The University of Texas at Austin
Strauss
CENTER
for International Security and Law

CENTRAL AMERICA & MEXICO POLICY INITIATIVE

CLANDESTINE MIGRATION AND MIGRANT RISK IN WEST TEXAS AND NEW MEXICO

FALL 2024 – SPRING 2025

Clandestine Migration and Migrant Risk in

West Texas and New Mexico

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Partnerships and Acknowledgments

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

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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

HSI   Homeland Security Investigations

ICE   U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

PACER   Public Access to Court Electronic Records

RV   Recreational Vehicle

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

Each year, thousands of clandestine migrants attempt to cross the U.S.-Mexico border to reach destinations throughout the United States. This practice dates back to the 1880s, when the U.S. Congress passed the country's first restrictive immigration laws.[1] At this time, various populations became unable to enter the country through official ports of entry. In response, some of these individuals hired smugglers and looked for clandestine ways to enter U.S. territory. Over time, the U.S. federal government has passed more restrictive immigration laws and allocated resources toward enforcing these laws, with migrants continuing to turn to smugglers and clandestine routes to enter U.S. territory.

Clandestine migrants' journeys into the United States can vary depending on where they cross the U.S.-Mexico border. This report analyzes clandestine migration in West Texas and New Mexico, which corresponds with the Border Patrol's El Paso and Big Bend sectors.[i] It seeks to answer three research questions. First, how do clandestine migrants make their way into the United States through this region? Second, what risks do migrants face during each phase of their clandestine journey? Finally, third, who are the people facilitating clandestine migration in West Texas and New Mexico?

To answer these questions, we use a mixed methods approach. We primarily rely on two novel datasets—a Smuggling Incident dataset and a Migrant Testimony dataset—to explore the different migration phases and understand smuggler demographics. For analysis on migrant risks, we utilize a person-level Border Patrol dataset and local-level datasets that document migrant deaths. Additionally, to fill in any gaps, we conducted 13 interviews with law enforcement, legal professionals, academics, and journalists. Overall, this analysis focuses on the period from 2014 to 2024.

This research report has three primary findings. First, it finds that the migration journey can look vastly different for migrants passing through an urban area in the region compared to remote desert areas. For example, when individuals cross the border in El Paso, migrants are typically picked up in a vehicle close to the border and transit through three to five migration phases before reaching a city in the U.S. interior. Conversely, migrants crossing the border in remote areas in New Mexico, the area southeast of El Paso, or near Big Bend National Park may walk long distances and pass through three to four migration phases. The second primary finding was that these urban and desert routes pose different risks. In the El Paso area, migrants' biggest risks came from crossing the canals and Rio Grande. While in rural areas, the risks came from exposure to the elements and dehydration in the rough terrain. The third and final finding was that there is no single demographic profile for migrant smugglers in the region. The most common demographic profile was a U.S. citizen male, but arrested smugglers constituted a range of profiles.

The report is structured into four chapters. The following chapter outlines the report's methodology and the subsequent chapters each address one of the three research questions. Chapter One documents the various migration phases in West Texas and New Mexico. Chapter

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[i] For this report, we use clandestine migrants to refer to individuals that have entered the country without authorization and who attempt to avoid detection.

Two details the risks that migrants face during their journeys into the United States. Finally, Chapter Three focuses on migrant smugglers, and highlights their demographic profiles and motivations. Each chapter analyzes these topics across the different migration phases: crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, vehicle pick-up at the border, stash-houses near the border, Border Patrol checkpoint concealment or circumvention, and stash houses in interior cities.

Methodology

To answer the report's three research questions, we relied on a mixed-methods approach. First, we created and analyzed two novel datasets—the Smuggling Incident dataset and the Migrant Testimony dataset—that cover migrant smuggling events and document clandestine migrant experiences. Next, to analyze migrant risk and mortality, we used two additional datasets. These datasets included the Border Patrol's person-level death data and various local level actors' migrant death datasets that we combined into the Local Actors dataset. We supplemented these datasets with secondary literature and 13 interviews with law enforcement officials, legal professionals, academics, and journalists.

The Smuggling Incident dataset is the report's primary dataset. To build this dataset, we identified smuggling events in local newspapers, government agency press releases, and on social media sites such as X and Facebook, among other sources.[ii] For each event, we coded 49 variables, which included information about the incident, the migration phase, the clandestine migrants, and the involved smugglers. Overall, the Smuggling Incident dataset includes 150 migrant smuggling events from 2014 to 2024 in West Texas and New Mexico. These events include 168 arrested individuals and approximately 2,700 apprehended migrants.

Once we coded these incidents, we then searched the federal Public Access to Court Electronic Records (PACER) database for each named smuggler. The goal was to obtain court documents—such as criminal complaints or indictments—that provided additional case details. For our 150 incidents, we were able to obtain court documents for 53 cases. We then incorporated relevant information from these documents into our dataset. In general, we used this dataset to learn more about migrant smuggling operations, risks to migrants, smuggler demographics, and smugglers' motivations.

To build the Migrant Testimony dataset, we also used information from the collected court documents. Of the 53 smuggling incidents with court documents, 14 cases included testimonies from apprehended migrants. From these cases, we coded a total of 18 migrant testimonies into the Migrant Testimony dataset. For each testimony, we tracked 15 variables, including the migrant's demographic information and their experience during each migration phase. We primarily relied on this dataset to learn more about how migrants moved through each clandestine migration phase and the conditions that they experienced along the way.

These datasets represent the first scholarly attempt to track clandestine migration and migrant smugglers in West Texas and New Mexico. However, they have several limitations. The first limitation is that the data only includes incidents where authorities apprehended smugglers. This means that the dataset misses any individuals who successfully avoided detection. Second, the Smuggling Incident dataset's cases are likely not a representative sample of overall smuggling incidents in West Texas and New Mexico since they were compiled from news outlets. In general, news outlets and government agencies may highlight only specific types of stories, such as cases that involve large numbers of migrants, injuries and deaths, or unconventional

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[ii] These government agencies included U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The local newspaper articles came from sources such as the *El Paso Times* and the *Big Bend Sentinel*.

smuggling tactics—which skews the cases toward these types of incidents. Due to these limitations, we only used these datasets for descriptive analysis.

Next, we analyzed several datasets that cover migrant risk and mortality in West Texas and New Mexico. First, we reviewed the Border Patrol's person-level migrant death dataset from its Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS). The BSITS dataset includes 605 migrant deaths from January 2014 to August 2024 and tracks a range of variables, including the general location of the recovered remains, the cause of death, and any available information on the migrant's sex, age, and nationality. The Border Patrol does not publish this data, but has released it to researchers through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.[2] We used this dataset to look at migrant death trends over time. However, the BSITS dataset only includes geo-coordinates for migrant remains recovered between 2014 and 2017, which limited our ability to map recent cases and differentiate between potential migration phases.

As such, we also relied on a dataset that compiles various local level actors' migrant death datasets. Overall, this dataset—which we refer to as the Local Actors dataset—includes migrant death records from a range of state and county level entities (see Figure 1).[3] It contains 603 migrant death cases from January 2014 to July 2024, but not all the datasets cover the entire time period.

Figure 1: Datasets by Source and Years Covered

Dataset	Data Source	Years Covered*	Number of Cases
Local Actors Dataset	New Mexico Office of the Medical Investigator	2014-2024	345
	El Paso County Office of the Medical Examiner	2014-2024	188
	Hudspeth County Sheriff's Office	2017-2022	36
	Hudspeth County Justices of the Peace District 1 and 2	2022-2023	17
	Presidio County Sheriff's Office	2017-2022	10
	Independently Reported	2021-2022	4
	International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Missing Migrant Project	2016-2020	3
Border Patrol	BSITS Data	2014-2024	605

Source: Local Actors dataset

The Local Actors dataset covers a range of variables. These variables include information on where and when the remains were discovered and information about the cause of death. It also includes migrant demographics, when available, such as the deceased migrant's sex, country of origin, and age. Notably, this dataset includes geo-coordinates for 93 percent of cases, which allowed us to map and analyze migrant risk by specific location and migration phase.

We made several determinations in order to match the Local Actors data to the associated migration phase. First, migrants crossing the border on foot in desert areas in West Texas and New Mexico walked for up to 55 miles from the border. Some of these migrants hiked to a point north of the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. Using our migration phases framework—which is outlined in Chapter One—we could code any deaths along these routes as either "crossing the border" or "circumventing checkpoints on foot." We classified these cases as "crossing the border" because all these migrants appeared to start walking north from a point in Mexico.

Our second determination was related to migrant deaths from vehicle accidents. For these cases, the Local Actors dataset only included the location where the vehicle crashed. This made it difficult to determine if the vehicle was initially picking people up after they crossed the border (the "vehicle pick-up" phase) or transporting migrants from a stash house through a Border Patrol checkpoint (the "circumventing or passing through a checkpoint in private vehicles" phase). For these cases, we attempted to make the classification by examining the particular area's migration routes and border enforcement infrastructure. For example, if the vehicle accident was located near the border, then we classified it as a vehicle pick-up near the border. However, if the vehicle accident occurred near or around a checkpoint, then we classified it as being part of the circumventing or passing through a checkpoint phase.

The Local Actors dataset has several limitations. First, this data does not have standardized time frames across the different county- and state-level datasets, which makes it challenging to analyze regional trends over time. To mitigate this limitation, we used BSITS data for historical trends, since it tracked migrant deaths in New Mexico and West Texas over the entire time period. Second, the county- or state-level actors did not always collect or release the same type of information for each death. This meant that some local datasets did not have geo-coordinates or certain demographic information, making it more complicated to analyze trends throughout the area. We sought to mitigate this limitation by cross-referencing cases with the BSITS data and the Smuggling Incident dataset. We also sought to gain additional context around the migrant death data through interviews with law enforcement officials, legal professionals, academics, and journalists.

