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CENTRAL AMERICA & MEXICO POLICY INITIATIVE

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# CLANDESTINE MIGRATION AND MIGRANT RISK IN SOUTH TEXAS

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# **Clandestine Migration and Migrant Risk in South Texas**

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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## **Policy Research Project Participants**

### **Authors**

Ashley Alvarado, B.A. (Political Science), Texas A&M University

José Alberto González Aranda, B.A. (Political Science and History), New York University

Guilleremo Gudino, B.A. (Sociology) & B.S. (Public Relations), The University of Texas at Austin

Raul Ernesto Longoria, B.B.A (Supply Chain Management), The University of Texas at Austin

### **Project Director**

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

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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.

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## **List of Acronyms**

BSITS	Border Safety Initiative Tracking System
CBP	U.S. Customs and Border Protection
DPS	Texas Department of Public Safety
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
ICE	U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
PACER	Public Access to Court Records



## **Foreword**

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

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

JR DeShazo  
Dean

## Executive Summary

For more than a century, clandestine migrants have traveled over the U.S.-Mexico border. Beginning in 1882, the U.S. Congress passed its first legislation to restrict migration, which led some banned migrants to enter the United States through clandestine pathways as the earliest unauthorized migrants. Over the following decades, Congress passed additional legislation and increased enforcement efforts to deter migration across the border. However, despite the focus on reducing unauthorized migration, clandestine migrants have continued to transit through South Texas.<sup>a</sup> This report focuses exclusively on these clandestine migrants, who seek to avoid detection as they cross through the region's borderlands.

In particular, this policy research report addresses three questions related to clandestine migration. These questions are: 1) How do clandestine migrants transit through this region? 2) What are the risks to migrants during their journeys? and 3) Who are the individuals that facilitate clandestine migration in South Texas? To answer these questions, we used a mixed methods approach. We relied on two original datasets—the Smuggling Incident dataset and the Migrant Testimony dataset—that examine the different migration phases and the demographics of individuals facilitating clandestine migration. Additionally, for migrant deaths, we used a Border Patrol dataset and county-level datasets from Brooks County, Kenedy County, and Maverick County. To fill in any research gaps, we conducted interviews with federal and local officials, law enforcement, and journalists.

This research report has three primary findings. First, the report finds that migrants' journeys vary significantly by route and final destination. Depending on where migrants cross the border, and their smugglers' preferred routes, their journeys may include three to five migration phases. For example, migrants who cross the border in the Rio Grande Valley generally pass through five migration phases. However, migrants that cross the border between Laredo and Del Rio may only pass through three phases. Second, migrants transiting through South Texas face the primary risks of drowning in the Rio Grande and dying from exposure to the elements, particularly as migrants try to circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints on foot. From 2014 to 2024, these two types of deaths accounted for 73 percent of the Border Patrol's recorded migrant deaths in the region.<sup>b</sup> Finally, we found that smugglers' demographic profiles shift by activity. For example, U.S. citizens were the primary individuals moving migrants into the United States at ports of entry. However, Mexican men, including Mexican minors, were the primary population that guided migrants across the Rio Grande.

The report is divided in four chapters. The next chapter outlines this report's methodology and explains the data collection and analysis processes. The following three chapters each address one of the three research questions. Chapter One examines the different migration routes and smuggling phases in South Texas. Chapter Two highlights the risks for clandestine migrants traversing through this area of the border. Finally, Chapter Three analyzes the roles, demographics, and motivations for the smugglers involved in guiding and transporting clandestine migrants in the region.

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<sup>a</sup> Historically, there have been two distinct groups of migrants: asylum seekers and clandestine migrants. Clandestine migrants seek to avoid detection and asylum seekers seek out authorities to make their claims.

<sup>b</sup> This includes the following Border Patrol sectors: Del Rio, Laredo, and Rio Grande Valley.

## Methodology

This report employs a mixed methods approach to analyze clandestine migration in South Texas. First, it relies on two original datasets that cover migrant smuggling in the region. The first dataset—the Smuggling Incident dataset—covers migrant smuggling incidents in South Texas from 2014 to 2024. The second dataset—the Migrant Testimony dataset—compiles migrant testimonies during clandestine migration in the region. To analyze risks to migrants throughout each migration stage, we also used migrant death datasets from the Border Patrol and county-level actors. Finally, we conducted interviews with federal and local officials, law enforcement, and journalists to address the remaining questions.

To build the Smuggling Incident dataset, we identified and coded migrant smuggling events in South Texas. 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). We then coded each smuggling event using 49 separate variables, including the date, location, case details, risks to migrants, and demographic information for any involved migrants or arrested smugglers. Overall, this dataset included 120 smuggling incidents and 199 people arrested for engaging in migrant smuggling activities from 2014 to 2024.

Once we coded the publicly available accounts, we ran the arrested individuals' names through the Public Access to Court Records (PACER) database, which is a federal court case documentation system. For each case, we searched for any relevant court documents, such as criminal complaints and indictments. Of the Smuggling Incident dataset's 120 cases, we found federal court documents for 58 cases. Once we located these documents, we reviewed them and updated our dataset to include any new, relevant information. Overall, we used the Smuggling Incident dataset as our primary data source, which allowed us to analyze smuggling activities and clandestine migration routes, risks to migrants, and smugglers' demographic profiles and motivations.

To create the Migrant Testimony dataset, we also relied on federal court documents from PACER. Of the 58 cases with court documents, 45 contained material witness testimonies from involved migrants. For these cases, we coded each migrant testimony into the Migrant Testimony dataset, including the migrant's demographics, smuggling payment information, and their experience across different migration phases. We used this dataset to better understand smuggling activities, the conditions for migrants during each phase, and any associated risks.

These datasets have several limitations. First, the datasets only include smuggling events where authorities caught the individuals. This means that the datasets may not reflect the full range of possible smuggling methods. Second, it only includes cases where newspapers and agencies published an article or press release about the event, which may bias the datasets toward more newsworthy events (such as cases with large numbers of migrants, creative smuggling tactics, and incidents where a migrant was hurt or killed). Third, the information was not standardized across news articles and press releases, which means we were not able to collect complete information for each case. We attempted to overcome these limitations by triangulating our data sources and supplementing the analysis with expert interviews.

Next, to analyze migrant risk and mortality in South Texas, we relied on external datasets. The primary dataset was the Border Patrol's person-level migrant death data. Border Patrol agents document migrant rescues, injuries, and fatalities throughout the United States' border region in their Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS) dataset. The Border Patrol does not publish this data, but has released it to researchers through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.<sup>1</sup> The dataset that we used for South Texas contains data from January 2014 to October 2024. It includes 2,581 migrant deaths for the Border Patrol's Del Rio, Laredo, and Rio Grande Valley sectors. This dataset only includes GPS coordinates through fiscal year 2017, so we used it primarily for analyzing broader regional patterns.

We also examined county-level migrant death datasets. Our project director compiled this data from records at the Brooks County Sheriff's Office, the Kenedy County Sheriff's Office, and the Maverick County Justices of the Peace. We used these county-level datasets to create case studies and analyze recent migrant death patterns within specific counties. We also relied on the Smuggling Incident and Migrant Testimony datasets to add narratives and testimonies regarding the risks for clandestine migrants transiting through South Texas.

The Border Patrol's migrant death dataset and the county-level datasets also have several limitations. First, the datasets fail to capture the true number of deceased migrants. For example, they do not count migrants who died in South Texas but whose remains were never recovered. Similarly, they do not count individuals who drowned in the Rio Grande but whose remains washed up on the Mexican side of the river. However, this undercounting is inherent in all U.S. based migrant death datasets. Second, the datasets do not contain geo-coordinates for the entire time period. As previously mentioned, the Border Patrol's dataset only contains geo-coordinates for recovered remains through fiscal year 2017. To address this challenge, we used the county-level datasets and relied on interviews with federal and local officials, law enforcement, and journalists to fill in any gaps.

## Chapter 1: Clandestine Migration in South Texas

In South Texas, clandestine migrants travel along various migration routes. These routes are shaped by the specific crossing location, border terrain, and border enforcement infrastructure, among other factors. The first route involves people crossing in the Rio Grande Valley, which we define as the area stretching from Roma to Brownsville. For this route, migrants generally travel to the region's north-south running highways—U.S. Route 281 and Interstate 69E—and then head north to Houston. The second route involves anyone crossing the border from Del Rio to Laredo. Throughout this stretch, migrants travel to various highways heading into the U.S. interior—such as Interstate 35, U.S. Route 57, and U.S. Route 90—and then head to San Antonio. Smugglers may then release migrants directly into these interior cities or move them to other final destinations.

**Figure 1: Primary Migration Routes in South Texas**



*Authors' elaboration*

Migrants move through various migration phases as they follow these routes. The first phase is crossing the U.S.-Mexico border—which in South Texas means crossing the Rio Grande—either at a port of entry or between ports of entry. The second phase occurs when drivers pick up migrants near the border. The third phase is when these drivers transport the migrants to nearby stash houses. The fourth phase involves smugglers guiding migrants around or through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. Finally, the fifth phase is when smugglers transport migrants to a stash house in San Antonio or Houston. Migrants crossing the border from Laredo to Del Rio may experience as few as three migration phases—skipping vehicle pick-ups near the border and border stash houses—while migrants crossing in the Rio Grande Valley generally pass through all five migration phases.

This chapter aims to answer the first research question regarding how clandestine migrants move

through South Texas. 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. It also uses interviews with federal and local officials, law enforcement, and journalists to confirm information and fill in the gaps. The following sections outline each clandestine migration phase and the related conditions for migrants.

## **Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border**

The first migration phase in South Texas involves crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. There are two pathways for a clandestine migrant to cross the U.S.-Mexico border: at a port of entry or between ports of entry.<sup>2</sup> To cross at a port of entry, clandestine migrants must falsely claim to have the appropriate immigration status or documentation to enter the country or hide inside a vehicle. To cross between ports of entry, clandestine migrants must cross the Rio Grande by swimming, wading, or using inner tubes, rafts, or boats. The following subsections explore these various forms of clandestine border crossing.

