks are heightened by the area's extreme weather, with high temperatures in the summer months and freezing cold temperatures in the winter.

[18] Migrants may also cross the Tijuana River, which is located near the San Ysidro port of entry. While the San Diego Medical Examiner's dataset does not report any deaths at the Tijuana River between 2015 and 2023, there are risks associated with any body of water. According to the Migrant Testimony dataset, in January 2024, two male migrants said that they feared for their lives when crossing the Tijuana River because they did not know how to swim.

Figure 12: Migrant Deaths From Environmental Exposure Near the Border (2015-2023)



Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office and the Imperial County Coroner

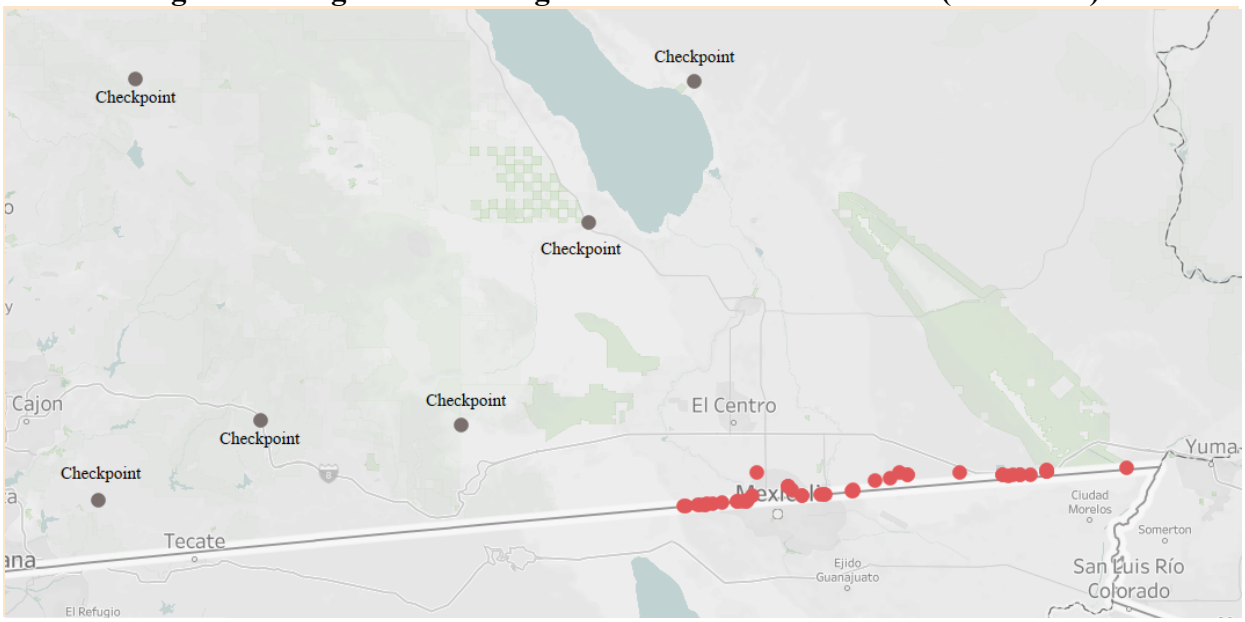
From 2014 to 2024, the Local Actor's dataset included 112 migrant deaths from exposure to the elements that occurred within 10 miles from the border. The Smuggling Incident dataset provides details regarding these types of cases. For example, in a February 2020 case, brush guides led three sisters from Mexico through a mountainous area near Tecate. It began to snow as the group walked through the terrain, and a brush guide later reported that one woman turned white from the cold and stopped breathing. By the time Border Patrol agents found the group, two of the women were dead and the third woman was pronounced dead shortly thereafter. In another October 2022 case, Border Patrol agents responded to a distress call from a group of migrants walking near the Imperial Sand Dunes. When agents arrived, a man was suffering extreme heat exposure and was already unconscious.

There was no single demographic profile of a migrant who died from exposure to the elements in California's borderlands. In the Local Actors datasets, 102 out of 112 cases had information about the deceased migrants' sex. Of these cases, 79 percent were male and the remaining 21 percent were female. Of the cases with a listed race and ethnicity, nearly all the deceased migrants were listed as Hispanic or Hispanic Mexican, and just three individuals were listed as white. The median age of the deceased migrants was 33 years old, but the migrants' ages ranged from 15 years old to 64 years old.