Chapter 1: Clandestine Migration in West Texas and New Mexico

In West Texas and New Mexico, clandestine migrants navigate the borderlands via distinct routes. These routes are shaped by the crossing location, terrain, and nearby border enforcement infrastructure, among other factors.[4] There are three primary routes that migrants take to move through the region, including in both urban and rural areas. First, migrants that cross into New Mexico or move north after crossing into El Paso travel toward Albuquerque. Second, migrants crossing into West Texas and moving east from El Paso travel toward Odessa, Lubbock, or Dallas.[5] Finally, some migrants that crossed the U.S.-Mexico border in Arizona swing through western New Mexico to avoid Border Patrol checkpoints before circling back to Arizona. Figure 2 outlines clandestine migrants' most common routes through the region, including their border crossing points and final destinations.[iii]

Figure 2: Clandestine Migrant Routes in West Texas and New Mexico
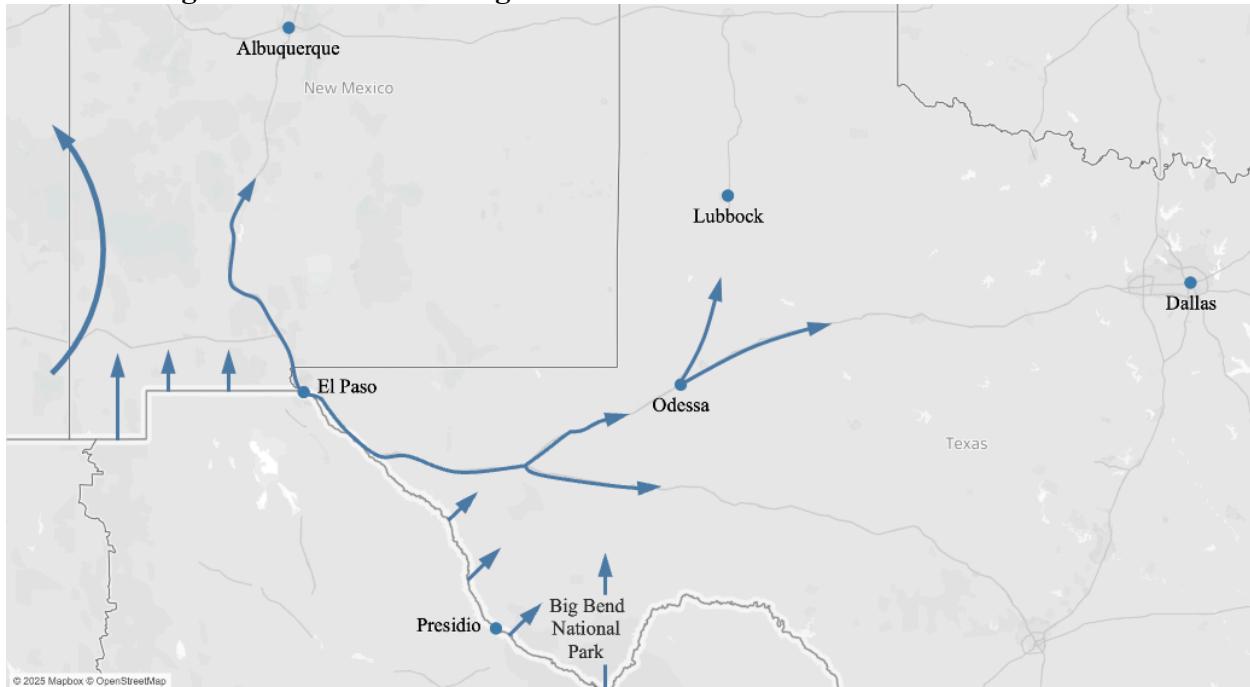
Source: Authors' elaboration

Migrants move through various phases as they follow these routes. The first phase involves crossing the international border, either at designated ports of entry or between them. Once across the border, migrants are either quickly picked up by vehicles or they may walk an extended distance to a vehicle pick-up point far into the U.S. interior. If migrants are immediately picked up, they may be taken to stash houses near the border and then guided around or through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. Finally, once migrants reach a major city in the New Mexico or Texas interior—such as Albuquerque or Odessa—smugglers take them to another stash house to pay the remainder of their smuggling fee. Depending on where migrants cross the border, they may pass through three to five migration phases.

[iii] Most migrants that cross in the region continue on to places such as Chicago, New York, and New Jersey.

This chapter aims to answer the report's first research question regarding how clandestine migrants transit through the West Texas and New Mexico borderlands. To undertake this analysis, the chapter relies on the Smuggling Incident and Migrant Testimony datasets to provide insight into the different clandestine migration phases and migrants' experiences during their journeys. The following sections detail the different migration phases and the conditions for migrants along the way.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

The first clandestine migration phase 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. To cross at a port of entry, clandestine migrants either present themselves as having the appropriate status or documentation to enter the country or are concealed inside a private or commercial vehicle. Conversely, migrants crossing between ports of entry hike on foot and may have to navigate a range of obstacles, such as the Rio Grande, border barriers, irrigation canals, and rough desert terrain. The following subsections explore clandestine migrants' specific modes of border crossing in West Texas and New Mexico.

Ports of Entry

Throughout West Texas and New Mexico, there are seven ports of entry along the border. In West Texas, these include the El Paso Port of Entry (which is made up of four international bridges), Tornillo-Guadalupe Port of Entry, Fort Hancock Port of Entry, and Presidio Port of Entry.[iv] In New Mexico, the ports of entry include the Antelope Wells Port of Entry, Columbus Port of Entry, and Santa Teresa Port of Entry. At each port of entry, U.S. Customs and Border Enforcement (CBP) officers review travelers' documents and asks questions to confirm their identity and nationality.[v]

[iv] The four international bridges are the Bridge of the Americas, Good Neighbor Bridge, Paso Del Norte Bridge, and Ysleta-Zaragoza Bridge.

[v] Traveler's documents may include a passport, green card, or a U.S. visa, among other forms of documentation.

Figure 3: Ports of Entry in West Texas and New Mexico

Clandestine migrants may attempt to cross the border at a port of entry on foot or in a private or commercial vehicle. One method of crossing is for migrants to present themselves as having the necessary documentation to enter the country. To undertake this approach, smugglers provide migrants with false crossing documents. After entering the United States, the migrants may return the documents to the smugglers to be reused in the future.[7] Smugglers may also place these migrants in cars with people who have legitimate border crossing paperwork, which can help them to avoid detection.[8]

The second method of crossing clandestine migrants at ports of entry is to conceal them in a vehicle. The Smuggling Incident dataset contained only one case where a clandestine migrant attempted to enter the United States at a port of entry. In this case—which occurred in September 2022—the driver strapped the migrant onto a truck flatbed with a harness. The driver then took the truck across the Paso del Norte International Bridge in El Paso. An interview with a local actor also highlighted two additional cases at ports of entry. This included a case where smugglers attempted to move 15 migrants into the United States in a box truck's cargo area, and a second case where a driver attempted to smuggle a family member inside a vehicle's storage compartment.[9]

Between Ports of Entry

Clandestine migrants crossing between ports of entry may enter the United States through urban areas or remote deserts. Each form of crossing involves distinct approaches and obstacles. If migrants cross in urban areas, they can cross above ground or underground. Migrants crossing above ground may need to climb over border barriers and pass through swift-moving irrigation canals. While migrants crossing underground in urban areas may trek through storm drainage

tunnels, the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez cross-border sewer system, or man-made tunnels. Alternatively, migrants crossing the border in remote, desert areas may have to cross the Rio Grande, climb over a border barrier, or walk through the desert. The Smuggling Incident dataset included 21 incidents in urban areas and 24 incidents in rural areas where migrants crossed the border between ports of entry throughout the region.

Urban Areas. Migrants may cross the border in urban areas—such as El Paso, Sunland Park, and Presidio—in the West Texas and New Mexico region. These cities vary in size. El Paso is the largest border city, with a population of approximately 680,000 people, while Sunland Park has a population of about 18,000 people, and Presidio has a population of around 3,000 people.[vi][10] The Smuggling Incident dataset included 21 cases of migrants crossing between ports of entry in urban areas.

If migrants are transiting above ground, they face various obstacles depending on their route. The first obstacle for migrants crossing in El Paso or West Texas is the Rio Grande. The Rio Grande begins to serve as the international border between the United States and Mexico just west of El Paso, and splits the city from its cross-border neighbor Ciudad Juárez. The river then runs through the rest of West Texas and acts as the dividing border for this region. However, for more than a decade, the Rio Grande near El Paso has had little to no water. This means that the river itself is rarely a serious obstacle for clandestine migrants crossing into the city.

The biggest obstacle for migrants crossing into El Paso is the city's irrigation canal network. These canals run near or parallel to the Rio Grande and contain water that is used for irrigation in El Paso County and Hudspeth County. The canals are not wide but they contain rapidly flowing water and slippery, steep concrete banks. According to December 2023 testimony from El Paso's Chief Border Patrol Agent, the irrigation canals were designed to have strong currents in order to move debris through the canal, which makes it more perilous for migrants.[11] These conditions are particularly hazardous during the summer months, when farmers' demand for water peaks and authorities release more water into the canals.

Clandestine migrants can also cross into urban areas through underground pathways, which include tunnels, storm drains, and sewage systems. To manage scarce water supplies, El Paso and Ciudad Juárez have interconnected water infrastructure. The El Paso sewer system consists of over 300-miles of drainage lines.[12] In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were four cases that involved migrants crossing the border through underground infrastructure. For example, in a November 2017 case, Border Patrol agents saw four migrants exiting a storm drain near a restaurant in El Paso. In another August 2023 case, members of the El Paso Independent School District police spotted migrants crawling out of a manhole that was connected to a storm drainage tunnel. When the Border Patrol investigated the incident, they apprehended 11 migrants who were still inside the tunnel. Smugglers may also create tunnels between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. On January 9, 2025, Border Patrol agents found a man-made tunnel coming from Mexico that led to a storm drain in El Paso.[13]

The fourth obstacle for clandestine migrants crossing in urban areas are border barriers, particularly in El Paso and parts of Sunland Park. Migrants must climb over these barriers, which

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[vi] El Paso lies across the border from Ciudad Juárez, which has more than 1.5 million residents.

are frequently made of steel bollards that can reach up to 30 feet tall.[14] In some areas of El Paso, there is more than one border barrier.[15] In these areas, the 30 foot border barrier is accompanied by smaller fences on either side. In some parts of El Paso, particularly in close proximity to the ports of entry, Texas authorities have also installed concertina wire along the barriers.

To climb over the border barriers, migrants may use different types of ladders. In October 2023, a *Texas Monthly* article described how one group of clandestine migrants used a standard metal ladder to climb up the Mexican side of the wall. Smugglers then helped migrants slowly descend to U.S. territory via a rope tied to their waists.[16] Migrants often attempt to cross the border barriers in urban areas in the early morning or in the evening to avoid the desert heat.[17] In 2023, there were 44 consecutive days in El Paso with temperatures above 100 degrees.[vii][18]

Notably, there is no border wall in Presidio or in a large portion of Sunland Park. However, there is a concertina wire barrier on the U.S. side of the border between Texas and New Mexico. Starting in 2024, the Texas Army National Guard installed this concertina wire on the Texas side of the state border as part of Texas Governor Greg Abbott's Operation Lonestar, a state-led border security initiative. Governor Abbott stated that the concertina wire was necessary to keep out migrants that crossed the border in New Mexico and then attempted to cross into Texas.[19]

The part of Sunland Park that does not contain a border wall is instead marked by Mount Cristo Rey. This mountain stretches across the U.S.-Mexico border line, with about two-thirds of Mount Cristo Rey in U.S. territory and the remaining one-third in Mexico. For migrants crossing on foot in this area, a guide often serves as a lookout from the top of the mountain. The guide watches for Border Patrol agents and uses WhatsApp calls or texts to help migrants navigate down the mountain into Sunland Park. Guides have also used tactics such as sending a group of women and children asylum seekers across the border in one area to distract Border Patrol agents, while crossing a group of male clandestine migrants in another area.[20]

Rural Areas. Migrants can also cross into the United States in remote, desert areas. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes 24 cases of migrants crossing the border between ports of entry in rural areas. If migrants cross in these areas, they face two to three obstacles. The first obstacle for these migrants in West Texas is the Rio Grande. While the Rio Grande does not contain much water near El Paso, the water levels vary throughout West Texas and depend on rainfall. For example, in 2024, the U.S. Geological Survey documented that the Rio Grande's depth shifted from between 2 and 13 feet in the eastern end of Big Bend National Park over the course of the year.[21]

The second obstacle for migrants crossing through desert areas are border barriers. In New Mexico, the border wall is the primary dividing line between Mexico and the United States. The wall covers nearly two-thirds of the state's 180-mile border with Mexico.[viii][22] While in West Texas, the border wall is intermittently present in some rural areas, such as near Fort Hancock. However, there is no border wall from Fort Hancock through Big Bend National Park, constituting a stretch of almost 220 miles.[23]

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vii In 2024, the Sunland Park Fire Department measured ground temperatures of 156 degrees Fahrenheit.
viii Notably, there is fragmented border wall coverage in Hidalgo County, which constitutes the state's boot heel and is a common crossing location for clandestine migrants.