### ***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. Along the South Texas border, there are eight ports of entry. These include both larger ports of entry—such as in Brownsville, Hidalgo, and Laredo—and smaller ports of entry, such as in Progreso, Rio Grande City, Roma, Eagle Pass, and Del Rio.<sup>3</sup> At each port of entry, CBP officers inspect individuals' travel documents and determine whether they can enter the United States.<sup>4</sup> The CBP officer can also refer the individual for secondary inspection.

**Figure 2: Ports of Entry in South Texas**



*Authors' elaboration*

Clandestine migrants attempt to cross at a port of entry on foot or in a private or commercial vehicle. They may try to present themselves as having the necessary immigration status or travel documents, or they may be concealed in hidden spaces—such as car trunks or compartments in tractor trailers—to evade detection. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were seven cases where clandestine migrants attempted to enter U.S. territory through a port of entry. Four of these cases involved migrants who presented falsified documentation and the remaining three cases involved drivers who concealed migrants in their vehicles.

Notably, all four false documentation cases involved U.S. citizen women crossing unauthorized minors into the United States. These women crossed at the Laredo and Brownsville ports of entry, with children aged three to 13 years old. For example, in one July 2024 case, a U.S. citizen woman attempted to cross at the Gateway Bridge in Brownsville with three children—aged five, eight, and nine—whom she claimed were her grandchildren. She provided the first CBP officer with her Texas identification card and birth certificate and stated that the children were U.S. citizens. The officer sent the group for secondary inspection, where additional CBP officers determined that the children were Mexican citizens, not related to the woman, and lacked authorization to enter the United States.<sup>5</sup>

In the dataset's three cases that involved concealed migrants, the drivers were generally transporting adult migrants. In these cases, the drivers used their personal vehicles and concealed between one and five individuals. For example, in a March 2018 case, a female driver attempted to smuggle her boyfriend, a Mexican national, by hiding him in her vehicle trunk.<sup>6</sup>



## ***Between Ports of Entry***

***Crossing the Rio Grande.*** Clandestine migrants also enter the United States between ports of entry. In South Texas, the Rio Grande serves as the international border. The river's width and depth vary in the stretch from Del Rio to Brownsville. In this area, the river's width ranges from 30 feet to more than 1,000 feet, and its depth ranges from just a few inches to approximately 60 feet.<sup>7</sup> The river's water levels also fluctuate based on rainfall and water releases from upstream dams.

All clandestine migrants that enter South Texas between ports of entry must cross the Rio Grande. These individuals typically wade, swim, or float across the river on inner tubes, rafts, or boats.<sup>8</sup> The Rio Grande's depth influences how people cross. For example, near Quemado, Texas—between Del Rio and Eagle Pass—the Rio Grande River is shallow and narrow. Clandestine migrants often cross this area on foot and also use the local canal and dam system to cross the river. By contrast, near McAllen or Brownsville, the Rio Grande is deeper and migrants often need to swim or float across.

The Smuggling Incident dataset includes 13 cases where migrants crossed the Rio Grande. In these cases, smugglers—often referred to as brush guides—led groups of three to 16 migrants across the river. Generally, one brush guide traveled with each group. The majority of the Smuggling Incident dataset's cases took place near Eagle Pass, with two cases occurring near Brownsville.

***Border Barriers.*** Once migrants reach the U.S. side of the Rio Grande, they may encounter border barriers. In South Texas, these barriers include walls constructed from steel bollards, layers of concertina wire, and vehicle barriers. The placement of these border barriers varies significantly throughout the region.<sup>9</sup> Some of these barriers are situated directly along the Rio Grande, such as in downtown Brownsville, while others extend several miles inland.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the barriers are not continuous, appearing as sporadic stretches along the border.

Since 2018, the U.S. Border Patrol has constructed border walls in certain areas of South Texas. In particular, these barriers line parts of the border in the Rio Grande Valley. In these areas, the border wall is made of steel bollards, is 18 feet high, and extends for more than 22 miles. As of April 2024, there was no border wall from McAllen through Del Rio. However, the Department of Homeland Security has planned 69 miles of border barrier for the Border Patrol's Laredo Sector and another 4 miles for the Del Rio Sector.<sup>11</sup>

Texas has also deployed more than 100 miles of concertina wire along its border with Mexico, particularly in high-traffic areas. Concertina wire—commonly known as razor wire—is a type of coiled, sharp-edged fencing. Unlike traditional barbed wire, concertina wire features closely spaced, razor-sharp metal blades that can cause severe injuries to anyone attempting to climb over or cut through it. The wire is often installed in multiple overlapping layers. In Eagle Pass, Texas authorities also installed a border barrier composed of shipping containers and topped with concertina wire.<sup>12</sup>

***Walking Through the Borderlands.*** After clandestine migrants cross the Rio Grande and pass beyond any border barriers, they begin hiking to a vehicle pick-up location. The terrain along the U.S.-Mexico border from Brownsville to Del Rio varies significantly. In Brownsville, the climate is humid and subtropical, with coastal plains, palm trees, and wetlands. However, near Del Rio, there is less rain and the landscape is more arid and desert-like, with rolling hills and sparse vegetation.

Migrants' experiences walking from the Rio Grande to their vehicle pick-up locations can vary significantly. The Smuggling Incident dataset included five cases for this activity. In these cases, some migrants walked for only a few minutes, while others walked for days to reach a point beyond the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. The migrants walking for longer distances generally crossed the border between Laredo and Del Rio.

### **Vehicle Pick-up at Border**

Once clandestine migrants cross the border, they embark on the second migration phase: vehicle pick-ups. During this phase, brush guides often lead the migrants from the Rio Grande to their pick-up locations. Drivers then pick up migrants from these predetermined points and may take them to nearby stash houses.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 39 cases involving vehicle pick-ups. These cases occurred along the entire South Texas border—both in big cities, such as Laredo, and in smaller towns, such as Del Rio, Eagle Pass, and Roma. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there was no designated type of vehicle. The cases included cars and vans, and the drivers fit between two to 16 migrants inside the vehicles. For example, in one October 2022 case, Border Patrol agents saw 15 migrants climb into a red Ford F-150's cabin and bed while it was parked near the Rio Grande.

Notably, not all clandestine migrants participate in this migration phase. For example, some migrants that cross between Laredo and Del Rio attempt to walk from the border to a point beyond the nearest Border Patrol checkpoint. Additionally, some migrants walk directly to their stash houses. In the Eagle Pass area, members of law enforcement reported that smugglers often provide migrants with stash house coordinates and have them travel on their own. These smugglers remain in Mexico and monitor when migrants arrive at the stash houses via home security cameras.

### **Stash Houses at the Border**

Once drivers pick up clandestine migrants, they may take them to the third migration stage: stash houses near the border. At these stash houses, caretakers provide migrants with food, water, and clothing as they wait for their next migration activity. Additionally, smugglers may contact the migrant's family members to request additional smuggling payments. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were eight cases that involved this migration phase.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, the border stash houses were located throughout all of South Texas, including in big cities such as Laredo and Brownsville, and in smaller towns, such as Eagle Pass and Rio Grande City. These stash houses involved various types of dwellings. In the dataset, smugglers used apartments, hotel rooms, residential houses, abandoned homes, and even

warehouses to house migrants.<sup>13</sup> The stash houses held between four and 47 people, and these individuals remained at the locations for anywhere from one day to more than two weeks. Some migrants reported that they were not provided basic necessities and were subjected to dark, hot, and crowded conditions. More than one migrant reported having their cell phones and personal belongings taken from them at these stash houses. Another migrant reported that he was only fed pizza once a day.

In the Migrant Testimony dataset, several migrants discussed being transferred from one border stash house to another before embarking on their next migration stage. For example, in August 2024, a male Guatemalan citizen testified that he crossed into Brownsville and was told to sleep underneath an abandoned trailer home. The next day, he was taken to a nearby stash house and then transported to a gas station to be loaded into a tractor trailer.

### Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention

To reach the U.S. interior, migrants transiting through South Texas must bypass the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. Across South Texas, the Border Patrol operates 13 highway checkpoints that act as a secondary line of border enforcement. These checkpoints are located between 10 and 75 miles away from the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>14</sup> At these checkpoints, Border Patrol agents conduct visual inspections of the passing vehicles and ask travelers about their citizenship. If a vehicle is flagged as potentially carrying an unauthorized person or item, it is sent for secondary inspection.

**Figure 3: Border Patrol Checkpoints in South Texas**



*Authors' elaboration*

To reach the Texas interior, smugglers and migrants must circumvent or pass through these highway checkpoints undetected. To do so, they use various transportation methods, including walking around the checkpoints, being concealed in private vehicles and tractor trailers, or taking a boat or a plane around the checkpoints. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 59 cases for this migration phase. The following subsections look at clandestine migrants' primary methods of bypassing checkpoints.

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Foot***

To reach a point beyond the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, some smugglers lead migrants around them on foot. These migrants must contend with the challenging South Texas terrain. The land surrounding the Border Patrol's checkpoints is vast private ranchlands, with dense thorny brush and semi-arid plains. Smugglers and migrants navigate these landscapes amid potentially extreme temperatures and little access to water. In South Texas, temperatures in the summer are frequently above 100 degrees Fahrenheit and can drop below freezing in the winter.

There are two general starting points for migrants hiking around checkpoints. First, as previously mentioned, some groups of migrants walk directly from the border to a point beyond a Border Patrol checkpoint. Migrants traveling these routes often cross in Laredo, Eagle Pass, and Del Rio, since the Border Patrol's checkpoints in this area are ten to 35 miles from the border. These migrants may spend several days in the brush. Local law enforcement also report that migrants may ride in railroad box cars to navigate past these Border Patrol's checkpoints.