Crossing the Border by Land: The All-American Canal. For migrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border in Imperial County, there is also the risk of drowning in the All-American Canal, which runs parallel to the border for 80 miles. To reach the U.S. interior, migrants use rafts or attempt to swim across the canal. However, they face swift currents, along with deep, cold water, and steep, slippery embankments that make it difficult to climb out. According to the Imperial County Coroner, between 2015 and 2023, there were 84 cases of migrants who drowned in the All-American Canal. However, other news reports suggest even higher numbers. For example, the *Calexico Chronicle* reported 21 deaths related to the All American Canal in 2021, compared to the Imperial County Coroner's 16 recorded deaths for the same year.[xxii]

In the Local Actors dataset, the recovered remains' locations show that migrants drowned along the entire length of the All-American Canal. However, there were several areas with particularly high numbers of recovered remains. This includes the zone to the west of Calexico and certain stretches between Calexico and Yuma, Arizona. Along these locations, some roads run right next to the canal. This likely makes these crossing spots more attractive since vehicles can quickly pick up migrants after they cross the canal.

Figure 13: Migrant Drownings in the All-American Canal (2015-2024)



Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office & Imperial County Coroner

There was no single demographic profile for a migrant who drowned in the All-American Canal. In the Imperial County Coroner dataset, there was some demographic information for all of the cases. For the cases with a listed gender, 96 percent of the victims were male and 4 percent were female. There was no information available on the ethnicity of the deceased migrants. The median age for the deceased migrants was 30 years old, but the age ranged from 17 years old to 55 years old.

Crossing the Border by Land: Tunnels and Sewer Pipes. Migrants also cross underneath the border through tunnels and sewer pipes. These migrants risk drowning and suffocation as they traverse the underground spaces. There were no deaths in the Border Patrol or Local Actors datasets that could be clearly linked to this form of crossing. However, the small spaces are inherently risky. For example, in August 2017, 30 migrants crawled through a narrow tunnel underneath the border barrier near the Otay Mesa Port of Entry. These migrants wriggled through approximately 328 feet of crawl space to reach the United States. Further, when U.S. authorities detected their movement, the migrants tried to crawl back to Mexico.

Vehicle Pick-Ups

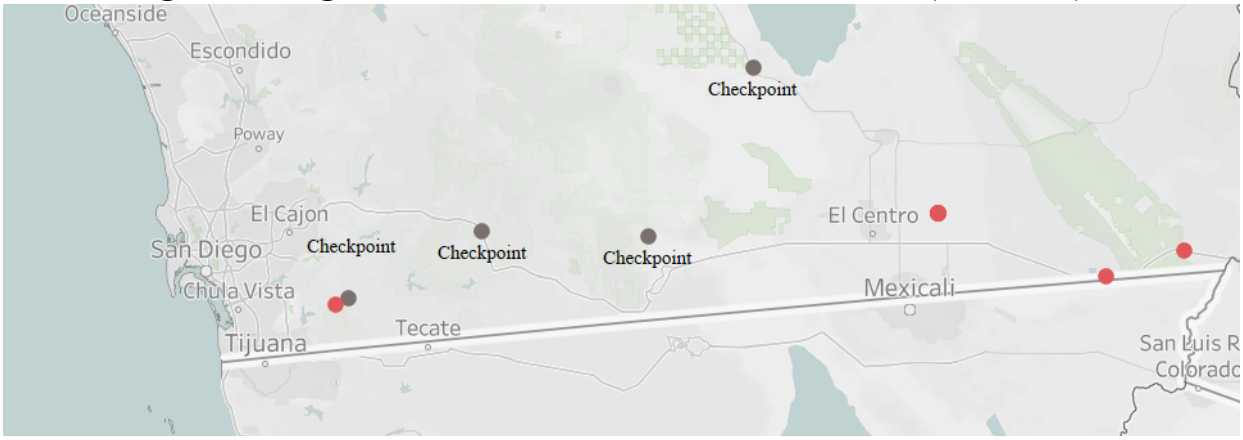
Once migrants cross the border between ports of entry and reach their vehicle pick-up locations, they face a different set of risks. During the vehicle pick-up phase, car accidents are the most

significant danger. This risk may be exacerbated by unsafe travel conditions—such as overcrowding inside the vehicles—or vehicle pursuits with law enforcement. Additionally, migrants may also face risks if drivers ask them to enter small spaces where it may be difficult to breathe. They may even receive burns if they jump onto exposed metal, such as a truck bed that has been sitting out in California's hot summer sun.[19]