The third obstacle for migrants crossing in rural areas is the region's physical terrain. Once migrants cross into U.S. territory, they begin hiking to a vehicle pick-up location. However, these migrants are often hiking through arid desert, with summer temperatures averaging near 100 degrees Fahrenheit and winter temperatures dipping below freezing. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, clandestine migrants' experiences walking from the border to their vehicle pick-up locations varied significantly. Some migrants were picked up almost immediately from a spot near the border.[ix] However, other migrants walked for days to reach a point beyond one of the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints.[x][24] Migrant group sizes also varied widely for these treks. For example, in the Big Bend region, most groups consisted of about 15 people, but, in recent years, there have also been several apprehended groups with more than 50 people.

Vehicle Pick-Ups

Once migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border, the next migration phase involves vehicle pick-ups. During this phase, drivers pick up migrants hiking from the border and transport them to either a stash house near the border or a stash house in an interior city. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, 44 cases involved a vehicle that was picking up migrants near the border. The majority of these cases were in El Paso, particularly along the city's west side.

After migrants reach their vehicle-pick up locations, they must identify their vehicles. In some instances, the vehicles alerted the migrants to their presence. For example, in a July 2019 case, a white van approached a group of migrants and flashed its lights to signal that the individuals should get inside. In other instances, the foot guides traveling with the group organized the vehicle pick-ups. In an April 2023 case in Lordsburg, New Mexico, a migrant stated that his guide made a phone call during the trek to arrange the group's pick-up logistics.

When the vehicles arrive at the predetermined locations, the drivers instruct the migrants to get into the vehicles. In testimonies, migrants recalled that the vehicles were often crowded. In October 2022, a Honduran migrant testified that she could not secure herself in the truck that picked her up, since there were too many passengers. While in a January 2023 case in Sunland Park, a woman recalled that the driver squeezed her group of 29 migrants into a vehicle that was designed to hold only 12 people.

Overall, the pick-up vehicles ranged in size, make, model, and color. Some of the dataset's most commonly used cars were Dodges and Nissans. The vehicle's size often determined the number of migrants who could fit inside. In smaller cars, law enforcement found anywhere from two to seven migrants. While in larger vehicles—such as pick-up trucks and SUVs—they found groups of 8 to 24 migrants. In a June 2021 case in Brewster County, a sheriff's deputy noticed a recreational vehicle (RV) was swaying and weaving between lanes. After stopping the RV, the deputy found 48 migrants inside the vehicle.

[ix] For example, in July 2019, a migrant crossed the border into Columbus, New Mexico and walked for only an hour to reach her pick-up location on a nearby highway.

[x] Migrants crossing in Hidalgo County in New Mexico may hike on either side of the Animas Mountains (near Antelope Wells) to I-10 to be picked up in vehicles. This trek is roughly 65 miles and takes multiple days.

Stash Houses Near the Border

The pick-up vehicles may transport migrants to the third migration phase: stash houses near the border. These stash houses serve to house migrants after they cross the border and before they move on to the next phase of their migration journey.[25] There were also several cases where migrants paid additional smuggling fees at these locations.[26] In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 32 incidents that involved stash houses near the border.

Figure 4: Border Stash House Locations in the Smuggling Incident Dataset

These stash houses were located across the entire West Texas and New Mexico border region. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 25 stash houses in West Texas (El Paso, Horizon City, and Presidio) and seven stash houses spread throughout southern New Mexico (Anthony, Las Cruces, and Sunland Park). According to an interview with legal representatives in New Mexico, smugglers also set up stash houses in other New Mexico cities such as Roswell and Chaparral.[27] Additionally, drivers often transport migrants from Sunland Park and Santa Teresa, New Mexico to stash houses in El Paso.[28]

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, these border stash houses took various forms. The most common form of stash houses were private houses or rented hotel and motel rooms. However, smugglers also used other types of locales, including an apartment, a mobile home, a car garage, a truck yard, and an Airbnb home.[xi][29] Interviews suggest that, specifically in El Paso, the stash houses are frequently located in low-income neighborhoods.[30]

Migrants' experiences also varied inside the stash houses. Migrants spent anywhere from several hours to multiple days at these locations. Some migrants reported that they were offered food and water, but this was not always the case. Further, the stash houses were often unsanitary and

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[xi] Smugglers have increasingly used Airbnb homes as stash houses.

crowded. In a September 2024 case, authorities found 72 migrants in a storage shed with limited air flow, small windows, and piles of trash. While in a December 2023 case, Border Patrol agents discovered 39 migrants staying in three hotel rooms in El Paso. Overall, the number of migrants housed in these stash houses ranged from 2 to 78 people.

In the Migrant Testimony dataset, migrants also discussed moving from one border stash house to another. For example, in January 2023, a migrant described how she arrived at a stash house in Sunland Park, New Mexico, but was soon transported to a nearby hotel. Similarly, in a September 2023 case, a migrant stated that she was transported to a stash house in Chaparral, New Mexico, but then moved to a hotel in Las Cruces, New Mexico. It is unclear why migrants are sometimes transported between multiple stash houses near the border before they move on to the next phase of their journey.

Checkpoint Concealment or Circumvention

Across West Texas and New Mexico, the Border Patrol operates 11 highway checkpoints. The agency runs five checkpoints in West Texas and six checkpoints in New Mexico (see Figure 5 for their locations).[xii] These checkpoints are all located within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border, with their locations ranging from 12 miles to 80 miles into the U.S. interior.[31]

[xii] The Hatch and NM 185 NW geographic point covers two closely located checkpoints.

Figure 5: Border Patrol Checkpoints in West Texas and New Mexico
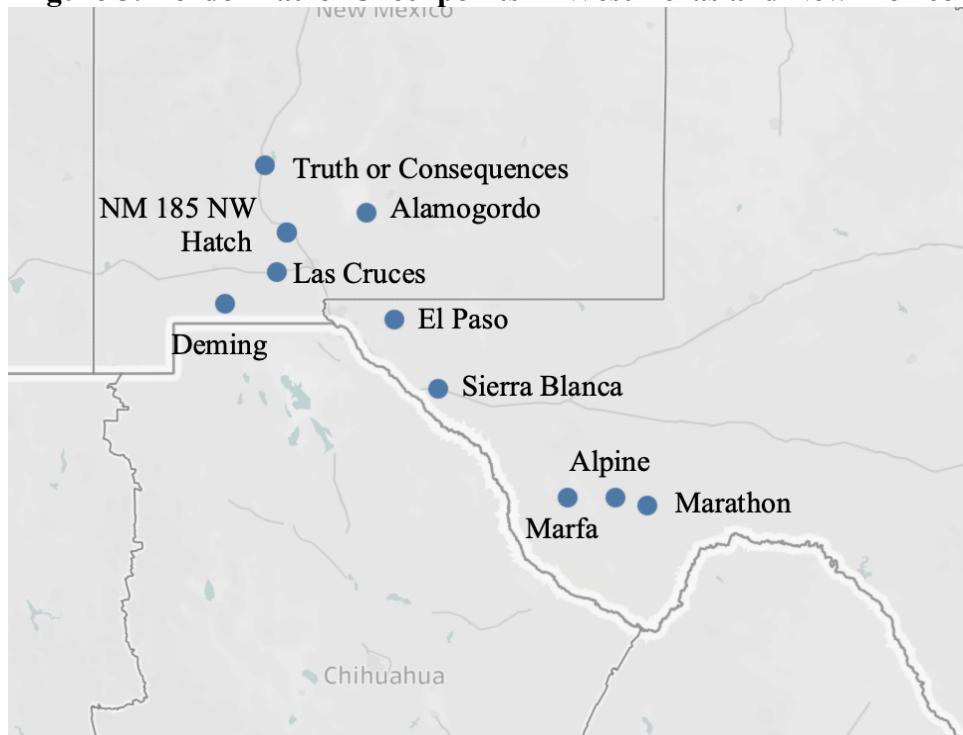
Source: Cato Institute[32]

At these highway checkpoints, Border Patrol agents visually inspect each private vehicle and may use X-ray technology to see inside tractor trailers. Trained dogs can also signal the presence of concealed individuals in private vehicles or trailers. If a vehicle is flagged as potentially carrying an unauthorized person or item, it is sent for a secondary inspection. The Border Patrol also sets up "temporary checkpoints" in areas with high levels of clandestine migration and operates constant "roving patrols" on local roads that lack permanent checkpoints.[xiii]

To reach the U.S. interior, clandestine migrants must circumvent these checkpoints or pass through them undetected. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 49 cases that involved migrants circumventing or attempting to pass through the checkpoints. This section examines the primary transportation methods that migrants use for this phase, which include hiking around the checkpoints, using private vehicles and tractor-trailers to pass through or circumvent the checkpoints, and flying over the checkpoints in planes.

Circumventing Checkpoints on Foot

To reach a point beyond the checkpoints, some migrants walk through the surrounding terrain. As previously mentioned, some migrants walk directly from the U.S.-Mexico border to a point beyond the nearest Border Patrol checkpoint. This is often the case for Border Patrol checkpoints near the border, such as the Deming and Sierra Blanca checkpoints. These checkpoints are located around 12 miles and 13 miles from the border, respectively.

[xiii] At times, the Border Patrol has used the Truth or Consequence Border Patrol Station in New Mexico as a temporary checkpoint.

However, vehicles may drop off a group of migrants with a guide before the checkpoint and then pick them up once they are past the checkpoint. This is more likely for checkpoints that are farther from the border, such as the Border Patrol's checkpoints near Marfa and Alpine. These checkpoints are located more than 50 miles from the border in the Big Bend region. Interviews with law enforcement in this area suggest that migrants cross the border on foot after dark and then hike along a small park road to wait for a vehicle pick-up. Once the migrants board the vehicle, the driver transports the individuals to an area south of the Alpine, Marfa, or Marathon checkpoints.[xiv] The migrants then exit the vehicle, hike around the checkpoint, and board another vehicle once they reach a vehicle pick-up location north of the checkpoint. The smugglers may use the same vehicle for the drop off and pick up or have different drivers for the various stages.