In the second route, drivers transport migrants to a drop-off point before a checkpoint. This method is most common for the Border Patrol's checkpoints in Falfurrias and Sarita, which are both located around 70 miles from the border. However, this method also occurs near the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints near Laredo, Eagle Pass, and Del Rio. In these cases, drivers transport groups of migrants to locations before these checkpoints and drop them off with a guide. At times, these groups may follow gas pipelines or power lines to stay oriented, and often remain just inside underbrush or thick vegetation to avoid being spotted.

The Smuggling Incident dataset includes three cases of migrants walking around the Falfurrias and Sarita checkpoints on foot. In these cases, one or two brush guides led groups of two to 12 migrants through the terrain. Each migrant had a backpack with essential supplies, such as water and food, and, at times, other items, such as medicine, toothbrushes or religious symbols.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Passing Through or Around Checkpoints in Private Vehicles***

Smugglers also move migrants through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in private vehicles. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 31 cases that involved this transportation method. In these cases, smugglers attempted to conceal migrants in vehicle trunks, under seats, and in other compartments. At times, the drivers also asked the migrants to sit in the vehicle's passenger seats and tell Border Patrol agents at the checkpoints that they were U.S. citizens. Depending on the method of travel, private vehicle drivers generally transported between one to four migrants.

Overall, there was no consistent make or model for vehicles transporting migrants through Border Patrol checkpoints. The Smuggling Incident dataset's cases included a range of vehicles, from standard sedans and SUVs to larger vans and trucks.<sup>c</sup> The smugglers also concealed migrants in various ways. In one June 2024 case, smugglers hid four migrants in a Dodge Ram pick-up truck, including inside a toolbox, underneath the toolbox, inside an ice chest, and behind the driver's seat. In an October 2021 case, smugglers even hid a Guatemalan woman inside a coffin.

Drivers also transport migrants around the Border Patrol's checkpoints in South Texas by driving through private ranches. These drivers often need to break locks on ranch gates or pay ranch staff for access, such as by receiving a key or leaving the gates open.<sup>16</sup> Interviews with law enforcement suggest that—in some rare cases—drivers will also plow through ranch gates with their vehicles.

### ***Passing Through Checkpoints in Tractor Trailers***

Smugglers also transport migrants through the Border Patrol's checkpoints in tractor trailers. These migrants may be concealed in the cab or in the trailer's cargo areas, sometimes among legitimate goods, such as produce or other freight. The Smuggling Incident dataset included 21 cases where smugglers transported migrants in tractor trailers. These cases were discovered at the Falfurrias, Sarita, Laredo, and Freer checkpoints, but migrants are likely transported in tractor trailers through any north-bound checkpoints that have high commercial traffic.

The number of migrants transported in tractor trailers varies. In the Smuggling Incident dataset's cases, there were between two and eight migrants hidden in the trailers' cabs.<sup>17</sup> While the cases documented between 17 and 86 migrants inside the trailers' cargo areas. In one July 2017 incident, smugglers distributed colored tape among the large number of concealed migrants for easy group identification and distribution into waiting pick-up vehicles at the final destination.

Once migrants are inside a trailer, they often spend three to five hours inside the cab or cargo areas before they reach their final destinations. In one July 2022 case, a Mexican migrant testified that the smugglers gave the migrants a walkie talkie to communicate with the driver in case of an emergency, such as if the refrigeration system shut off. The group was also given two hatchets to break through the roof. However, these types of measures are the exception rather than the norm. In a July 2017 case, a male Mexican migrant testified that he banged on the trailer wall to get the driver's attention—as the cargo area was getting too hot—but the driver did not pull over.

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Boats***

Smugglers also transport migrants around the Border Patrol's checkpoints by boat. In these cases, smugglers take migrants across the Rio Grande and then drive them to a boat launching point once they are in U.S. territory. The smugglers load migrants onto the boats and transport them up the Gulf coast until they are north of the Border Patrol's Sarita checkpoint. Smugglers may also guide groups north on South Padre Island and cross waterways, such as the Port Mansfield Channel, using rafts and watercraft.<sup>18</sup> It is also possible that some migrants launch boats in Mexico and travel up the Gulf coast, but the dataset did not include any cases of this activity.

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<sup>c</sup> Interviews with law enforcement suggest that many of these vehicles were stolen.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were four cases that involved smugglers transporting migrants on boats. These cases involved several types of boats—including small fishing vessels and tourist boats—that held between three to ten migrants per boat.<sup>19</sup> These boats may be overcrowded, poorly maintained, and lacking safety equipment, such as life jackets. In an October 2021 case, a boat captain attempted to transport six migrants in a 22-foot powerboat (a Bay Stealth 2230). The captain initially claimed that the group was on a fishing trip, but Border Patrol agents conducting a routine check saw no bait or fishing equipment and observed two individuals lying on the floor to avoid detection. When the Border Patrol agents searched the ship, they found only four flotation devices for the seven individuals on the boat.

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Airplanes***

Smugglers also transport migrants on airplanes to circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. In the dataset, there were four cases of migrants attempting to circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in planes. These cases involved aircraft at the Mid-Valley Airport in Weslaco, the South Texas International Airport in Edinburg, and the Valley International Airport in Harlingen. For each of these cases, drivers brought the migrants to the airport and they boarded charter planes or private planes. In all four cases, the migrants were destined for Houston, and there were between four and 13 migrants in each group. Notably, in one September 2022 case, a smuggler provided the six migrants with false Texas identification cards before they arrived at the airport.

### **Stash Houses in the Interior**

After circumventing the Border Patrol's checkpoints, migrants pass through the fifth migration stage: stash houses in interior cities. These stash houses serve as consolidation points for migrants, where smugglers collect payments and coordinate migrants' transportation to their final destinations. In South Texas, interior stash houses are located in Houston for migrants coming from the Rio Grande Valley and in San Antonio for migrants coming from the Laredo to Del Rio area. The Smuggling Incident dataset included four cases that involved interior stash houses, with two stash houses in Houston and two in San Antonio. All of these stash houses were residential homes with between 26 and 115 migrants.

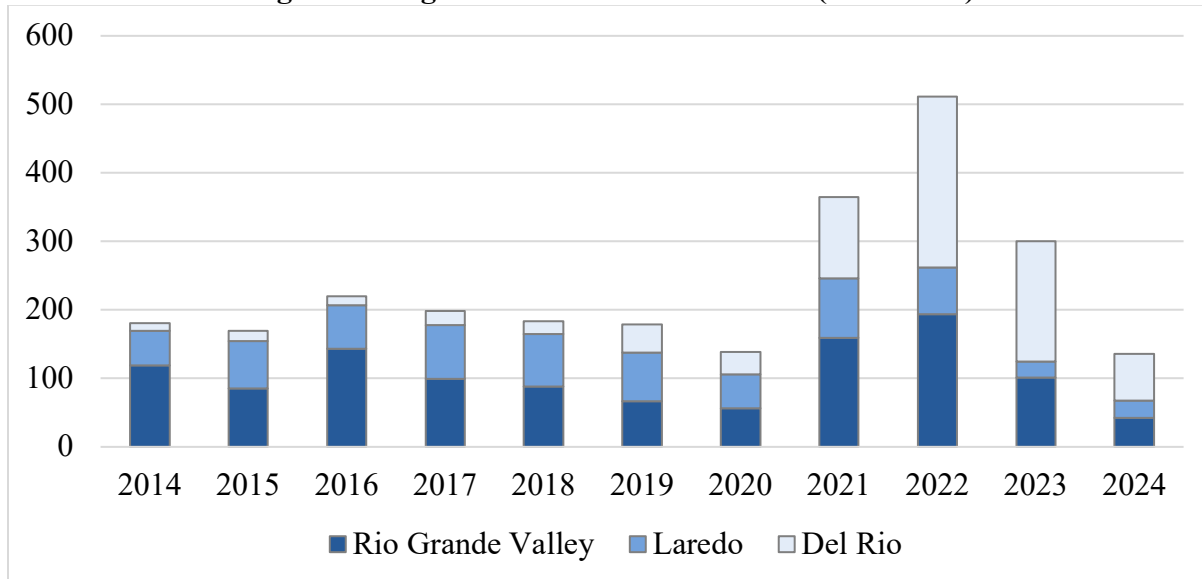
Inside the stash houses, caretakers instructed the migrants on the house rules, provided food, and ran the operations. In one April 2014 case, the stash house caretakers forced the migrants to give up their cellphones, shoes, and clothing upon arrival, to prevent them from escaping. The conditions in the houses were also often described as hot, non-hygienic, and intimidating. In June 2024, law enforcement authorities described a stash house in San Antonio as “a stifling-hot...shack-like structure with no AC or running water.” In this case, authorities took several migrants to the hospital for heat-related illness.

## Chapter 2: Migrant Risk and Mortality in South Texas

During each clandestine migration phase in South Texas, migrants face various risks. These include drowning in the Rio Grande, dehydration and exposure to the elements while circumventing checkpoints on foot, suffocation inside concealed vehicle spaces, and fatal car crashes during pursuits. Migrants' exposure to these risks is influenced by their migration routes, authorities' enforcement efforts, and specific smuggling conditions.

Overall, from 2014 to 2024, the Border Patrol documented 2,581 migrants who died in South Texas.<sup>d</sup> These migrants died in various ways, but the most common causes of death were exposure to the elements (48 percent of total cases) and drowning while crossing the Rio Grande (25 percent of cases). The number of migrant deaths in South Texas has generally fluctuated between 140 and 220 cases a year. However, from 2021 to 2023, there was a jump in the number of migrants dying in South Texas, particularly in the Del Rio Sector. This increase corresponded to a simultaneous spike in the number of migrants crossing through the region.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 4: Migrant Deaths in South Texas (2014-2024)**



*Data source: Border Patrol dataset*

This chapter aims to answer the report's second question regarding risks for migrants during their journeys through South Texas. To conduct this analysis, we used various datasets, including the Border Patrol's migrant death dataset and county-level migrant death datasets from Sheriff's Offices and Justices of the Peace. For risks that did not result in death, we used the Smuggling Incident and Migrant Testimony datasets to highlight the full scope of risks. The following sections cover the risks for migrants by migration phase, and, if relevant, the resulting deaths and deceased individuals' demographics.