To analyze migrant fatalities for this particular phase, we had to classify whether vehicle accident fatalities should be included as part of the "vehicle pick-up" phase or the "circumvention of checkpoints by private vehicle" phase. This was challenging because the Local Actors dataset lacks in-depth information about the vehicles' starting points or final destinations. In order to make these determinations, we relied on the vehicle accident location. In this section, we only included cases that were within ten miles of the border.

Using this methodology, from 2015 to 2023, the Local Actors dataset documents 20 migrants who died from car accidents near the border. These cases occurred along the entire stretch of the California-Mexico border.

Figure 14: Migrant Deaths from Motor Vehicle Accidents (2015-2023)[20]



Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office & Imperial County Coroner

There was no single demographic for migrants who died in a motor vehicle accident after being picked up from the border. The Local Actors dataset included demographics information for all 20 deaths. For these deceased individuals, 60 percent were women and 40 percent were men. There was no information available on the ethnicity of the deceased migrants, but the ages ranged from 19 years old to 53 years old.

Stash Houses Near the Border

The pick-up drivers may bring migrants to stash houses near the border. These stash houses serve as either consolidation points before migrants attempt to pass through or around the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. While the Local Actors dataset does not contain fatalities that can

[19] In a testimony from August 2024, one migrant sustained burns to the arm due to exposure of the metal of the truck.
[20] This map shows only four locations for migrant deaths. However, twelve migrants died in one March 2021 crash, and other cases lacked geo-coordinates.

be linked to this smuggling phase, the Smuggling Incident dataset and interviews highlighted some of the risks that migrants face in these stash houses.

The primary risks for migrants in border stash houses include illness and limited food, water, and essential supplies. These conditions are often worsened by overcrowding and unsanitary conditions inside the stash houses. For example, in a November 2016 case, police discovered a stash house with 45 migrants in San Diego County. These migrants were trapped in a shed with no access to bathrooms or ventilation.

Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention

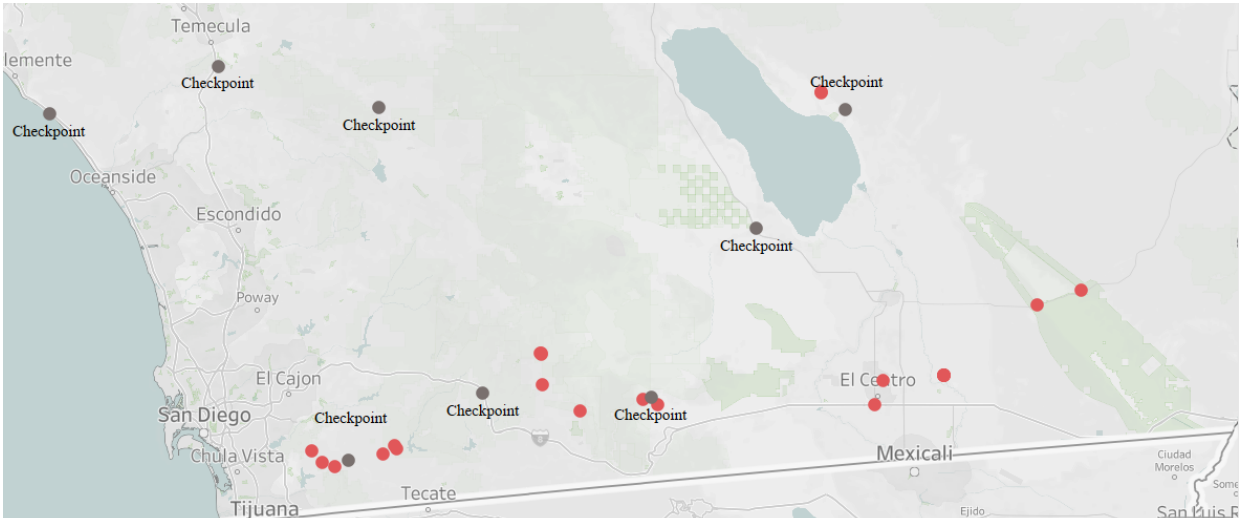
Migrants attempting to reach certain cities, such as San Diego or Los Angeles may pass through or circumvent one of the Border Patrol's eight highway checkpoints in California. To do so, smugglers transport migrants through or around the checkpoints using various modes of transportation, which each entail specific risks. In particular, migrants who circumvent the highway checkpoints on foot risk exposure to the elements and dehydration in the state's rugged terrain. While migrants who are concealed in vehicle trunks or tractor-trailers' cargo areas are at risk of suffocation and extreme temperatures. The following subsections analyze the risks that migrants face while attempting to pass through or circumvent these checkpoints.