Passing Through or Around Checkpoints in Private Vehicles

Smugglers and migrants also use private vehicles to pass through or avoid the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 28 cases that involved drivers transporting migrants in vehicles through checkpoints. In these cases, the drivers picked up the migrants in border cities or near the border and then transported them into the U.S. interior on highways and secondary roads. There were also three cases where drivers picked up migrants in Arizona, drove into New Mexico to evade Border Patrol checkpoints, and then looped back into Arizona to ostensibly reach Phoenix.

Vehicle drivers used various tactics to smuggle migrants during this stage. Some drivers sought to conceal migrants in various spaces, such as in the vehicle's trunk or under blankets, or provided them with false documentation. In other cases, the drivers followed routes without Border Patrol checkpoints. At times, lookout vehicles ("scouts") monitored Border Patrol activity near checkpoints and relayed it back to the drivers.[33] Smugglers also engaged in other tactics, such as deploying decoy vehicles to distract Border Patrol agents. For this migration phase, there was no specific vehicle type, and the dataset's cases included sedans, SUVs, pick-up trucks, and RVs. Inside the vehicles, the drivers transported a median of five people, with a range of 1 to 14 people.

Passing Through Checkpoints in Tractor Trailers

Smugglers also transport migrants in tractor trailers to pass through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. From October 2023 through September 2024, Border Patrol agents in the El Paso sector discovered 24 smuggling operations that involved tractor trailers.[34] In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 18 cases that involved smugglers moving migrants in tractor trailers in West Texas and New Mexico.[xv] Overall, El Paso appears to be the most common starting location for migrants using this transportation method.[xvi]

[xiv] Marfa, Alpine, and Marathon are the checkpoints leaving Big Bend National Park. It is not possible to leave the region without passing through at least one checkpoint.
[xv] In the dataset, smugglers drove tractor trailers through four checkpoints: Las Cruces, Alpine, Sierra Blanca, and Van Horn. A third of incidents occurred at the Sierra Blanca Checkpoint.
[xvi] In at least four of the Smuggling Incident dataset cases, the drivers loaded migrants into the tractor trailers in El Paso.

The Smuggling Incident dataset showed that smugglers load the migrants into the trailers in various locations, including outside of stash houses and at external sites, such as gas stations. Smugglers concealed the migrants both in the trailers' cabs and cargo areas. In the dataset's cases, the number of smuggled migrants inside each tractor trailer ranged from 17 to 131 people.[xvii] While the vast majority of the migrants in the trailers were adults, there were four cases that involved minors. For example, in November 2021, there was a case with 67 migrants in a tractor trailer that involved minors between the ages of 8 years old and 13 years old.

Smugglers used various types of trailers to transport the migrants, including tractor trailers, U-Haul brand trucks, and pick-up trucks that pulled cargo and travel trailers. In two separate incidents, drivers transported migrants in a horse trailer alongside a live horse. Smugglers also tried to disguise the trucks and have them blend in with regular vehicle traffic. In one August 2017 incident, the drivers wore work uniforms that matched the logo on the side of their truck.

Migrants inside the tractor trailers face challenging conditions. Once the individuals are inside the trailer, there are no bathrooms, no breaks, and no way for migrants to get out on their own. Further, the temperatures inside the tractor trailers can vary. Most trailers are refrigerated, but the temperature controls may turn off or stop working, which can make it very hot inside the trailer. In one June 2021 case in Van Horn, Border Patrol agents discovered a group of 33 migrants in a box-truck with limited ventilation during 100-degree summer heat. Among the group, 12 migrants were found to be suffering from heat-related illnesses.

Circumventing Checkpoints on Airplanes

Smugglers and migrants also use planes to bypass Border Patrol checkpoints. The Smuggling Incident dataset included one case where clandestine migrants attempted to travel into the Texas interior on a plane. In this December 2021 case, a pilot with a small private plane picked up five Mexican nationals at the Texas International Airport in Presidio. However, the plane crashed shortly after taking off, and first responders discovered the five clandestine migrants, including two with life-threatening injuries. The lack of documented incidents may reflect the difficulty of detection rather than the rarity of practice. In July 2024, Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) representatives noted that there was a small uptick in smugglers using small planes.[35]

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

After circumventing the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, drivers take migrants to the final smuggling phase: stash houses in interior cities. Smugglers hold migrants in these stash houses until their family or friends pay the remainder of their smuggling fees. Once migrants' fees are paid, the stash house caretakers either release the migrants into the city or arrange their transit to other final destinations across the United States.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were nine cases of stash houses in interior cities.[36] The most cases (five) were in Albuquerque. In October 2023, an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) agent stated that Albuquerque has

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[xvii] There was one case with fewer individuals. In an August 2023 case, smugglers concealed two males between the seats and cabin wall of a U-Haul truck.

become a major hub for migrants crossing the border from El Paso to Douglas, Arizona.[37] He noted that this could be due to lower levels of border enforcement in the area and the city's vast transportation infrastructure.[38] This report also identified stash houses in Dexter and Deming in New Mexico and in Dallas, Marfa, Fort Worth, Midland, and Odessa in West Texas.[39]

Figure 6: Stash House Locations in Interior Cities
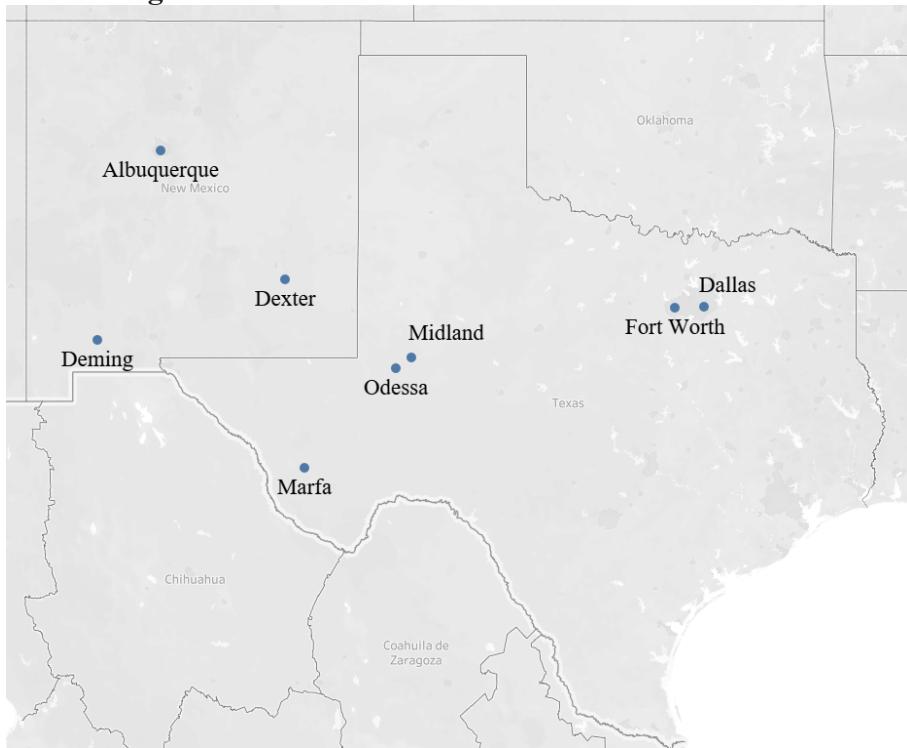
Source: Smuggling Incident dataset

The stash houses in these interior cities involved various types of buildings, including residential homes, apartments, trailers, and even a shack located inside of a cemetery. Several of the incidents involved multiple residences—often within close proximity—that were run by the same smuggler or group of smugglers. The number of migrants staying in these interior stash houses ranged from 10 people to 70 people, and migrants spent anywhere from a couple of days to more than a month in these locations. Unlike the stash houses near the border, it does not appear that migrants in interior cities were frequently moved between multiple stash houses.

Migrants in these stash houses often had to contend with challenging conditions. Specifically, these conditions included overcrowding, insufficient heating or air conditioning, a lack of bedding, and piles of trash strewn around the premises. In March 2023, authorities searched two stash houses in Albuquerque, and noted an excessive amount of trash, insufficient furniture and bedding, and signs that migrants had been sleeping on the floor. However, not all stash houses had these subpar conditions, and there were cases where migrants were staying in acceptable living conditions.

Chapter 2: **Migrant Risk and Mortality in West Texas and New Mexico**

Clandestine migrants face a wide range of risks as they journey through the West Texas and New Mexico borderlands. These risks can be influenced and heightened by various factors, including smugglers' specific transportation tactics, border enforcement efforts (such as checkpoints and high-speed vehicle chases), water levels in the Rio Grande and irrigation canals, and the region's geographic terrain combined. Migrants are often aware of these risks, but hire smugglers and cross as clandestine migrants due to a range of motivations—such as family reunification, economic considerations, and safety fears—combined with lack of legal pathways to enter the United States.[40]

This chapter addresses the report's second research question and outlines the risks for migrants crossing through West Texas and New Mexico. Overall, from January 2014 to August 2024, the Border Patrol counted 605 migrant deaths in the region, with a sharp uptick in recent years (see Figure 7).[41] These migrants died in various ways, but the most common causes of death for migrants were environmental exposure while hiking through desert terrain and drowning in the Rio Grande and irrigation canals—constituting a combined 77 percent of the Border Patrol's confirmed cases.

Figure 7: Migrant Deaths by Year (2014-2024)[xviii]
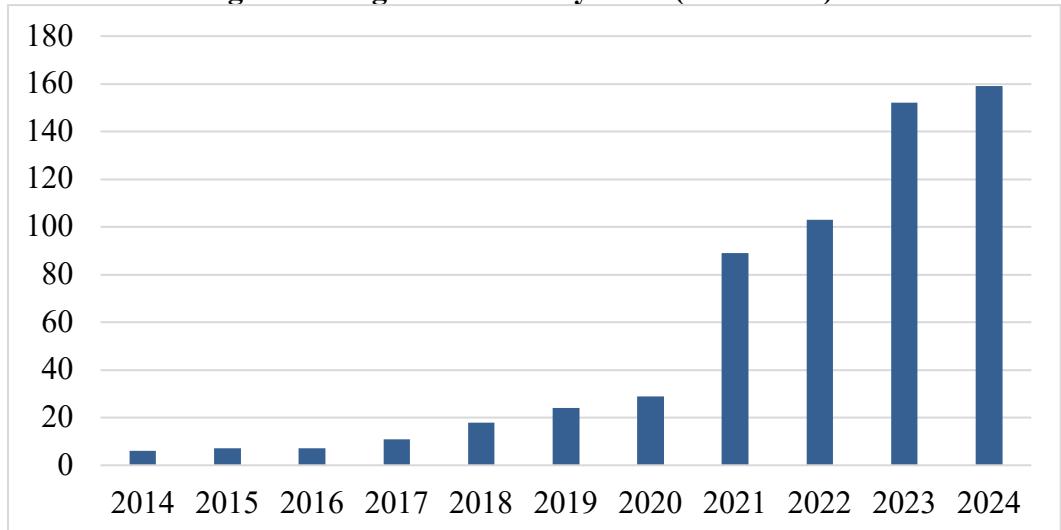
Source: Border Patrol

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 while staying at stash houses in interior cities. In order to conduct this analysis, this chapter uses the Border Patrol's dataset to look at trends over time and the Local Actors dataset to track recent risk dynamics. It also uses the Smuggling Incident dataset to illustrate the various risks for migrants that do not always result in death.