<sup>d</sup> Defined as the Del Rio, Laredo, and Rio Grande Valley sectors. This data includes both clandestine migrants and asylum seekers who are planning to turn themselves in to authorities.



## Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

Clandestine migrants begin facing risks as soon as they attempt to cross into the United States. These risks are shaped by a migrant's crossing location and specific smuggling method. At ports of entry, migrants who are concealed in private or commercial vehicles face the risk of suffocation or being exposed to extreme temperatures. While between ports of entry, migrants face the risks of drowning in the Rio Grande, being cut by concertina wire, falling from border barriers, and exposure to the elements while hiking to vehicle pick-up locations. The following subsections explore these risks, both at ports of entry and between ports of entry.

### *Ports of Entry*

Clandestine migrants' experiences crossing at ports of entry depend on their smuggling method. Migrants traveling with false documents or as part of a corruption scheme—such as when a CBP officer waves the individual through the port of entry—face minimal risks. However, migrants traveling in enclosed vehicle spaces face more dangerous conditions. These migrants are at risk of suffocation or extreme temperatures, with little ability to leave the spaces on their own or get help if there is an emergency.

In the Border Patrol's migrant death dataset, there were no cases where a migrant died at a port of entry in South Texas. However, the Smuggling Incident dataset's cases shed light on the various risks that migrants can face while crossing at ports of entry. Along with hiding migrants in concealed spaces, such as vehicle trunks, drivers also used risky methods to reduce their chances of being caught. For example, in September 2021, a driver sedated a five-year-old girl with melatonin jellybeans while attempting to cross her at a port of entry. Melatonin jellybeans are not inherently dangerous, but administering any unnecessary medication to minors poses a risk, particularly if given at higher than prescribed dosages.

### *Between Ports of Entry*

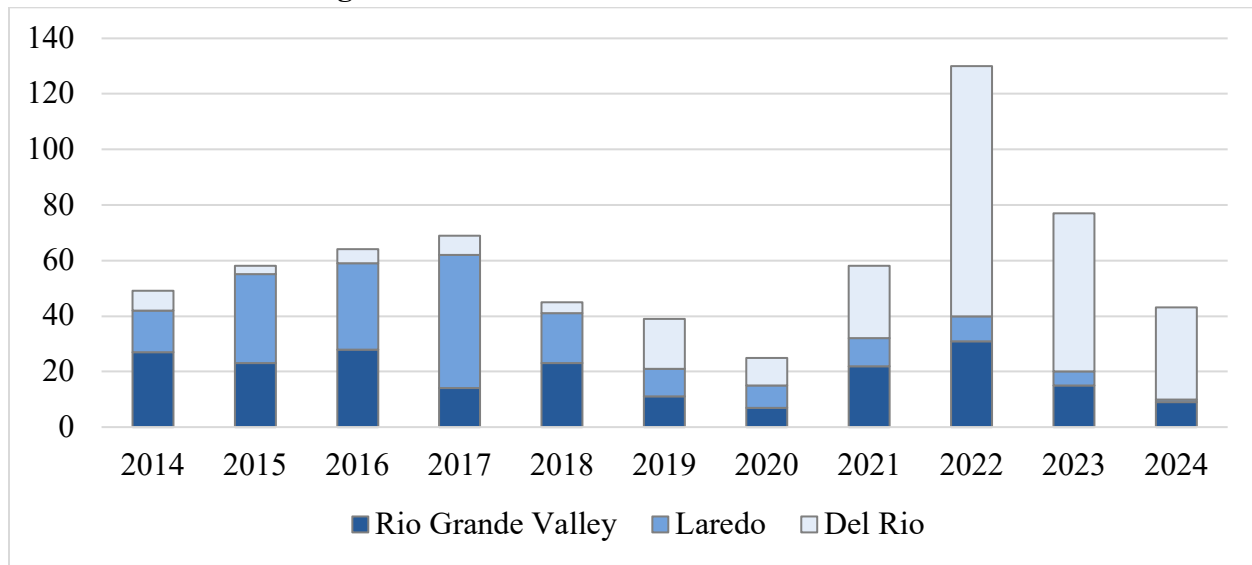
***Crossing the Rio Grande.*** To enter the United States in South Texas between ports of entry, every clandestine migrant must cross the Rio Grande. Migrants may attempt to cross the river on boats, rafts, inner tubes, or by wading and swimming across. Migrants that are wading or swimming are at the greatest risk of drowning, especially those who are weak swimmers or who are trying to assist others. At the river's midpoint, the undercurrent can also quickly drag people underwater or downstream. Instead of letting the water carry them, migrants may panic and try to fight the current, which can cause exhaustion and drowning.

From 2014 to 2024, the United States Border Patrol recorded more than 650 water-related drownings in South Texas. While this number includes all water-related deaths in the region, the vast majority were drownings in the Rio Grande.<sup>e</sup> From 2014 to 2021, the Border Patrol documented between 25 and 70 water-related deaths each year. However, in 2022, the Border Patrol recorded 130 drownings in the region, with 90 in the Del Rio Sector alone.

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<sup>e</sup> This data includes both clandestine migrants and asylum seekers who are planning to turn themselves in to authorities.

**Figure 5: Water-Related Deaths in South Texas**



*Data source: Border Patrol dataset*

**Crossing the Border Barriers.** Migrants may also encounter border barriers in certain areas of the South Texas border. To pass by these barriers, migrants may climb over the barrier, crawl underneath, or climb through any holes. Migrants risk falling from the border wall, given that it reaches up to 18 feet in certain areas of South Texas. They also risk getting cut by concertina wire, either from the layers of coils on land or after it falls in the Rio Grande. For example, in certain areas near Eagle Pass, the riverbank’s erosion has tipped the concertina wire into the river, which makes it an invisible hazard to migrants walking or swimming across.

In the Border Patrol’s migrant death dataset, there were no cases where a migrant died after falling from a border wall or being cut by concertina wire. Additionally, the Smuggling Incident dataset did not include any cases that highlighted these specific risks. However, we obtained Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) data that covered risks from concertina wire. From June 2023 to February 2025, this data documented 310 people who suffered trauma after contact with concertina wire.<sup>21</sup>

**Hiking to a Vehicle Pick-Up Location.** After crossing the Rio Grande, clandestine migrants hike to a vehicle pick-up location. Depending on the route, migrants may only need to climb an embankment to reach the vehicles or they may have to walk for hours through rough terrain. These longer hikes often occur in the area between Laredo and Del Rio, where migrants may trek to points beyond the Border Patrol’s highway checkpoints. During these hikes—and particularly on the longer ones—migrants face the risk of exposure to extreme temperatures and dehydration. Additionally, they are vulnerable to encounters with wildlife, including rattlesnakes, insects, ticks, and spiders. For example, in an October 2021 case, the Border Patrol found a Honduran man in distress while circumventing the Sarita checkpoint in South Texas. The man later died, and his presumed cause of death was a spider bite.<sup>22</sup>

To examine deaths related to exposure to the elements during the border crossing phase, we focus on the case study of Maverick County. Maverick County is home to the city of Eagle Pass and is

located in the Border Patrol's Del Rio Sector. The county hosts a permanent Border Patrol highway checkpoint on U.S. Highway 83. There is also a second Border Patrol checkpoint on U.S. Route 277 in Dimmit County, which is just outside Maverick County. In total, we examined 425 migrant deaths in Maverick County from 2014 to 2024—including at least 139 migrants that likely died from exposure to the elements—which were obtained from the county's five Justices of the Peace.<sup>f</sup>

**Figure 6: Maverick County**



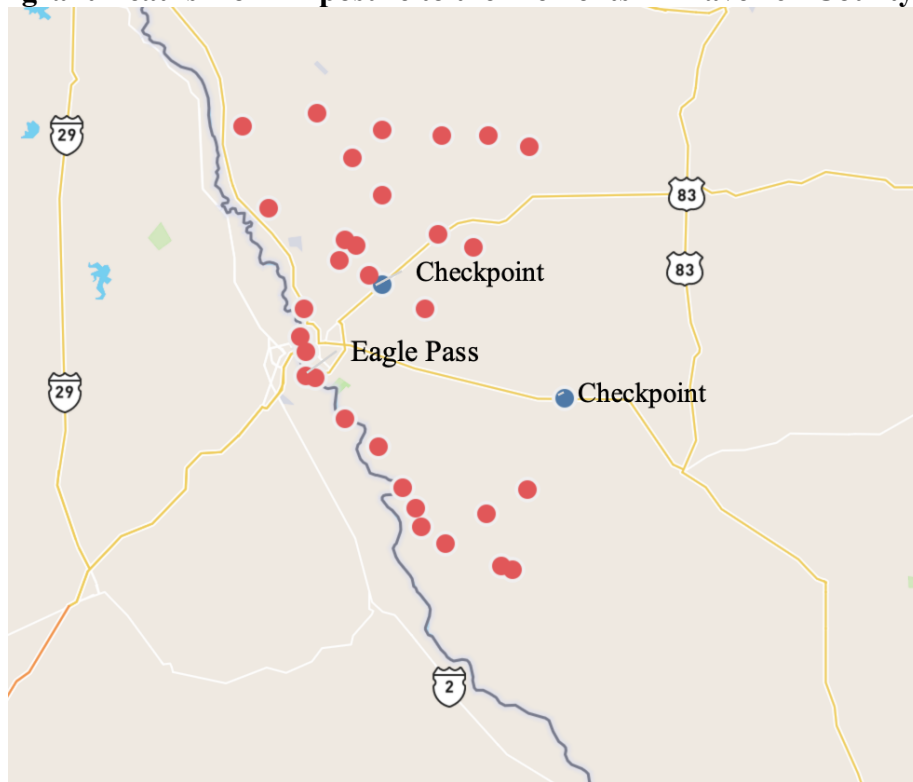
*Authors' elaboration*

The migrant deaths from exposure to the elements in Maverick County show two primary trends. First, some of these deaths are concentrated near the border, particularly near downtown Eagle Pass and to the south of Eagle Pass. These deaths near urban areas suggest that the migrants were likely going to be picked up close to the border. Second, there were also recovered remains further into the South Texas interior, including more than 30 miles from the border. These deaths appear to highlight migrants' attempts to circumvent the Border Patrol's checkpoints. While some of these migrants may have been picked up near the border and dropped off before the checkpoints, others appear to have crossed the border and hiked directly into the South Texas interior. Figure 7 details these trends, with each red dot representing recovered migrant remains.