Hiking Around Checkpoints

Migrants may attempt to avoid Border Patrol checkpoints by hiking around them on foot. The primary risk for these migrants is exposure to the elements and dehydration in the mountainous terrain and desert. As previously mentioned, some migrants walk directly from the border to points north of nearby Border Patrol's checkpoints (such as the checkpoints near Jamul and Boulevard). Smugglers may also drop groups of migrants off before a checkpoint—particularly near checkpoints that are further into California's interior—and a guide then leads the group through the terrain.

This section focuses on migrant deaths that are more than ten miles from the border. Using this metric, the Local Actors dataset included ten migrant deaths from exposure to the elements for the checkpoint circumvention phase. In the dataset, the number of these migrant deaths peaked in 2020 with four cases, and declined in subsequent years. This matches interviews with a local fire department that reported a recent drop in the number of migrants hiking around checkpoints.[xxiii]

Figure 15: Migrant Deaths From Environmental Exposure Near the Border Patrol's Highway Checkpoints (2015-2023)[21]



Source: San Diego County Medical Examiner's Office and the Imperial County Coroner

Crossing Highway Checkpoints in Vehicles and Tractor-Trailers

Migrants passing through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in private vehicles and tractor-trailers also face various risks. These risks are related to the migrants' method of transportation, and include car crashes, suffocation in car trunks and cargo areas, and extreme temperatures in concealed spaces. In the Local Actors dataset, there were no cases of migrant fatalities for these modes of transportation. However, the Smuggling Incident dataset illustrates the various risks for migrants. For example, in a March 2014 case, Border Patrol agents at the Highway 111 checkpoint near Indio discovered three men inside a wooden box under an RV. These men were all at risk of suffocation in the enclosed space. Similarly, in June 2020, Border Patrol agents at the I-8 West checkpoint near Pine Valley discovered 12 migrants among hay bales in the back of a tractor-trailer. As a responding Border Patrol agent noted at the time, "[the] tight space within the haystacks was not ventilated"[xxiv]

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

After circumventing the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, drivers take migrants to stash houses in Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Valley. Smugglers hold migrants in these stash houses until their loved ones pay the remainder of their smuggling fees. Once the fees are paid, the smugglers release the migrants into the city or organize their transit to their final destinations. Notably, neither the Local Actors dataset nor the Smuggling Incident dataset had any cases that could be linked to this migration activity. However, interviews with local law enforcement provided insights into the risks for migrants.

In interior stash houses, migrants face a range of risks. These stash houses may be overcrowded and have unsafe conditions. For example, stash house caretakers may provide migrants with hot plates that they can use to cook their own food, which can cause fires. A former law enforcement

[21] This map illustrates the deaths that occurred more than 10 miles from the border.

officer reported that he responded to an incident in the San Gabriel Valley where a gas hot plate caused a fire inside a bedroom at a stash house.

Chapter 3: Migrant Smugglers in California

During each clandestine migration stage, various people transport or guide migrants through the California borderlands.[22] Law enforcement and government actors often refer to these individuals as "human smugglers" or "migrant smugglers." While migrants may call them "coyotes" or "guides." These individuals engage in a wide range of activities, including leading migrants on foot, transporting them in boats, private vehicles, and tractor trailers, maintaining stash houses, and coordinating the entire clandestine migration journey, among other roles. During each migration activity, these smugglers may work alone or operate as a team. Yet, a coordinator generally oversees the entire migration process and collects and administers payments.

This chapter addresses the third research question related to migrant smugglers' demographic profiles and motivations in California. To answer this question, we rely on the Smuggling Incident dataset, which includes 93 people who were arrested for engaging in migrant smuggling activities in the state from 2014 to 2024. While there is no typical smuggler profile in the dataset, the most common demographic was a male U.S. citizen or a male Mexican citizen. Overall, we find that the arrested smugglers include both men and women, come from diverse nationalities and age groups, and typically become involved for financial gain. Notably, smugglers' demographic profiles also appear to shift depending on the specific smuggling activity.