[xviii] These are calendar year totals.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

Clandestine migrants face 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 vehicle, then that migrant is at risk of potential suffocation or heat exposure. Similarly, migrants crossing the border between ports of entry face a range of risks that depend on their particular route. These risks could include drowning in the Rio Grande or irrigation canals, falling from the border wall, exposure to the elements in the desert, or a risk related to crossing through underground tunnels. The following subsections detail these risks at and between ports of entry.

Ports of Entry

Some clandestine migrants attempt to enter the United States through a port of entry. While crossing at a port of entry is generally the safest way to enter the country, there are risks associated with different crossing methods. For example, if migrants are smuggled through ports of entry in vehicle trunks or other concealed spaces, they risk suffocation or heat exhaustion. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, a September 2022 case involved a migrant harnessed to the flatbed of a truck. While the migrant was not located in a concealed space, he was unable to get out of the harness on his own.

Between Ports of Entry

Migrants crossing the border between ports of entry also face numerous risks. These risks vary by the specific crossing location—such as crossing in an urban area or a remote desert area—and the smuggling methods. Overall, according to the Local Actors dataset, at least 454 migrants died in West Texas and New Mexico while crossing between ports of entry. This makes border crossing between ports of entry the most dangerous phase for clandestine migrants traversing the region. The following subsections detail the risks for clandestine transiting through urban and remote areas and analyze the corresponding migrant death data.

Crossing the Border in Urban Areas. Clandestine migrants who cross the border in urban areas face multiple safety risks. The first risk for migrants who cross in urban areas comes from crossing the border barrier. In the area from Sunland Park to San Elizario, the border wall reaches up to 30 feet tall and falling off the wall can result in injuries ranging from a sprained ankle to a brain injury and even death.[42] Additionally, in areas with concertina wire, the razor-sharp edges can cause injury to anything it touches. In June 2024, a physician in the El Paso area reported treating children with "torn flesh" from the wire.[43]

The Local Actors dataset included 16 cases of migrants who died after falling from the border wall in urban areas.[xix][44] There was no one demographic profile among these deceased


[xix] Border barriers may also exacerbate migrants' risk of dehydration and exposure to the elements, by rerouting them onto longer routes. However, these indirect risks are difficult to measure.

individuals. In the Local Actors dataset, 69 percent of the migrants were male and 21 percent were female. Further, of the cases with nationality information, the majority (69 percent) were Mexican citizens, with the other individuals hailing from Bolivia, El Salvador, and Honduras. The median age of these deceased migrants was 40 years old, with ages ranging from 24 years old to 55 years old.

The second risk for migrants—specifically for the individuals who cross in or around El Paso—comes from the various canals and irrigation channels that run near the border. These canals may look shallow, but they often have strong currents and slippery embankments, which can make it difficult to climb out. From 2014 to 2024, the Local Actors dataset included 79 water-related-deaths that occurred in an urban area. Almost all of these deaths took place in El Paso County, particularly during the summer months. The deaths were concentrated in several hot spots, which included canals in southeast El Paso near El Chamizal and in the American Canal Extension in Socorro, just south of the Ysleta Port of Entry.

According to the Border Patrol's dataset, the number of drownings in the El Paso sector has shifted over time. Specifically, the number of deaths has steadily increased from one water-related death in 2014 to the peak of 26 deaths in 2024. Counter-intuitively, the higher number of drowning deaths in canals may be related to drought years, since the El Paso water authority releases additional water for agricultural irrigation during these droughts.[45]

Figure 8: Migrant Drownings in West Texas and New Mexico (2014-2024)

Source: Border Patrol
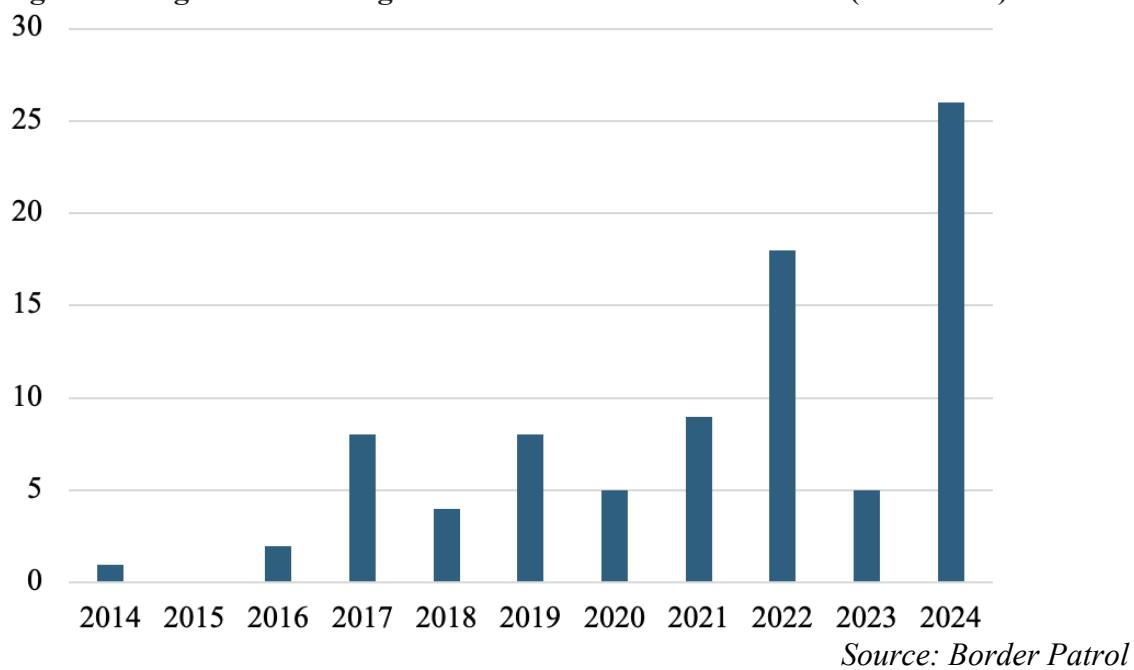
In the Local Actor's dataset, there was no single demographic profile among the individuals who drowned in El Paso and the surrounding urban areas. For the incidents with gender information, 78 percent of the migrants who drowned were men and 22 percent were women. For the cases with nationality information, Mexican and Guatemalan citizens each made up more than a third of the deaths from drowning, and the remaining migrants were from Brazil, Ecuador, El

Salvador, Honduras, and Russia.[xx] Among the deceased migrants, the median age was 27 years old, but the ages ranged from 4 years old to 64 years old. The Local Actors dataset included nine minors who drowned in the region's urban areas.

Migrants crossing in El Paso also face safety risks if they transit through underground tunnels or pipes. The Local Actor's dataset does not include any deaths related to this form of transit. However, newspaper articles have outlined the various dangers for migrants who take these routes. These dangers include getting lost or stuck—such as in the more than 300-mile long sewer system—or potentially drowning or suffocating underground.[46] Further, the tunnels can also contain other potential hazards, such as chemicals, toxic gases, and venomous insects and animals.[47]

Crossing the Border in Rural Areas. If migrants cross the border in a rural area, they also face various risks. In West Texas, the first risk is the Rio Grande and the irrigation canals that pull from it. According to the Local Actors dataset, there were 20 water-related deaths in rural west Texas, defined as the area between San Elizario and Tornillo. The Rio Grande often has little water between El Paso and Presidio, with much of the water diverted toward irrigation canals.[48] However, these drownings occurred predominantly in the irrigation canals that run parallel to the Rio Grande.

As with urban area crossing drowning deaths, there was no single demographic profile of people who drowned in rural areas along the border. For the incidents with gender information, 79 percent of the migrants who drowned were men and 21 percent were women. For the cases with nationality information, 56 percent were from Mexico, followed by individuals from Guatemala (31 percent), Honduras (6 percent), and Ecuador (6 percent). Among the deceased migrants, the median age was 31 years old, but the ages ranged from 17 years old to 44 years old.

The second risk for migrants crossing the border in a rural area comes from scaling the border barrier. In the Local Actors dataset, there were 12 cases where migrants died after falling from the border wall in rural areas. In these cases, migrants face the same risks as individuals climbing the barrier in cities. However, if migrants fall from the wall in these remote zones, they may not be discovered as quickly and are farther away from medical assistance.

In the Local Actors dataset, there were a range of demographics among the people who died after falling from the border wall in rural areas. For the cases with gender information, 72 percent of the decedents were male and 27 percent were female. For the cases with nationality information, 40 percent were Mexican citizens and 60 percent were from a range of Central and South American countries, including Guatemala and Brazil. The deceased migrants had a median age of 39 years old, but ranged in age from an unborn child to a 58-year-old man. In the case of the unborn child, a 19-year-old pregnant woman from Guatemala was in her third trimester and attempted to climb the border wall near El Paso in March 2020. She fell 19 feet to the ground, and despite medical personnel attempting to deliver the baby, both the mother and baby were pronounced dead.[49]

[xx] A notable case involved Russian citizens. In July 2022, two Russian nationals—a 64-year old male and 15-year-old female—drowned in irrigation canals in southwest El Paso.

The third risk for migrants crossing in remote terrain comes from hiking through the New Mexico and West Texas desert after crossing the border. The region's terrain is desert, and migrants may walk for hours or days during these border crossings, in extreme temperatures with little access to water. As a result, migrants are at risk of exposure to the elements, specifically related to dehydration, hyperthermia, and hypothermia.[50] Further, law enforcement efforts can also compound risks, as migrants may scatter in the desert or in mountainous areas to avoid apprehension, which increases their risk of injury, dehydration, or becoming lost.[xxi][51]

For this section, we analyze migrant deaths that can likely be attributed to exposure to the elements in rural areas. The BSITS data includes 415 cases that were likely from exposure to the elements, and shows an increase in the number of deaths over time.[xxii] In 2014, the Border Patrol reported only three deaths in the region that were likely due to exposure to the elements, but, by 2023 and 2024, this number had increased to 124 deaths for each year. Deaths from exposure to the elements in West Texas and New Mexico were highest during the summer months of June and July.[52]

Figure 9: Migrant Deaths from Exposure to the Elements by Year (2014-2024)