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<sup>f</sup> Only 31 cases had GPS coordinates in Maverick County.

**Figure 7: Migrant Deaths from Exposure to the Elements in Maverick County (2014-2024)**



*Data source: Maverick County Justices of the Peace dataset*

The Justice of the Peace data included demographic information for 90 percent of the individuals who died from exposure to the elements in Maverick County. For the cases with an identified gender, 83 percent of the decedents were male and 17 percent were female. The majority of the migrants were from Mexico (50 percent), followed by Honduras (29 percent) and Guatemala (9 percent). There were also migrants from other countries, such as Nicaragua, Venezuela, and El Salvador. The median age was 31 years old, but the ages ranged from a two-year-old Honduran boy to a 54-year-old Mexican woman.

### **Vehicle Pick-Up at Border**

After migrants reach their designated vehicle pick-up location, they face a different set of risks. The primary risk during this phase is car accidents, particularly during high-speed pursuits with law enforcement. For example, in a March 2022 case, Border Patrol agents observed two migrants crossing the border wall in Brownsville and entering a waiting vehicle. As law enforcement pursued the car, the driver attempted to evade capture by running multiple red lights. Ultimately, the driver lost control of the vehicle and crashed into a utility pole, killing one of the two migrants.

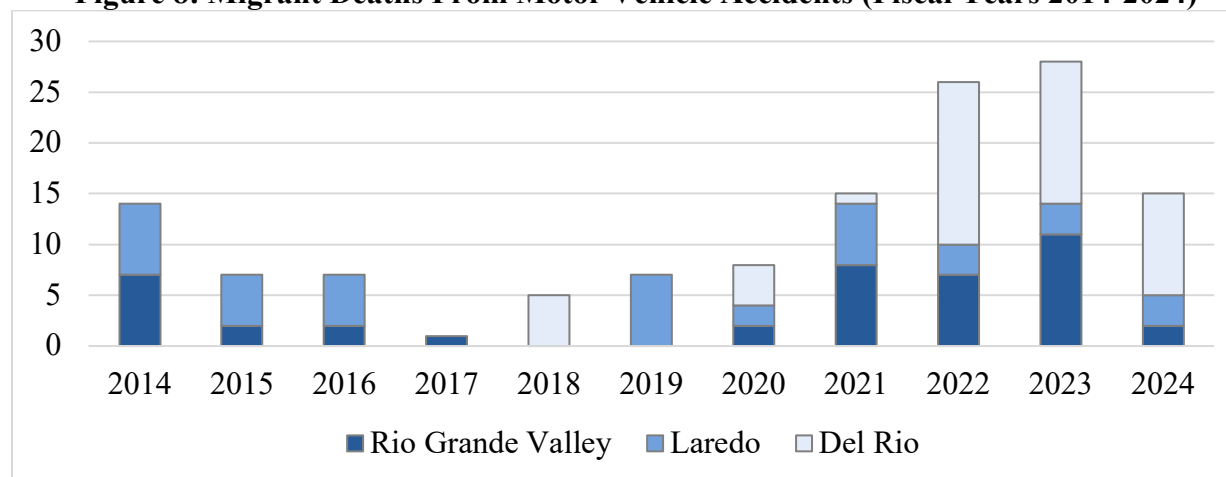
From 2014 to 2024, the Border Patrol recorded 133 migrant deaths that were related to motor vehicle accidents in South Texas. This total includes deaths from vehicle pick-ups at the border and from vehicles attempting to transport migrants through or around checkpoints.<sup>g</sup> From 2014 to

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<sup>g</sup> The Border Patrol migrant death dataset includes information on motor vehicle-related fatalities but the lack of geo-coordinates for recent years makes it difficult to determine how to categorize a motor vehicle fatality.

2021, there were between one and 15 motor vehicle related deaths each year. However, in 2022, the total number of deaths increased to 26 individuals, with a similar number the following year. These deaths' geographic distribution also shifted, with more individuals dying in the Del Rio Sector. Specifically, from 2014 to 2021, 16 percent of motor vehicle related deaths occurred in the Del Rio Sector. However, from 2022 to 2024, more than 80 percent of the total deaths took place in this area.

**Figure 8: Migrant Deaths From Motor Vehicle Accidents (Fiscal Years 2014-2024)**



*Data source: Border Patrol dataset*

### Stash Houses Near the Border

Pick-up drivers often take migrants to stash houses near the U.S.-Mexico border. During this phase, migrants face various risks, including physical violence, sexual assaults, and threats from stash house caretakers. While the Border Patrol's dataset did not link any deaths to this particular phase, the Smuggling Incident dataset and the Migrant Testimony dataset both shed light on the risks that migrants face at these stash houses.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, various cases highlighted stash house caretakers' violence and threats against migrants. There were several cases where smugglers demanded additional fees from migrants' loved ones and threatened to harm the migrants if they did not receive the payments. For example, in July 2014, a Honduran citizen man testified that smugglers in a Pharr stash house made several phone calls to his family members to demand money. The smugglers told the family that they would kill the man if they did not receive the payments.<sup>23</sup> There were also cases, where smugglers were violent toward migrants prior to demanding smuggling fees. For example, in a December 2020 case in Donna, stash house caretakers sexually assaulted both a man and a woman and forced them to call their family members to ask for thousands of dollars.

### Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention

Clandestine migrants attempting to enter the U.S. interior through South Texas must pass through or circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. To do so, smugglers facilitate migrants' movement through various forms of transportation, which each entail specific risks. These risks

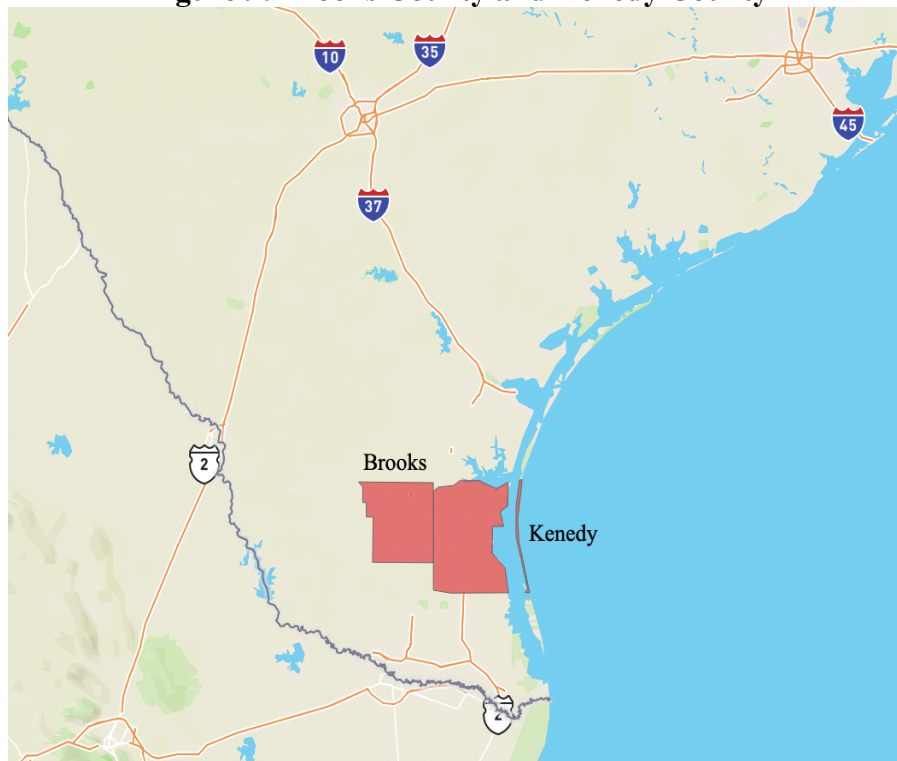
include exposure to the elements and dehydration while walking through the brush, car crashes and suffocation for migrants transiting in private vehicles and tractor trailers, and drowning in the Gulf of Mexico while traveling on boats. The following sections describe the risks associated with each transportation method.

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Foot***

To circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, some migrants hike through the surrounding brush. Some of these individuals may only walk for hours, while others may hike for days. However, all of the people walking on foot around checkpoints face various dangers, such as South Texas' extreme temperatures and a lack of clean drinking water. Within the brush, there are additional dangers from rattlesnakes, spiders, scorpions, and ticks.

To examine deaths related to exposure to the elements during the checkpoint circumvention phase, we focus on a case study of Brooks County and Kenedy County. Brooks County is home to the Border Patrol's Falfurrias checkpoint and Kenedy County is the location for the Sarita checkpoint. Given that these checkpoints are nearly 70 miles from the border, all of the migrants circumventing them on foot are driven north in vehicles and dropped off prior to the checkpoints. In total, we relied on 731 cases of recovered migrant remains in these counties, including 623 cases of recovered migrant remains in Brooks County and 108 cases in Kenedy County from 2014 to 2024.