The following sections provide an overview of the individuals involved in facilitating clandestine migration in California. The first section offers a high-level examination of arrested individuals' demographics and motivations. The subsequent sections then turn to the five clandestine migration phases. For each phase, the chapter analyzes the arrested individuals' migrant smuggling roles, demographics, and motivations.

Clandestine Migrant Smugglers

From 2014 to 2024, the Smuggling Incident dataset includes 93 individuals who were arrested for smuggling migrants in California from 2014 to 2024. The most common profile among the arrested individuals was a U.S. citizen man or Mexican citizen man. However, these individuals spanned a wide range of demographic profiles. They include the more stereotypical smuggler demographics, such as a 20-year-old Mexican man who guided migrants through sewer pipes across the border. Yet, they also include less conventional smuggling profiles, such as a 54-year-old U.S.-citizen woman who hid a migrant in her vehicle trunk.

Overall, for the cases with information about the gender, 85 percent were men and 15 percent were women. Citizenship was fairly evenly split between U.S. citizens (47 percent) and Mexican citizens (49 percent). The arrested individuals had a median age of 33 years old but their ages ranged from minors to the 54-year-old woman.

Notably, smugglers' demographic profiles shifted across the migration phases. For example, Mexican men were often the most common demographic for roles that began in Mexico and avoided interaction with U.S. authorities, such as guiding migrants across the border on boats or

[22] Law enforcement generally refers to these individuals as "human smugglers" or "migrant smugglers," while migrants may call them "coyotes" or "guides."

on foot. By contrast, U.S. citizen men were the most likely profile for roles that interfaced with CBP officers or Border Patrol agents. Specifically, U.S. citizen men were the most common profile to act as drivers in California, including when taking migrants through ports of entry, vehicle pick-ups, and transporting migrants through Border Patrol checkpoints.

Figure 16: Smuggler Demographics by Clandestine Migration Phase

Migration Phase	Location Specifics	Most Common Demographic Profile	Median Age
1. Border crossing	Port of entry	U.S. citizen male	31
	Between ports of entry: by sea	Mexican citizen male	34
	Between ports of entry: by land	Mexican citizen male	33
2. Vehicle pick-up at border	---	U.S. citizen male	30[23]
3. Stash house (near border)	---	U.S. citizen male	49
4. Checkpoint concealment or circumvention	Private vehicle	U.S. citizen male	38
	Tractor-trailer	U.S. citizen male	46

Source: Authors' elaboration

In the United States, coordinators recruited these individuals through a range of methods. First, coordinators and other smugglers often sought to recruit people into migrant smuggling activities through internet platforms and applications, such as TikTok, Craigslist, bilingual job boards, and Snapchat. These posts and advertisements offered hundreds or thousands of dollars to people willing to participate in migrant smuggling activities. Second, coordinators and other smugglers also engaged in in-person recruitment. Third, some smugglers also appeared to become involved if they had friends, family, or romantic partners who were participating in the smuggling activities and invited them to join. Finally, the Smuggling Incident dataset also recorded seven migrants who partook in migrant smuggling activities in order to pay their own smuggling fees.

[23] One of the U.S. citizen men involved in picking up migrants at the border was a minor. His age was not factored into this number.

Overall, the vast majority of these individuals appeared to be motivated by the potential for financial gain. These individuals' payments fluctuated significantly depending on their role and activity. For example, drivers who picked up migrants at the border reported being paid between $1,000 and $10,000, with the amount likely depending on the number of migrants and their final destination. Coordinators also took a cut of each smuggling payment, although the exact amount was unclear.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

During the first migration phase, smugglers guide migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border. These individuals play a range of roles, including acting as vehicle drivers, boat captains, and foot guides. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 35 individuals who were arrested while attempting to transport migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border. This included 17 individuals who were arrested at ports of entry and 18 individuals who were arrested while guiding migrants between ports of entry. The following subsections analyze these individuals' demographics and motivations both at ports of entry and between ports of entry.