Source: Border Patrol
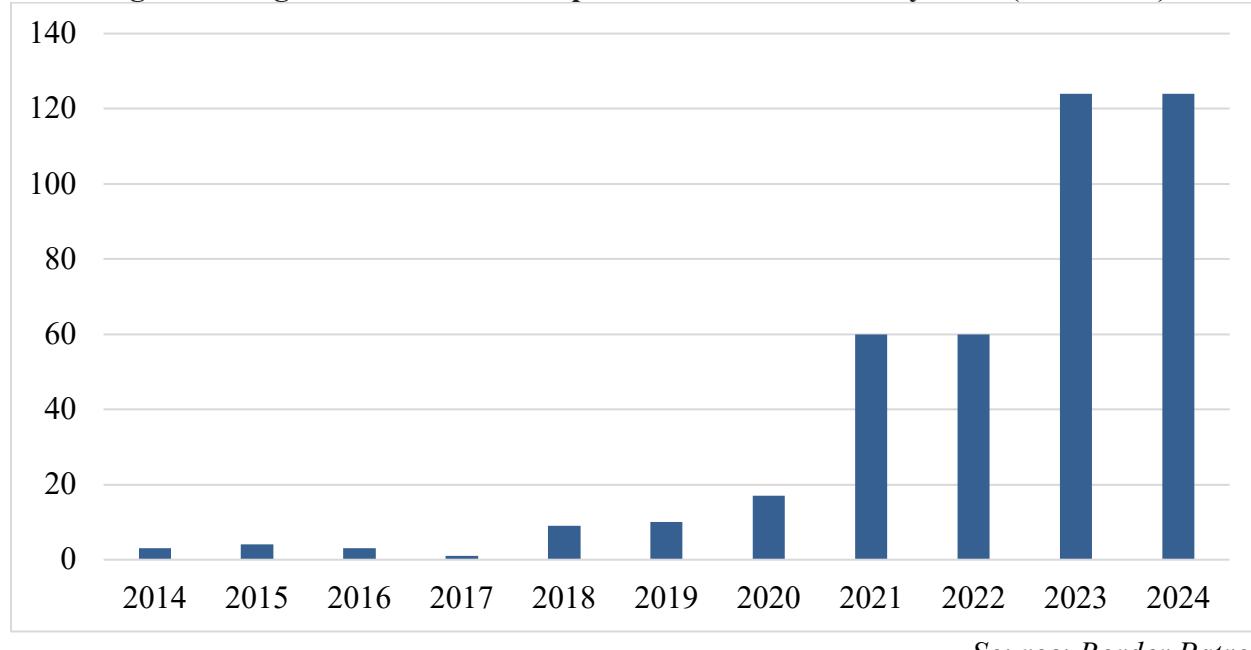
Border crossing deaths from exposure to the elements occurred throughout the entire region, but were concentrated in several hot spots. In New Mexico, migrant deaths from exposure to the elements were concentrated in Doña Ana County with a large concentration in Sunland Park just west of El Paso. The Local Actors dataset includes 316 likely exposure-related deaths for New Mexico, with 239 deaths in Doña Ana County, 38 deaths in Luna County, 23 deaths in Hidalgo


[xxi] There have even been reports of law enforcement posing a direct risk to migrants by chasing them on horseback up and down mountains and refusing to give them water.

[xxii] This includes deaths that were labeled as being caused by exposure to the elements and undetermined deaths / skeletal remains.

County, and 9 deaths in Grant County.[xxiii] Overall, migrants crossing the border in this hotspot appeared to be either walking north-west from Sunland Park or El Paso to major highways—particularly I-10, which is between 30 miles and 65 miles from the border—to reach their vehicle pick-up locations. Similar to the region-wide trend, the number of deaths from exposure to the elements in this area increased significantly in 2023 and 2024.

In West Texas, migrant deaths that were likely from exposure to the elements were generally dispersed between El Paso and Hudspeth Counties. The Local Actors dataset includes 56 exposure-related deaths for this area, including 28 deaths in El Paso County, 18 deaths in Hudspeth County, and 10 deaths in Presidio County. There were also several areas with higher concentrations of these deaths, such as near the city of El Paso and near Fort Hancock. Overall, migrants crossing the border in this region appeared to be walking toward nearby highways to reach their vehicle pick-up locations. Many of the migrants who died near Fort Hancock appeared to be circumventing the Border Patrol's Sierra Blanca checkpoint on I-10, which is located approximately 13 miles from the border.

Figure 10: Migrant Deaths from Exposure to the Elements (2014-2024)

Source: Local Actors dataset
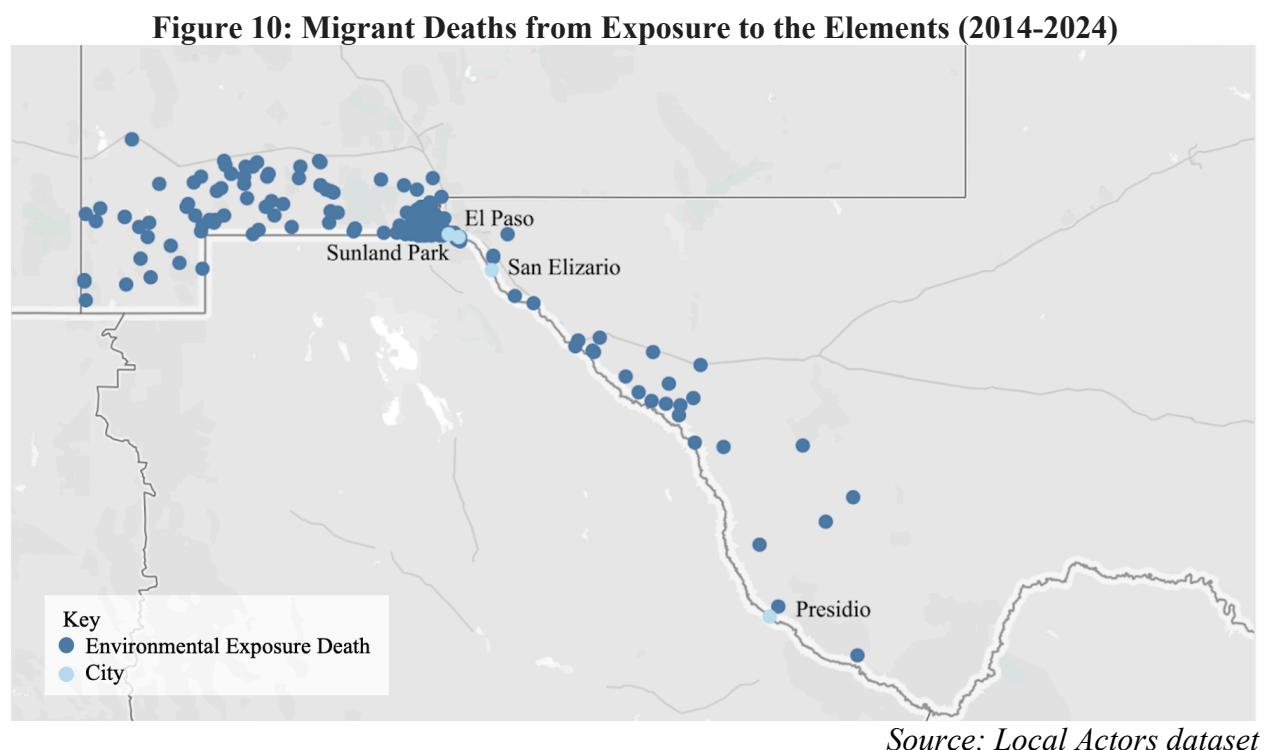
There was no one demographic profile of a migrant who died from exposure to the elements in remote areas in West Texas and New Mexico. In the Local Actors dataset, 58 percent of the cases with demographic information were male and 42 percent were female. Of those cases with nationality information, 62 percent were from Mexico, 23 percent were from Guatemala, and the remaining 15 percent were from a range of countries including Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, and Cuba, among others. Among the deceased migrants, the median age was 31 years old, but


[xxiii] The remaining deaths were in Otero County, Sierra County, and Bernalillo County.

the ages ranged from eight years old to 67 years old. Overall, there were seven cases of deceased individuals who were younger than 18 years old.

Vehicle Pick-Ups

Once migrants reach their pick-up vehicles, they face a new set of risks. During this phase, the most common risk is car accidents, particularly while in high-speed vehicle pursuits with law enforcement. Between 2014 and 2024, the Local Actors dataset includes 40 migrant deaths that were attributed to motor-vehicle accidents along the border. Many of the vehicle deaths occurred on highways near the U.S.-Mexico border and on El Paso's west side (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Vehicle-Related Deaths in West El Paso (2014-2024)
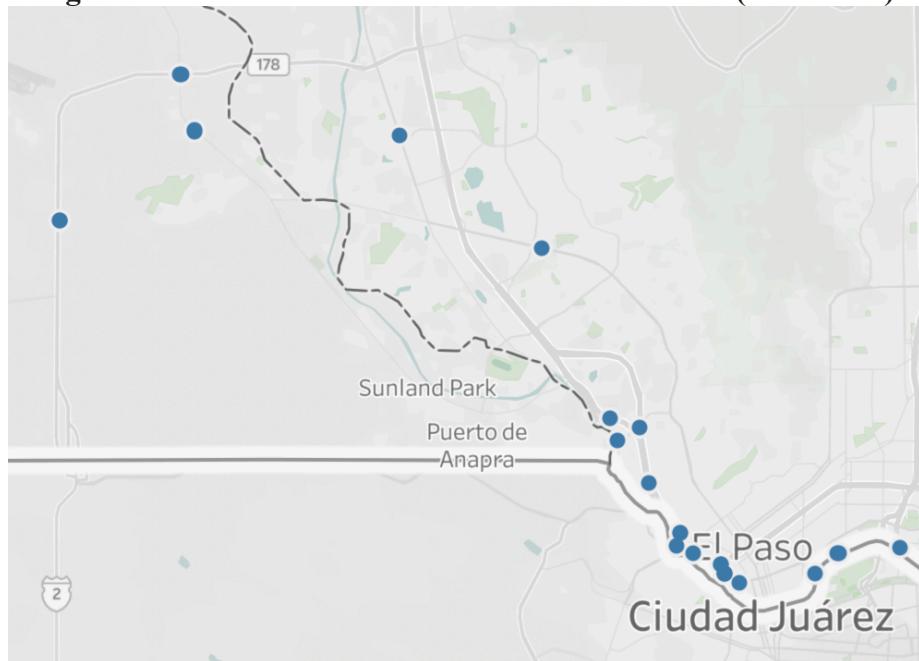
Source: Local Actors dataset

These vehicle pursuits involved various law enforcement agencies. The Smuggling Incident dataset included cases with high-speed vehicle pursuits that involved Border Patrol agents, local law enforcement, and DPS troopers. However, these chases are not split equitably across law enforcement bodies. Instead, local news outlets have noted that DPS engages in the most vehicle chases in El Paso County. This is likely due to two factors. First, the Texas Governor's border enforcement efforts through Operation Lonestar have deployed more DPS troopers to the border. Second, DPS has fewer restrictions on when its troopers can engage in a vehicle pursuit compared to the El Paso Police Department or the Border Patrol.