**Figure 9: Brooks County and Kenedy County**

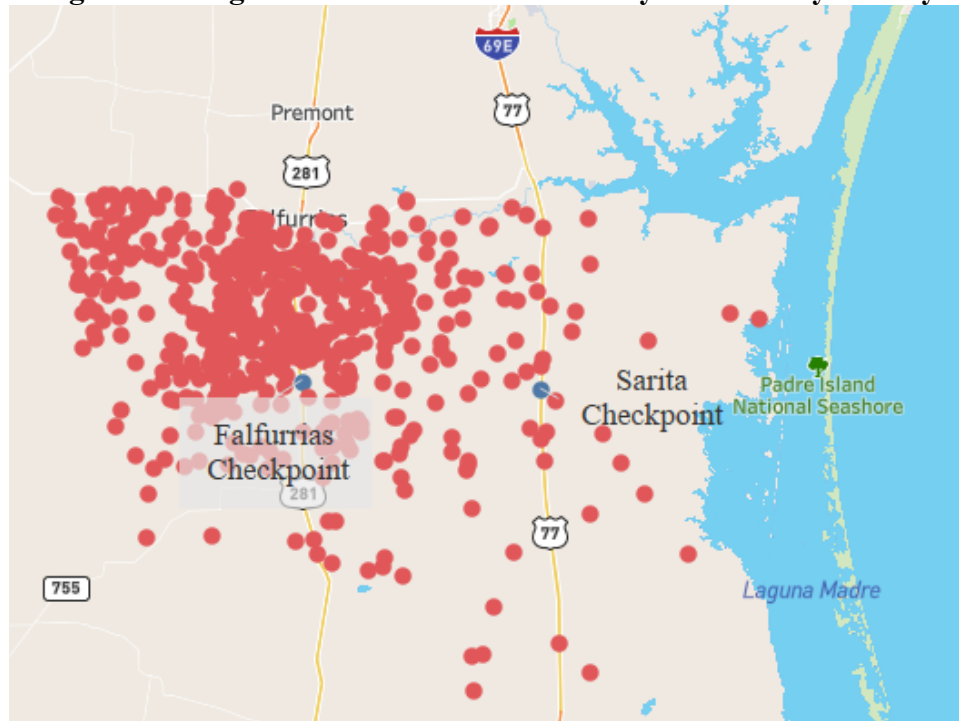


*Authors' elaboration*

The migrant deaths from exposure to the elements in Brooks County and Kenedy County show two primary trends. First, the deaths generally begin more than 10 miles south of the checkpoints,

suggesting that, in some cases, migrants are being dropped off at least a day's walk from the checkpoints. Second, the majority of deaths happen north of the checkpoints. These deaths appear to occur as migrants approach common pick up locations, such as along the east-west running U.S. Route 285.

**Figure 10: Migrant Deaths in Brooks County and Kenedy County**



*Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office & Kenedy County Sheriff's Office datasets*

In the Sheriff's Offices' datasets, there was demographic information for 94 percent of the individuals who died from exposure to the elements in Brooks County and Kenedy County from 2014 to 2024. For the cases with an identified gender, 80 percent were male and 20 percent were female. The majority of the migrants were from Mexico (33 percent), El Salvador (24 percent), Guatemala (21 percent) and Honduras (15 percent). The average age was 30 years old, but the ages ranged from 15 years old to 62 years old.

### ***Passing Through or Around Checkpoints in Private Vehicles***

Migrants also travel through or around the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in private vehicles. For this method of transportation, migrants face several primary risks, including suffocation and extreme temperatures in enclosed spaces and car accidents, especially during high-speed chases. The previous section on vehicle pick-ups near the border covers all motor-vehicle related deaths in South Texas. As a result, this section relies on the Smuggling Incident dataset to analyze specific risks for migrants traveling through or around the Border Patrol's checkpoints in private vehicles.

The Smuggling Incident dataset contained 13 cases where private vehicle drivers transported migrants through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in concealed spaces. The most common



concealed spaces were car trunks, which put migrants at risk of suffocation. However, smugglers also used additional types of spaces. For example, in a May 2024 case, smugglers placed a Guatemalan man inside of a cooler on the back of a pick-up truck. The heat index at the time was more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and the man later testified that he was panicking and struggling to breathe.<sup>24</sup>

The Smuggling Incident dataset also contained a case where a vehicle looking to circumvent a Border Patrol checkpoint engaged in a high-speed pursuit. In this April 2024 case, a Texas National Guard soldier made a sudden U-turn before a Border Patrol checkpoint in Kinney County.<sup>25</sup> The soldier sped away from pursuing authorities, swerved into oncoming traffic, and reached speeds of 100 miles per hour. Eventually, DPS troopers deployed road spikes and stopped the car before anyone was injured. However, the case could have ended differently and illustrates the potential dangers to migrants from high-speed pursuits.

### ***Passing Through Checkpoints in Tractor Trailers***

Migrants who transit through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in tractor trailers also face a range of risks. Overall, the primary risks include extreme temperatures and a lack of ventilation inside the tractor trailer's cargo area. While many tractor trailers have some form of refrigeration and ventilation, these systems may not always be working. This is particularly dangerous during the summer months, when outside temperatures can quickly heat up a trailer's cargo area.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, if the refrigeration is set at a low temperature—or there is no set temperature and the outside weather is cold—migrants can also be at risk of hypothermia.

The Border Patrol's migrant death dataset does not specifically categorize fatalities that are associated with tractor-trailers in South Texas. Further, it does not appear to even include the two most high-profile cases of migrants who died in tractor trailers in the region. For example, the Border Patrol's dataset did not include the July 2017 case where authorities discovered ten deceased migrants inside a tractor trailer in a San Antonio Walmart parking lot.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, it did not include the June 2022 case where law enforcement discovered 53 deceased migrants inside a trailer on a San Antonio city road. In both of these cases, the trailers' refrigeration and ventilation systems were not working.

While the Border Patrol dataset does not include these two high-profile cases, it is possible to examine the deceased migrants' demographics through newspaper accounts and court records. Combined, these two cases involved 63 migrants who died while transiting through South Texas in tractor trailers. For the cases with identifiable sex, 75 percent were male and the remaining 25 percent were female. For the cases with nationality information, the majority were Mexican citizens (56 percent), and the remaining individuals were from Honduras (25 percent), Guatemala (15 percent), and El Salvador (4 percent). The majority of the deceased individuals were adults, but the July 2022 tractor trailer case also included two deceased 13-year-olds.

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Boats***

Smugglers may also move migrants on boats in the Gulf of Mexico to circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. This method of transportation also comes with risks for migrants,

primarily due to the lack of safety equipment on these vessels. In particular, the boats may be in subpar condition or may not have sufficient life jackets.<sup>28</sup> In the Border Patrol's migrant death dataset, there is information on water-related fatalities, but the lack of geo-coordinates makes it impossible to see which drownings occurred in the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>h</sup> As a result, this section relies on the Smuggling Incident dataset to highlight specific risks for migrants traveling on boats.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were four cases that involved boat captains transporting migrants by sea. For these migrants, the primary risk was drowning in the Gulf of Mexico. For example, in a February 2022 case, a boat capsized near South Padre Island with nine people aboard. At first, the Port Mansfield Police Department discovered a deceased 29-year-old Honduran woman floating in the water.<sup>29</sup> The officers later found the capsized boat and recovered three more bodies—all of whom were determined to be migrants.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Airplanes***

Smugglers also move small numbers of migrants around Border Patrol checkpoints on airplanes. This is the safest form of checkpoint circumvention, largely due to the strict federal regulation of air travel. Neither the Border Patrol dataset nor the Smuggling Incident dataset included any migrant deaths or risks related to circumventing checkpoints on planes.

### **Stash Houses in the Interior**

Once migrants pass the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, smugglers take them to stash houses in or around San Antonio and Houston. These stash houses mark the final phase of clandestine migrants' transit through South Texas and are where migrants pay any remaining smuggling fees. However, migrants also face risks in these stash houses, including overcrowding, poor conditions, and violence and intimidation from stash house caretakers. The Border Patrol's dataset does not include specific deaths that could be linked to interior city stash houses. However, the Smuggling Incident dataset provides cases that illustrate the dangers that migrants face during this phase.

The first risks for migrants staying at stash houses in interior cities are poor conditions. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were two cases that documented these conditions. These cases noted lack of air-conditioning, no running water, and extreme temperatures in the dwellings. For example, in June 2024, San Antonio officials discovered 26 migrants crammed inside a shack-like structure that had no air conditioning or running water. Inside the dwelling, the temperature was nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit and many of the migrants were subsequently hospitalized for heat-related illnesses and other injuries.

The other risks were related to humiliation, intimidation, and violence from stash house caretakers. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were three cases that documented these dangers. For example, in an April 2014 case, authorities discovered 115 migrants in a stash house in Houston. The stash house caretakers had removed the migrants' clothes, shoes, phones, and other possessions to prevent them from escaping. The smugglers also reportedly used guns, paddles, tasers and other equipment to control the migrants.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in April 2021, authorities

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<sup>h</sup> Since the vast majority of water-related drownings are from migrants crossing the Rio Grande, this section does not rely on Border Patrol data.

discovered another stash house in southwest Houston with 97 migrants in two small rooms. According to the law enforcement accounts, there were deadbolts on the doors and all of the men were kept in their underwear to keep them from attempting to escape.<sup>32</sup> The smugglers reportedly threatened to harm the migrants if their family members did not pay their smuggling fees.

### **Chapter 3: Migrant Smugglers in South Texas**

During each clandestine migration stage in South Texas, there are different individuals who transport or guide migrants to help them evade detection. Policymakers and law enforcement generally refer to these individuals as “human smugglers” or “migrant smugglers,” while migrants may use the words “coyote” or “guide.” These people play various roles during each migration stage, such as transporting migrants at ports of entry, acting as brush guides, picking up migrants in vehicles, maintaining stash houses, captaining boats, flying planes, and coordinating the various smuggling activities. Some of the individuals—such as the coordinators—may have broad knowledge of how these activities fit together, while other individuals are only recruited to play a specific role.