Ports of Entry

To assist clandestine migrants in crossing through ports of entry, smugglers may walk with migrants along pedestrian lanes or drive them through vehicle lanes. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 17 individuals who were arrested while attempting to transport migrants through ports of entry in California. These individuals all acted as vehicle drivers, and the majority of these drivers hid migrants inside their vehicles as they attempted to cross the border.

There was no one demographic profile of a vehicle driver involved in transporting migrants through ports of entry. The most common profile in the Smuggling Incident dataset was a U.S. citizen man. However, there were additional demographic profiles. For the cases with information about gender, 67 percent of the arrested individuals were male and 33 percent were female. For the cases with citizenship information, 83 percent (ten individuals) were U.S. citizens and 17 percent (two individuals) were Mexican nationals. Notably, the two Mexican nationals were the driver and passenger in a case that included a corrupt CBP officer, who was facilitating the vehicle's passage into the United States. The drivers at ports of entry had a median age of 34 years old, but ranged in age from 18 years old to 50 years old.

Overall, these individuals appeared to become involved in migrant smuggling for financial gain. For the two cases with payment information, the drivers were promised between $1,000 to $4,000. In 2019, a U.S. citizen woman was promised $1,000 to hide a Chinese citizen in a blue bin behind the driver's seat and transport her into the United States. While in a 2024 case, a U.S. citizen man was promised $4,000 to conceal a migrant in a hidden compartment of his vehicle and take him through the port of entry. In both cases, the drivers were going to be paid once they dropped the migrant off on the U.S. side of the border. However, there were other cases that suggest additional reasons for becoming involved. For example, in a July 2024 case, a smuggler transporting a migrant in his vehicle instructed a U.S. citizen woman to travel with him as a passenger so it would appear less suspicious when passing through the port of entry.

Between Ports of Entry

Smugglers also transport and guide migrants into the United States between ports of entry. These individuals play various roles, including driving boats and other watercraft into California's coastal waters, and guiding migrants over border barriers, through wilderness areas, across the All-American Canal, and underground via sewer pipes and tunnels. The following subsections detail the individuals who move migrants into the United States between ports of entry—both by sea and by land—and outlines their demographics and motivations.

Crossing the Border by Sea. When migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border by boat, the people facilitating this transit serve as boat captains and play other supporting roles. These individuals are typically responsible for navigating the vessel and coordinating with vehicle pick-up drivers on shore. Boat drivers may operate the vessel alone or in teams. In a November 2022 case, a female migrant from Guatemala testified that two smugglers guided her boat into California's coastal waters. She explained that one man was responsible for driving the boat and the other man was responsible for any navigation, which he conducted via a map on his cellphone. The woman testified that both men received phone calls with instructions regarding the vehicle pick-up location.

The Smuggling Incident dataset includes 10 individuals who were arrested for transporting migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border by boat. All of the individuals with demographic information had the same profile: Mexican citizen men. For the six individuals with listed ages, the median age was 34 years old, but the ages ranged from 24 years old to 50 years old. Similarly, in the Migrant Testimony dataset, all of the migrants unanimously referred to their boat captains—whether or not they were arrested—as Spanish-speaking men.

The arrested boat captains appeared to transport migrants by sea for financial gain. Additionally, one Mexican citizen boat captain was also a migrant looking to reduce his own smuggling fee. In this August 2024 case, the boat captain attempted to transport migrants from Mexico to Imperial Beach in southern San Diego. The coordinators promised him a $7,000 smuggling fee reduction, from of his total $15,000 fee. The man noted that he wanted to reach California to work and earn money to help his sick son.

Crossing the Border by Land. Smugglers also guide migrants into the United States by land. These individuals—who are often called brush guides or foot guides—may lead migrants over the border wall, through wilderness areas, across the All-American Canal, or underground via tunnels and sewer systems. After moving the migrants into U.S. territory, the guides may quickly return to Mexico or accompany migrants all the way to their pick-up vehicles or even stash houses. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes eight guides who were arrested after leading migrants across the California-Mexico border by land. All of the individuals with demographic information had the same profile: Mexican citizen men. The median age for these individuals was 33 years old, but the ages ranged from 20 years old to 39 years old.