Overall, the number of vehicle chases appears to be increasing. In January 2025, the local news outlet *El Paso Matters* reviewed DPS data on high speed chases in El Paso County. The data showed that between 2018 and 2022, the law enforcement agency was involved in between 20 and 66 high speed chases. However, in 2023, that number jumped to 399 high speed chases and there were another 182 chases from January to June 2024.[53]

Figure 12: Texas DPS High-Speed Pursuits in El Paso County (January 2018 - June 2024)
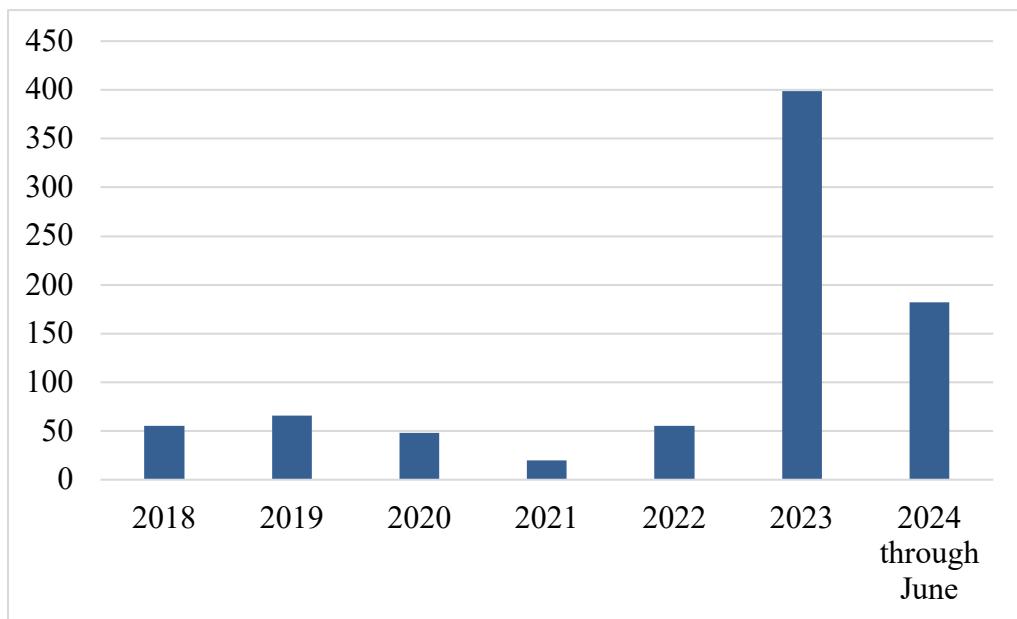
In the Local Actor's dataset, there were a range of demographic profiles among the 40 migrants who were killed in motor-vehicle accidents during the vehicle pick-up phase. For the cases with gender information, 75 percent of the deceased migrants were male and 25 percent were female. For the cases with nationality information, the highest number of people were from Mexico (46 percent), followed by individuals from Guatemala (31 percent) and Honduras (9 percent). There were also small numbers of deceased individuals from El Salvador, Ecuador, and Colombia. The median age was 25 years old, but the ages ranged from 12 years old to 53 years old.

Stash Houses Near the Border

Drivers may pick up migrants from the border and take them to nearby stash houses, where they face additional risks. While the Local Actors dataset did not include any deaths that could be connected to stash houses, migrants still face dangers during this phase. These risks could come from a lack of food and water, unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, inhospitable living conditions, and abuse and extortion from smugglers. It was also common for smugglers to confiscate migrants' cell phones during this phase, so that they could not contact anyone.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, various cases highlighted these risks. First, there were three cases where authorities described the stash houses as unsanitary or in a deplorable condition. In a September 2024 case, authorities discovered migrants in a storage shed among large piles of trash.[xxiv][55] Second, the dataset included four cases describing inadequate access to basic necessities, such as food and water. In a December 2021 case, migrants reported that they were not given food or water for three days. Finally, overcrowding can exacerbate inhospitable

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[xxiv] Trash is common inside stash houses, as large groups of migrants can generate significant amounts of trash. Stash houses caretakers often keep the trash inside the homes or hotel rooms to avoid drawing unwanted attention from neighbors or authorities.

conditions. The dataset included eight cases of stash houses with more than 50 people. In these cases, it was common for migrants to report insufficient bedding or a lack of access to showers.[56]

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were also cases where stash house caretakers threatened and abused migrants. These threats included brandishing weapons at migrants, extorting them, and verbally abusing them. In one September 2023 incident, smugglers held a migrant at a motel in Las Cruces. The migrant stated that the smugglers threatened and verbally abused her and the other migrants. She recalled that a female smuggler "carried a knife and possibly a gun" and would prevent her and other migrants from bathing. In another January 2023 incident, smugglers threatened migrants at gunpoint in an El Paso stash house and demanded that they pay additional smuggling fees.

Checkpoint Concealment or Circumvention

To reach the U.S. interior, migrants have to pass through or circumvent one of the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints in West Texas or New Mexico. During this migration phase, smugglers facilitate migrants' movement through various modes of transportation, which each entail specific risks. These modes of transportation include leading groups of migrants around the checkpoints on foot, concealing migrants in vehicles and tractor trailers, or flying them over the checkpoints in planes. The following subsections cover each of these transportation methods and the associated risks.

Circumventing Checkpoints on Foot

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 desert or mountainous terrain. As previously mentioned, some migrants cross the U.S.-Mexico border and trek to a point beyond the checkpoints. The analysis for these cases is captured in the "border crossing" section, which highlights clandestine migrants transiting over the border by foot.

However, other migrants also get dropped off and hike around certain Border Patrol checkpoints in the region. This is particularly common with the Alpine, Marfa, and Marathon checkpoints to the north of Big Bend National Park and the Las Cruces checkpoints in New Mexico. The Local Actors dataset includes four deaths around the Las Cruces checkpoints, which are more than 50 miles into the U.S. interior. These deaths all occurred between April 2021 and September 2021, and involved three men and a woman. There is only nationality information for one deceased man, who was listed as being from Mexico. The migrants were between the ages of 29 years old and 37 years old.

Passing Through or Around Checkpoints in Private Vehicles

There are also risks for migrants traveling through or around Border Patrol checkpoints in vehicles. These risks include car crashes during high-speed chases with law enforcement and suffocation or extreme temperatures in concealed spaces. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were two cases where vehicles engaged in high-speed chases near checkpoints. This included a September 2021 case, where Border Patrol agents began pursuing a black Acura SUV

carrying nine migrants in Deming, New Mexico. The driver picked up speed, but eventually lost control of the vehicle and crashed. Several passengers flew out of the vehicle, which then caught on fire. One migrant ultimately died as a result.[57]

The Smuggling Incident dataset also contained two cases where migrants were transported through or around a checkpoint concealed in enclosed vehicle spaces. In these cases, migrants were hidden in a car trunk and in a vehicle's hidden compartments. Once these drivers placed the migrants in the enclosed spaces, they had no breaks and were unable to leave the spaces on their own.[xxv] Further, migrants in these spaces risk suffocation and overheating in extreme temperatures. In a February 2023 incident near the Arizona-New Mexico border, police attempted to stop a Hyundai Elantra after noticing the vehicle's sagging trunk. When the chase finally ended, officers discovered three migrants who had spent hours inside the trunk.

The Local Actors dataset contains 14 migrant deaths the occurred near or past the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints. Almost all of these cases were located in New Mexico, with six deaths occurring along I-10 and three additional deaths taking place on north-south roads that run from the border to I-10. For the cases with gender information, 66 percent of the deceased migrants were male and 33 percent were female. For the cases with nationality information, the highest number of people were from Mexico (30 percent) and Ecuador (30 percent), with additional deceased individuals from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Brazil. The median age was 31 years old, but the ages ranged from 19 years old to 49 years old.

[xxv] Law enforcement often discovered private vehicles transporting migrants at checkpoints and during traffic stops and roving patrols. In particular, Border Patrol agents often noticed unusual conditions or behavior, such as overloaded suspensions or passengers ducking down in the vehicles.

Figure 13: Vehicle-Related Deaths Near or Past Checkpoints (2014-2020)
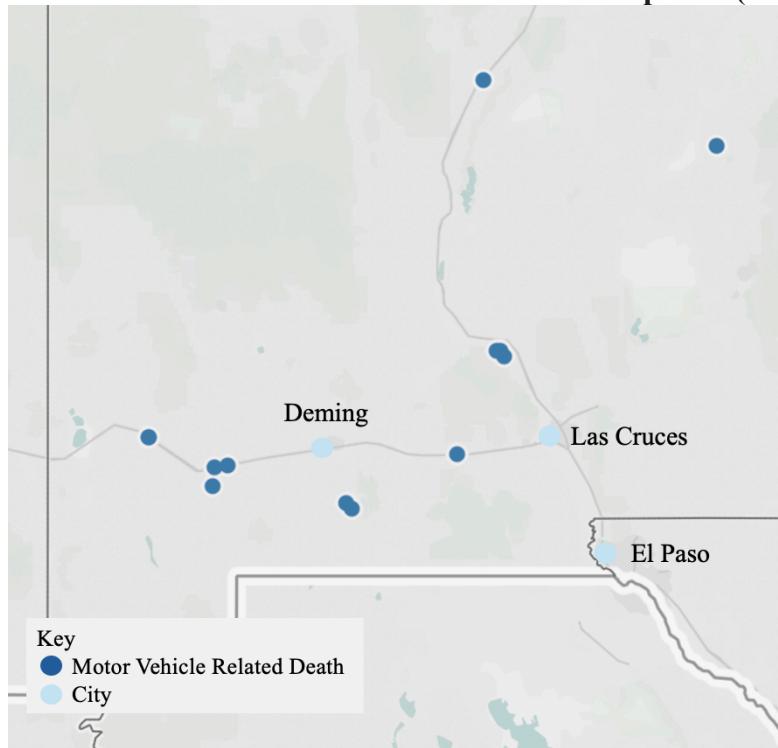
Passing Through Checkpoints in Tractor Trailers

Migrants who attempt to pass through Border Patrol checkpoints while hidden in tractor trailers also experience various risks. These risks include a lack of ventilation, extreme temperatures, dehydration, overcrowding, and car crashes. The Local Actors dataset does not identify any deaths as being specifically related to traveling in a tractor trailer. However, the Smuggling Incident dataset and Migrant Testimonies dataset document some of the risks that are related to this specific mode of transportation.

In particular, these cases focused on the risks from a lack of ventilation and extreme temperatures. Without ventilation, a trailer can quickly heat up to dangerous temperatures. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, four cases mentioned this specific risk. For example, in a July 2019 case, Border Patrol agents opened a U-Haul truck in Deming, New Mexico and found 17 migrants inside. The agents noted that "the only ventilation in the sweltering cargo area" was a two-inch opening. Similarly, migrants transiting in trailers in the winter may be subject to cold temperatures. In January 2022, Border Patrol agents discovered migrants concealed in a trailer at the Sierra Blanca checkpoint that were reportedly crying, distraught, and shivering from the cold.

Circumventing Checkpoints on Airplanes

Migrants who circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints on planes generally face the same risks as any air travel passenger. The Local Actors dataset does not include any migrant deaths related to circumventing checkpoints in planes. However, the Smuggling Incident dataset

does include a December 2021 case, where a small plane—carrying five Mexican migrants—crashed soon after takeoff. Two of the migrants had life-threatening injuries and were subsequently taken to a hospital for treatment.