This chapter relies on the Smuggling Incident dataset to address the third research question regarding who facilitates clandestine migration in South Texas. The general stereotype is that migrant smugglers along the U.S.-Mexico border are Mexican men. Yet, the Smuggling Incident dataset—which includes 224 arrested individuals—reveals a much broader range of demographics and backgrounds. Further, the smugglers’ demographic profiles shifted depending on the particular smuggling activity.

The following sections analyze the individuals who were arrested while participating in migrant smuggling activities in South Texas. The first section provides a high-level overview of the Smuggling Incident dataset’s arrested individuals, including their demographics and motivations. The following sections then turn to the different clandestine migration phases. For each of these phases, the chapter outlines the arrested individuals’ smuggling roles, demographics, and motivations.

#### **Clandestine Migrant Smugglers**

From 2014 to 2024, the Smuggling Incident dataset identified 224 individuals who were arrested for participating in a migrant smuggling activity in South Texas. These individuals do not fit into a single demographic profile, but rather span a wide range of demographics. For example, the arrested individuals include a 25-year-old active-duty soldier, a 15-year-old girl from a South Texas border town, and even an 80-year-old pilot with dual Belgian citizenship.

However, the most common demographic profile was a U.S. citizen man from Texas. Overall, for the cases with information, 81 percent of the arrested individuals were male and 19 percent were female. The majority of these individuals (66 percent) were U.S. citizens, followed by Mexican citizens (23 percent), and the remaining individuals (11 percent) were from a range of countries, including Cuba, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Jordan. For the U.S. citizen smugglers with residency information, the vast majority were from Texas. However, there were also arrested individuals from other states, such as California, Florida, Mississippi, Ohio, and New Jersey.

The arrested individuals’ ages also varied. For the cases that listed the individuals’ age, the median age was 28 years old. However, the ages ranged from 14 years old to 80 years old. Notably, the dataset only included 15 minors, which may be a significant undercount. Researchers and

journalists have documented that Mexican minors frequently act as brush guides who lead migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>33</sup> However, the Border Patrol generally returns these minors to Mexico instead of referring them for prosecution in the United States, which means that they are not captured in our dataset.<sup>34</sup>

Smugglers' demographic profiles also appeared to change across migration phases. For example, brush guides who led migrants across the Rio Grande were exclusively Mexican citizen men, while drivers at ports of entry were generally U.S. citizen women. Further, drivers who interfaced with Border Patrol agents at highway checkpoints were most frequently U.S. citizens.

**Figure 11: Smuggler Demographics by Clandestine Migration Phase**

Stage	Specifics	Most Common Demographic Profile	Residency Location
1. Border crossing	Port of entry	U.S. citizen female	Texas (border towns)
	Between ports of entry	Mexican citizen male	Mexico (border towns)
2. Vehicle pick-up at border	---	U.S. citizen male	Texas (border towns)
3. Stash house (pre-checkpoint)	---	U.S. citizen male	Texas (border towns)
4. Checkpoint concealment or circumvention	On foot	Mexican citizen male	Texas (interior cities)
	Private vehicle	U.S. citizen male	Texas (interior cities)
	Tractor trailer	U.S. citizen male	Texas (interior cities)
	Boat	U.S. citizen male	Texas (border towns and interior cities)
	Plane	U.S. citizen male	Texas (border towns)
5. Stash house (interior cities)	—	Mexican citizen male	Texas (interior cities)

*Authors' elaboration*

In the United States, smuggling coordinators often use various techniques to recruit people into migrant smuggling activities. In some cases, the coordinators or lower-level smugglers approached their family members, romantic partners, and friends, or even complete strangers to see if they

would be open to participating in the activities. While in other cases, smugglers used social media applications, such as Snapchat and TikTok to recruit individuals with the promise of easy money. These individuals often became involved in the smuggling activities for financial gain.

## **Crossing the Border**

During the first migration phase, smugglers guide migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border. These individuals play a range of roles, including driving vehicles at ports of entry and leading migrants across the Rio Grande and through the brush. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes 22 individuals who were arrested while attempting to move migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border. This includes ten people who were arrested while transporting people at a port of entry and 12 people who were guiding migrants across the Rio Grande between ports of entry. The following subsections outline the arrested individuals' demographics and motivations.

### ***Smugglers at Ports of Entry***

To help migrants enter the United States, smugglers may move them through a port of entry. These smugglers may accompany migrants on the port of entry's pedestrian lanes or drive them in private or commercial vehicles. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 10 individuals arrested for participating in these activities. Among these cases, the most common demographic profile was a U.S. citizen woman. In fact, all eight people who interfaced with CBP officials were women. For these cases, seven women were U.S. citizens and one woman was a Mexican citizen. Some of the women attempted to cross migrants by using forged identification documents or real documents that belonged to other people. This was the most common tactic for women who were attempting to smuggle minors. Other women attempted to cross migrants in their vehicle trunks.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were also two men who were arrested for moving migrants through ports of entry. This included a U.S. citizen man who was arrested in Brownsville in May 2024 for coaching minors on how to use false documents at ports of entry. Additionally, in August 2017, U.S. authorities arrested a male CBP officer who received payments for allowing certain migrants to pass through his vehicle lane at the Progreso Port of Entry.

### ***Smugglers Between Ports of Entry***

Smugglers also help migrants cross the border between ports of entry in South Texas. These smugglers act as brush guides and lead migrants across the Rio Grande and into the immediate borderlands. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 12 individuals who were arrested after acting as brush guides. In these cases, all 12 individuals were Mexican citizen men, with ages ranging from 17 years old to 56 years old.

However, as previously noted, the Smuggling Incident dataset misses a common demographic involved in cross-border migrant smuggling: the so-called "circuit kids" ("*niños de circuito*"). Circuit kids are Mexican minors who act as brush guides for groups of migrants along the border. They are often recruited into the activity because U.S. authorities do not prosecute Mexican minors

and, instead, send them back to Mexico.<sup>i</sup> These minors may cross numerous times, leading to their nickname of circuit kids. In 2021, Border Patrol agents told a reporter that they had apprehended a 17-year-old Mexican male brush guide in the Matamoros-Brownsville area 96 times.<sup>35</sup> Researchers have suggested that these minors are mostly male and normally between the ages of 15 years old and 17 years old.<sup>36</sup> Overall, the brush guides—both minors and adults—appeared to be involved in moving migrants for financial gain.

### **Vehicle Pick-Up at Border**

Once migrants and brush guides hike to an agreed upon location, drivers pick them up and transport them to the next phase of their migration journey. The Smuggling Incident dataset included 41 drivers involved in the vehicle pick-up phase. In these cases, nearly all the drivers were operating alone and used a single vehicle to transport the group of migrants.

For vehicle pick-ups, the most common demographic profile for a driver was a U.S. citizen man, but there were also individuals with different demographic profiles. For the individuals with gender information, 89 percent were men and 11 percent were women. While for the individuals with nationality information, 86 percent were U.S. citizens and 14 percent were Mexican citizens. Overall, these individuals were primarily from Texas cities along the border, with most drivers living in or near the location where they were arrested. The drivers' median age was 18 years old, but the ages ranged from 14 years old to 42 years old. Notably, ten of the drivers were minors, but nearly all of them were U.S. citizens.

The primary motivating factor for drivers picking up migrants near the border appeared to be financial gain. However, the total amount promised to drivers varied significantly. In November 2017, a 17-year-old driver claimed that he was paid \$300 to transport four Guatemalan men from the border near Sullivan City to a nearby stash house. While in an October 2022 case, a man claimed he was promised \$450 per migrant that he picked up at the border. This same man also noted that smugglers had promised to help cross his family, which may also have influenced his participation in the smuggling activity.

### **Stash Houses at the Border**

Smugglers may take migrants to stash houses near the border, which serve as consolidation points before the next migration phase. Individuals working at these stash houses play various roles, such as maintaining the stash house, collecting additional payments, providing food, and guarding migrants to prevent them from escaping. These individuals may work alone, but, more commonly, they work with at least one additional person. The sole person working alone as a stash house caretaker was a 57-year-old U.S. citizen woman who ran stash houses in Del Rio. This woman also acted as a migrant smuggling coordinator and connected the migrants in her stash houses to subsequent smuggling activities.

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<sup>i</sup> Once in Mexican territory, agents from Mexico's National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM) bring the minors to a local Family Development (*Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*, DIF) shelter. These minors generally spend a short amount of time in the shelters before family members pick them up.



In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 16 people who were arrested while participating in this migration phase. Of these individuals, 88 percent were men and 12 percent were women. For the individuals with nationality information, 92 percent were U.S. citizens and 8 percent were Mexican citizens. Of the arrested U.S. citizens, the majority of the individuals were from Texas—particularly border cities—but there was one individual from California. The median age for these individuals was 29 years old, but the ages ranged from 21 years old to 57 years old.

These individuals appeared to become involved in stash houses primarily for financial gain. However, one case involved a married couple. In this August 2024 case, a former official from the Starr County District Attorney’s Office recruited the couple—who were two 40-year-old U.S. citizens—to operate a stash house out of their Rio Grande City home. The husband and wife claimed that they would buy the migrants new clothes and feed them, and then the former official would pick up the migrants in her county-issued car and drive them to Houston.

## **Checkpoint Concealment and Circumvention**

To reach the U.S. interior, migrants must pass through or circumvent the Border Patrol’s highway checkpoints. For this phase, smugglers may act as brush guides, vehicle or tractor trailer drivers, boat captains, or airplane pilots. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 47 individuals who were arrested for participating in these activities. The following subsections analyze these different smuggler roles, along with the arrested individuals’ demographics and motivations.