However, the Smuggling Incident dataset misses a specific population that serves as brush guides: Mexican minors. These minors—often known as circuit children (*niños de circuito*)—may guide groups of migrants across the border. However, unlike adults, they generally do not face

prosecution in the United States. Instead, U.S. authorities return these minors directly to Mexico through official ports of entry. Once in Mexico, they are held at Comprehensive Family Development (*Desarrollo Integral de la Familia,* DIF) shelters until their family members can pick them up. These minors are typically male but also involve small numbers of females. They are generally between the ages of 11 years old and 17 years old and reside in nearby Mexican border cities. Smugglers may recruit these minors through various methods, including via friends and family or through social media.[24]

Overall, arrested brush guides appeared to be primarily motivated by financial gain. For example, in a September 2017 case, a Mexican male guided eight migrants through a hole in the border wall near the San Ysidro Port of Entry. He reported that coordinators were going to pay him $1,000 for each individual that he successfully smuggled across the border. However, the pay for minors acting as brush guides appeared to be lower, with minors reportedly earning between $100 to $400 per group of migrants that they successfully guided into the United States.[xxv] Migrants also acted as brush guides to reduce their own smuggling fees. For example, in January 2024, a 20-year-old Mexican male led seven migrants through cross-border sewer pipes in exchange for a $6,000 smuggling fee reduction. He also reported earning extra money by building ladders to smuggle migrants over the U.S.-Mexico border wall.

Vehicle Pick-Ups

Once migrants reach the vehicle pick-up location, drivers move them to the next phase of their migration journey. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes ten drivers who were arrested for participating in this activity. The most common demographic profile among the arrested individuals was a U.S. citizen man, but there were also people with different demographic profiles. For the cases with information about the gender, 90 percent were men and the remaining 10 percent were women. For the cases with nationality information, 90 percent were U.S. citizens and 10 percent were Mexican citizens.[25] The median age for the arrested smugglers was 30 years old, but the ages ranged from a minor to a 41-year-old.

Coordinators recruited these drivers through various methods. In the dataset, there were cases where coordinators recruited drivers through social media and bilingual job boards and advertised the work as a way to make quick cash. These posts often targeted young men, such as high school students. However, in other cases, coordinators or other involved individuals approached friends, family, neighbors, and acquaintances and gauged their interest in participating in smuggling activities.

The drivers in this phase appeared to be financially motivated. The amount of money that the drivers earned varied depending on the number of migrants that they transported and the length of the trip. For example, in July 2023, coordinators agreed to pay two active-duty marines $8,000

[24] There are individual, family, community, and structural risk factors that influence these minors' involvement in smuggling activities. Individual vulnerabilities include their age, gender, level of education, and income level. Family vulnerabilities often include coming from single parent homes. Community vulnerabilities involve social settings where they may be exposed to physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Finally, structural vulnerabilities include the broader socio–economic and political climate within Mexico.

[25] One individual without a listed nationality crossed the border from Mexico before picking up migrants, and may have also been a Mexican national.

to pick up migrants near the border in eastern San Diego County and drive them to Los Angeles. At the time, this journey did not involve any operating Border Patrol checkpoints. While in a January 2024 case, coordinators promised to pay a driver $450 per migrant (totaling $1,800) to pick up four people at the border near El Centro in Imperial County and transport them to a nearby stash house.

Stash Houses Near the Border

Vehicle pick-up drivers may take migrants to stash houses near the border. The individuals working at these stash houses play various roles, including maintaining the stash house, providing food, and guarding the migrants. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes six individuals who were arrested for participating in this phase. For the stash house caretakers, the most common demographic profile was a U.S. citizen man. In the dataset, two thirds of the individuals were male (four people) and one third were female (two people). For the cases with citizenship information, four people were U.S. citizens and one person was a Cuban citizen. The median age was 35 years old, but the ages ranged from 20 years old to 51 years old.

These individuals appeared to become involved in stash houses primarily for financial gain. For example, in November 2016, a 51-year-old Cuban woman—with legal status to live in the United States—agreed to start holding migrants in her home after talking with a man at a bar. She later told authorities that she participated in the smuggling activity to make money for her rent.

Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention

To help migrants pass through or circumvent Border Patrol checkpoints, smugglers play various roles. These smugglers act as brush guides and lead migrants around the checkpoints on foot or drive vehicles and tractor-trailers that transport migrants through the checkpoints. The following subsections analyze these different smuggler roles, along with the arrested individuals' demographics and motivations.

Hiking Around Checkpoints on Foot

Smugglers lead migrants around the Border Patrol's checkpoints on foot. These individuals may be with migrants for a short period—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 beyond the checkpoints. The cases where migrants travel from the border to points beyond Border Patrol checkpoints are covered in the border crossing section, and were all Mexican citizen men. The Smuggling Incident dataset did not include cases where smugglers and migrants were dropped off before checkpoints and attempted to circumvent them on foot.

Vehicles and Tractor-Trailers

Smugglers also drive migrants through or around highway checkpoints in private vehicles or commercial tractor-trailers. According to the Smuggling Incident dataset, these individuals picked up migrants at locations near the border, such as gas stations. They then concealed the

migrants through various methods, such as hiding them inside vehicle trunks, concealing them in various places within the cars, or even situating them between hay bales.

The Smuggling Incident dataset includes five individuals who were arrested after attempting to drive migrants through one of the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. This includes four people who were driving vehicles and one person who was driving a tractor-trailer. For these individuals, the most common profile was a U.S. citizen man. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, three of the arrested individuals were men and two were females. All of the arrested individuals were U.S. citizens. The median age was 27 years old, but the individuals' ages ranged from a minor to 54 years old.

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

After the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, smugglers take migrants to stash houses in Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Valley. The individuals participating in this phase have various roles, including maintaining the stash houses, providing food to the migrants, and collecting the final smuggling payments. The Smuggling Incident dataset did not contain any cases involving stash houses for this stage. However, interviews suggest that some migrants may be forced to work in these stash houses if they cannot pay their final smuggling fees. These individuals participate in running the stash houses until they earn enough to fully pay their fees.

Coordinators

Migrant smuggling coordinators oversee the various phases that make up clandestine migrants' journeys. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 15 individuals who were arrested after acting as migrant smuggling coordinators. These individuals engaged in a wide range of activities, including coordinating border crossings, procuring vehicles or false documents, communicating with drivers or boat captains and tracking their locations, providing tips on how to elude authorities, and collecting and disbursing payments.

A coordinator's most essential role is managing the fees and payments for various migrant smuggling activities. Coordinators charge migrants based on their journey's route, distance, ongoing enforcement efforts, safety risks, and particular modes of transportation. For example, in court documents related to a July 2024 case, smugglers charged migrants $15,500 to be smuggled from Mexico to California by sea and $10,500 to be smuggled by land. Interviews suggest that smugglers charge more for maritime transportation because there are fewer enforcement obstacles and risks to migrants.[xxvi]

There was no single demographic profile for the coordinator role, although U.S. citizen men comprised the most common demographic profile. In the cases that contained information about the arrested individual's gender, 87 percent were men and the remaining 13 percent were women. While for the cases with citizenship information, half were U.S. citizens, two were Mexican citizens, one person was a Peruvian citizen, and one person was a Sierra Leonean citizen.[26] The median age for the coordinators was 33 years old, but the arrested individuals' ages ranged from 21 years old to 44 years old.

[26] All cases had information about the sex, and there were eight individuals with citizenship information.

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 report seeks to understand clandestine migration in the California borderlands. In particular, it attempts to answer three key questions: 1) How do clandestine migrants transit through California's borderlands? 2) What are the risks to migrants during their journeys? and 3) Who are the individuals that facilitate clandestine migration in California?

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. Depending on where and how migrants cross the border, their journeys may include three to five migration phases (such as crossing the border, getting picked up in a vehicle, and circumventing the Border Patrol's checkpoints). Further, the risks faced by migrants also vary by phase, with the most commonly reported risks being drowning in the Pacific Ocean or the All-American Canal, followed by environmental exposure in remote border areas. Combined these risks constituted between 65 and 79 percent of total migrant deaths in California.[27] Finally, the report finds that smugglers' demographic profiles shift dramatically by migration activity. For example, from 2014 to 2024, U.S. citizens were the primary smugglers for moving migrants into the United States at ports of entry, but Mexican men were the primary population that transported migrants in boats across the Pacific Ocean.

This report's findings provide insights into clandestine migration in the California border region and can inform future policy, advocacy, humanitarian efforts. This report also lays the foundation for future research that could engage the same questions through different methods or address related issues. For example, there is a need for research that explores recent links between U.S. migration policy and enforcement efforts—such as closing and reopening highway checkpoints—and migrant risk. This additional research could help build out our understanding of clandestine migration in California and help mitigate migrant risk and mortality.

[27] The percentages vary depending on the dataset.

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