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Foot***

Smugglers lead migrants around the Border Patrol’s checkpoints on foot. These smugglers act as brush guides and may be with migrants for a short period of time or travel with them for days to a predetermined vehicle pick-up location. Some of these brush guides lead migrants from the U.S.-Mexico border to a point beyond a checkpoint. These individuals are counted in the previous “border crossing” section. In other cases, drivers drop off brush guides and migrants before the checkpoints. These groups then hike to predetermined locations north of the checkpoints. This section covers these latter cases.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were five people who were arrested while participating in this migration activity. These individuals all led groups of migrants on foot around the Border Patrol’s checkpoints in Falfurrias and Sarita, which are approximately 70 miles from the border. For each of these cases, drivers transported groups of migrants from the Rio Grande Valley to a point before the checkpoint. The brush guides then led these groups through the brush and to specific locations north of the checkpoints. At these locations, drivers picked up the groups and took them to interior stash houses.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, the most common demographics for this activity were Mexican citizen men and U.S. citizen men. There was information about the gender for all five cases and all of the individuals were men. Additionally, three of the men were Mexican citizens and two were U.S. citizens. One of the U.S. citizens was living in Harlingen in the Rio Grande Valley, and two of the Mexican citizens were residing in Houston. The three men with age information were all in their early to late 20s.

The brush guides appeared to participate in the smuggling activity in order to earn money. In a February 2022 case, one of the U.S. citizens noted that a friend had recruited him by asking if he wanted to “make some money.” This individual later told law enforcement that he agreed to lead migrants through the brush because he had no money. Additionally, in a May 2023 case, one of the brush guides was a Mexican migrant who ran out of money to pay smugglers during his clandestine migration journey. As a result, he began working as a brush guide in order to earn money and reach his final destination.

### ***Passing Through or Around Checkpoints in Private Vehicles***

Smugglers also drive migrants through or around Border Patrol checkpoints in private vehicles. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 16 people who were arrested for participating in this activity. All of the cases had gender information, and 69 percent of the arrested individuals were male and the remaining 31 percent were female. In all of the cases with a listed citizenship status, the arrested individuals were U.S. citizens, and all were living in Texas. However, the locations where they lived ranged widely, and included San Antonio, Houston, Laredo, El Paso, and several smaller Texas towns. The median age for these individuals was 31 years old, but the ages ranged from 18 years old to 51 years old.

The individuals acting as vehicle drivers appeared to become involved primarily for financial gain. These drivers reported that they were offered varying amounts of money. In a June 2016 case, one driver claimed that coordinators promised him \$1,500 to take two migrants to Houston. While in May 2021, another man claimed that coordinators offered him \$4,000 to take a man from Laredo to San Antonio.

### ***Passing Through Checkpoints in Tractor Trailers***

Smugglers also drive migrants through checkpoints in tractor trailers. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes 19 individuals who were arrested for smuggling migrants through checkpoints in tractor trailers or other large vehicles. These drivers generally did not have direct contact with the migrants. Instead, other smugglers at the border transported the migrants to the trailer and instructed them to get inside.

The most common demographic profile for this phase was a U.S. citizen man. All of the Smuggling Incident dataset’s cases had information about the gender, and 89 percent of the drivers were male and 11 percent were female. For the two arrested women, one was a passenger in a tractor trailer and the other was arrested while transporting 30 migrants in a dump truck. For the cases with nationality information, 82 percent were U.S. citizens and the remaining 18 percent were from other countries (Cuba and Nicaragua). The median age of the arrested drivers was 45 years old, but the ages ranged from 28 years old to 62 years old.

The drivers appeared to be transporting migrants in tractor trailers for financial gain. Given the large number of migrants that may be concealed in a trailer—and the risk associated with crossing through a Border Patrol checkpoint—these drivers can make significant amounts of money. For example, in a December 2021 case, a 47-year-old U.S. citizen man attempted to transport 52

migrants in a tractor trailer traveling from Laredo to San Antonio. After the man was caught, he stated that smuggling coordinators had promised him \$50,000 to make the trip. These large sums of money may explain why arrested tractor trailer drivers also hailed from states outside of Texas, including Mississippi, New Jersey, Florida, and Louisiana.

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Boats***

Smugglers may also act as boat captains and move migrants up the Texas coast in order to circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were two individuals who were arrested for driving these boats. Both of these arrested individuals were U.S. citizen men who were living in Texas (San Antonio and Rio Hondo). The one man with a listed age was 43 years old.

These two boat captains appeared to transport migrants on boats for financial gain. In an October 2021 case, one of the boat captains testified that he visited a friend from prison who was living in Harlingen. During this trip, his friend allegedly offered to pay him \$6,000 to transport six individuals north of the Border Patrol's Sarita checkpoint by boat. Similarly, in the January 2022 case, smuggling coordinators offered the second boat captain \$1,800 to transport three migrants around the Border Patrol's Sarita checkpoint by boat.

### ***Circumventing Checkpoints on Airplanes***

Smugglers may also transport migrants around the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints on airplanes. These individuals may act as pilots, organize the charter planes, or accompany the migrants on the planes. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were four individuals arrested for transporting migrants on airplanes, with demographic information for three people. These included one pilot, who was an 81-year-old man with dual U.S. and Belgian citizenship. It also included two individuals who organized a charter plane and accompanied the migrants on the plane: a 40-year-old man from the Dominican Republic and a 21-year-old U.S. citizen woman, respectively. These individuals appeared to be motivated by financial gain, with the pilot noting that he was going to earn \$3,000 to transport four migrants from Weslaco to Houston.

### ***Stash Houses in the Interior***

Once migrants pass the Border Patrol's checkpoints, smugglers take them to stash houses in San Antonio and Houston. In these stash houses, caretakers collect the remaining smuggling fees and either release the migrants into the city or move them to the next phase of their journey. Smugglers play various roles in these stash houses, including maintaining the stash house, calling the migrant's loved ones to collect payments, purchasing and preparing food, and guarding the migrants to prevent them from escaping. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes 13 individuals who were arrested in relation to this smuggling phase.

For interior stash house caretakers, the most common demographic profile was a Mexican citizen man. However, there were several other demographic profiles in the dataset. All of the cases had information about the gender, with men comprising 85 percent of the arrested individuals and women making up the remaining 15 percent. Notably, all ten individuals with nationality

information were non-U.S. citizens. Seventy percent of the arrested individuals were from Mexico (seven people), 20 percent were from Honduras (two people), and 10 percent were from El Salvador (one person). The arrested individuals had a median age of 30 years old, but their ages ranged from 20 years old to 45 years old.

These individuals appeared to become involved in stash house activities to earn money. In a March 2014 case, the five arrested individuals each made between \$700 to \$3,500 every two weeks. These individuals reported that their responsibilities included providing instructions to the migrants, guarding them, preparing their food, and contacting loved ones to arrange smuggling payments. The specific tasks seemed to dictate the payments. A 40-year-old Mexican man reported receiving \$700 to \$800 every two weeks to guard the migrants and prevent them from escaping. While a 20-year-old Mexican man received \$3,400 to \$3,500 every two weeks to transport migrants to their families after they paid the smuggling fee.

Notably, there were two stash house caretakers who were in a romantic relationship. In this April 2014 case, a boyfriend-girlfriend couple worked together alongside other smugglers. Each partner in the relationship played a different role in the stash house. The male smuggler was responsible for driving and guarding migrants, while the female smuggler maintained a ledger and called migrants' families to arrange payments and final transportation logistics.

### **Migrant Smuggling Coordinators**

Migrant smuggling coordinators oversee the various activities that make up clandestine migrants' journeys in South Texas. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 23 individuals who were arrested for acting as migrant smuggling coordinators. These coordinators organized the migrants' overall smuggling journeys, collected payments, paid the various contracted drivers and stash house caretakers, selected vehicle pick-up locations, and monitored the migrants' movements in real time, among other activities.

The most common demographic for a migrant smuggling coordinator was a U.S. citizen man. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there was information on the gender for all of the arrested coordinators, with men constituting 70 percent and women making up the remaining 30 percent. For the cases with nationality information, 63 percent were U.S. citizens, 16 percent were Mexican citizens, 16 percent were Honduran citizens, and 5 percent (one person) was from Jordan. The arrested individuals had a median age of 39 years old, but the ages ranged from 21 years old to 57 years old.

The coordinators often recruited individuals to participate in smuggling activities via social media, such as through WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Local law enforcement also suggested that these coordinators may prefer to recruit minors, since the U.S. judicial system may treat minors more favorably than adults.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

This policy research report examines clandestine migration in South Texas, and focuses on the various transit routes and activities, risks to migrants, and involved smugglers. To conduct this analysis, we used a mixed methods approach. We primarily relied on two original datasets that cover migrant smuggling in South Texas from 2014 to 2024. However, to analyze risks to migrants, we used migrant death datasets from the Border Patrol and county-level actors. Finally, we conducted interviews with federal and local officials, law enforcement, and journalists to address the remaining questions.

The report has several findings. First, we find that clandestine migrants in South Texas follow different routes that are shaped by crossing points, terrain, and enforcement efforts. Specifically, individuals crossing the border through the Rio Grande Valley experience five migration phases, while individuals crossing between Laredo and Del Rio may pass through only three phases. Second, migrants face serious risks during each phase, but the greatest risks are drowning in the Rio Grande and exposure to the elements while trekking through private ranchland. Third, migrant smugglers in South Texas play various roles, from coordinating activities to guiding migrants through the brush. Overall, we find a diverse range of people engaged in migrant smuggling, with the most common demographic profile shifting by smuggling activity.

This policy research report lays the foundation for future research on clandestine migration. Given the variation in smuggling operations, we suggest that future research could analyze and compare how different smugglers recruit individuals and organize their activities. Additionally, this research found extensive evidence that smugglers and migrants rely on social media and WhatsApp to move through the region. This sets the stage for potential research on migrants and smugglers' use of technology to navigate dangerous routes and avoid detection. Finally, this report examined migrants in transit through South Texas, but new projects could also link migrants' transit experiences to subsequent health and well-being indicators once they reach their final destinations.

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