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

After migrants pass the Border Patrol's checkpoints, they are taken to stash houses in interior cities. These stash houses mark the final migration phase in the West Texas and New Mexico borderlands and they also bring a new set of risks. In the Local Actors dataset, there were no migrant deaths associated with interior stash houses. However, the Smuggling Incident dataset's cases revealed various risks for migrants. These risks included unhygienic and crowded conditions, along with caretakers' threats, abuse, forced labor, and extortion attempts.[58] Notably, not all migrants experienced the same conditions and they may be case specific.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, a primary risk was unsanitary conditions and overcrowding inside the stash houses. Some cases noted piled trash, an inadequate amount of food or water, lack of air conditioning or heat, insufficient hygiene supplies, and a lack of access to the bathroom.[59] All of these risks were exacerbated by overcrowding, which was common in these interior stash houses. In a November 2022 case, smugglers held 70 migrants in a mobile home in Albuquerque. In this incident, the trailer was not heated and half of the migrants were reported to be ill.

Other significant risks stemmed from the stash house caretakers. In interior stash houses, smugglers collect final smuggling fees and migrants may face threats related to these payments. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, most extortion threats were associated with unpaid smuggling fees—both for completed smuggling activities and for transportation to final destinations in the United States. [xxvi][60] However, the dataset also contained two incidents where migrants were not released, even after family members paid their smuggling fees. In a November 2022 case, a female migrant at a stash house in Albuquerque testified that she was "told to call her significant other and demand [that he] pay money to secure her release." When the smuggler spoke to her partner, he threatened to cut off the woman's head if he did not receive the money. Her partner made the required payment, but the woman reported that the smugglers still refused to release her.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were also cases of forced labor, verbal abuse, sexual assault, and other forms of physical violence. In a November 2022 case, a female migrant who was held in a stash house in Albuquerque testified that she was forced to cook for the head smuggler, his drivers, and the stash house occupants. When she initially refused, the head smuggler withheld food from her and other migrants and forced them to sleep on the floor with no blankets. Another female migrant from that stash house also testified that "members of the smuggling organization would come to the trailer, become intoxicated, and then demand the females inside of the trailer dance provocatively for them." Further, members of the smuggling organization would grope the women and force kisses. This migrant stated that she was struck in

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[xxvi] If a migrant plans to travel a final destination beyond the interior city (e.g., to New York), then the smugglers may demand that the migrants pay additional money to get there.

the face after telling a smuggler to stop groping underage girls at the residence, and that she was also sexually assaulted by one of the smugglers.

Chapter 3: Migrant Smugglers in West Texas and New Mexico

During each clandestine migration phase, various individuals transport or guide migrants through the West Texas and New Mexico borderlands. 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 people play a wide range of roles, including leading migrants through the desert, transporting them in vehicles and tractor trailers, maintaining stash houses, and coordinating the entire clandestine migration journey.[xxvii] Each of these people plays a specific role in furthering the migrant's journey, and may work alone or as part of a team.

This chapter aims to answer the third research question, which asks: who are the people that facilitate migrant smuggling in West Texas and New Mexico? To do so, it uses the Smuggling Incident dataset, which includes 168 individuals who were arrested for engaging in migrant smuggling activities. While there is no typical smuggler profile in the dataset, the most common demographic was a U.S. citizen man in his early 30s. Notably, the most common demographic appeared to shift depending on the smuggling activity. For example, the individuals who guided migrants across the border between ports of entry were Mexican citizen men, while drivers passing through the Border Patrol's checkpoints were more likely to be U.S. citizen men.

The following sections detail migrant smuggling facilitation across West Texas and New Mexico. The first section provides an overview of arrested individuals' demographics and motivations. The subsequent sections describe the different clandestine migration phases. For each of these phases, the chapter outlines the arrested smugglers' roles, demographics, and motivations.

Clandestine Migrant Smugglers

From 2014 to 2024, the Smuggling Incident dataset identified 168 individuals who were arrested for engaging in migrant smuggling activities in West Texas and New Mexico. These individuals spanned a wide range of demographic profiles, including a 52-year-old man from Houston, a 35-year-old woman from Albuquerque, and a 23-year-old man from Ecuador. However, the most common demographic profile was a U.S. citizen man in his early 30s. For the cases with gender information, 80 percent of the arrested smugglers were men and 20 percent were women. The majority of these individuals (51 percent) were U.S. citizens, followed by Mexican citizens (37 percent), and the remaining individuals (12 percent) were from Venezuela, Guatemala, and Ecuador. The arrested individuals had a median age of 31 years old, but their ages ranged from 15 years old to 52 years old.

Smugglers' demographic profiles also shifted across the migration phases. For example, Mexican men were often the most common demographic for roles that began in Mexico and avoided authorities, such as guiding migrants across the border between ports of entry and for operating stash houses near the U.S.-Mexico border. By contrast, U.S. citizen men were the most common profile to act as drivers, both for vehicle pick-ups and transporting migrants through

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[xxvii] Federal and state laws criminalize migrant smuggling. Individuals who are caught engaging in migrant smuggling can face fines, prison time, and deportation for non-citizens.

Border Patrol checkpoints. Figure 14 details how the demographic profiles shifted across migrant phases.

Figure 14: Smuggler Demographics by Clandestine Migration Phase

Stage	Specifics	Most Common Demographic Profile	Residency Location
Border crossing	Ports of entry	Too little information	Too little information
	Between ports of entry	Mexican citizen man	Local
Pick up at border	---	U.S. citizen man	Local
Stash house near border	---	Mexican citizen man	—
Checkpoint circumvention	Private vehicle	U.S. citizen man	Local, larger Texas and New Mexico cities, out of state
	Tractor trailer	U.S. citizen man	Larger Texas and New Mexico cities, out of state
	Plane	Too little information	Too little information
Interior city stash house	—	Mexican citizen man	Larger Texas and New Mexico cities

Source: Author's 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, such as Craigslist, or through social media. These posts and advertisements offered hundreds or thousands of dollars to people willing to participate in migrant smuggling activities. Second, these individuals also engaged in in-person recruitment at locations such as bars or outside of gas stations. Third, some smugglers appeared to become involved if they had friends, family, or romantic partners who were participating in various smuggling activities and invited them to join. Finally, there were seven cases of migrants who participated in migrant smuggling activities to pay their own smuggling fees.

Overall, the primary motivator for the vast majority of these cases appeared to be financial gain. These individuals' payments fluctuated significantly depending on their specific role and activity. For example, drivers who picked up migrants at the border reported being paid between

$200 and $2,000 per migrant that they transported, with the amount varying by pick-up location, route, and final destination.

Crossing the U.S.-Mexico Border

During the first migration phase, smugglers move migrants across the international border and into U.S. territory. These individuals may serve as drivers at ports of entry and foot guides between ports of entry. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes six individuals who were arrested while undertaking these activities.[xxviii] These cases included one person who was arrested at a port of entry, three people who helped migrants cross between ports of entry, and two individuals who were only listed as helping migrants to cross the border. Given the limited number of cases for this phase, we also conducted targeted interviews with law enforcement, legal professionals, academics, and journalists to improve our understanding of the people who facilitated these activities. The following subsections outline the findings related to the people who drive or guide migrants across the border.

Smugglers at Ports of Entry

To assist clandestine migrants in crossing through ports of entry, smugglers may guide migrants through pedestrian lanes or drive them through vehicle lanes. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there was only one case where an individual attempted to smuggle a migrant into the United States through a port of entry. This September 2022 incident took place in the commercial vehicle lanes at the Paso del Norte International Bridge in El Paso, and the vehicle driver was a 45-year-old U.S. citizen man.

Smugglers in Between Ports of Entry

Smugglers also lead migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border between ports of entry. These individuals—often referred to as "foot guides" or "brush guides"—assist migrants in crossing the border and lead them to their pick-up vehicles. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were three individuals who were listed as brush guides in West Texas and New Mexico. All three of these guides were Mexican citizen men.[xxix] Two of the cases included the men's ages, which were 27 years old and 34 years old. These individuals appeared to be acting as guides for financial gain. In a June 2021 case, the guide reported that he received a payment to start the journey and was promised an additional amount once he reached Odessa.

However, the dataset likely misses a significant demographic: Mexican minors. These minors—who are sometimes referred to as circuit children (*niños de circuito*)—guide groups of migrants over the border. However, since they are minors, Border Patrol agents do not detain them or refer them for prosecution. Instead, the children are generally returned to Mexico through ports of entry. These minors are typically Mexican citizen males from border communities, who are between the ages of 11 years old to 17 years old. They are often recruited into the activity by

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[xxviii] The Smuggling Incident dataset also included an individual listed as bringing migrants to the international border on the Mexican side and providing them instructions on how to get to their pickup location. However, this individual did not cross the border into U.S. territory and was not arrested.

[xxix] One of the guides passed away in the desert.

friends and family, and are motivated by the possibility of financial gain. However, there are also cases where recruiters may coerce minors into engaging in the smuggling activity.[61]

Vehicle Pick-Ups

Once foot guides and migrants reach a predetermined location, drivers pick them up and transport them to their next migration phase. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 49 individuals who were arrested for picking up migrants near the border. The most common demographic profile for this phase was a U.S. citizen man in his early 20s. However, the arrested individuals had a range of demographic profiles. For the individuals with a listed gender, 83 percent were men and 17 percent were women. While for the individuals with citizenship information, 51 percent were U.S. citizens, 37 percent were Mexican citizens, and 11 percent were Venezuelan citizens.

For these drivers, the median age was 22 years old, but the ages ranged from 15 years old to 40 years old. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were four minors who were arrested during this migration phase. This included a 17-year-old driver from El Paso who picked up four migrants after they crossed the border in west El Paso. The teenager ultimately missed his high school graduation after being arrested. Unlike brush guides crossing the border, the minors involved in picking up migrants at the border tended to be U.S. citizen males.[62]

Migrant smuggling coordinators recruited vehicle pick-up drivers through various ways. Some of the arrested individuals reported that they were recruited on social media, after engaging with posts that requested drivers. In another case, a man reported that he was recruited by a stranger in a bar. While in other cases, the drivers had a family or romantic relationship with someone who was already participating in migrant smuggling activities, with the dataset including two brothers and a couple. Most pick-up drivers appeared to become involved in the activity for financial gain. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, the drivers reported receiving $150 to $2,000 for each migrant that they picked up near the border.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were also eight cases where pick-up drivers or scouts were listed as being part of an organized criminal group. These groups included the "Nuevo Cartel de Juárez," the "La Nueva Empresa" gang in Ciudad Juárez, and the Venezuelan "Tren de Aragua" gang. Among the arrested drivers, there were four individuals who were allegedly linked to the Nuevo Cartel de Juárez, including two Mexican citizens and two U.S. citizens. All of these individuals were between the ages of 23 years old and 28 years old. There were also three arrested men who allegedly had ties to the "La Nueva Empresa" gang. Finally, one arrested man from Venezuela was linked to the "Tren de Aragua" gang. This man was not transporting migrants but acting as a scout for another pick-up driver.

Stash Houses Near the Border

Vehicle pick-up drivers may transport migrants to stash houses near the border in West Texas and New Mexico. The individuals working at these stash houses play various roles, including maintaining the stash house and providing food for the migrants. In the Smuggling Incident

dataset, there were 24 people arrested for operating a stash house near the border. Typically, these individuals worked in small groups to manage each stash house.

For the role of a stash house caretaker—which is the person who manages the property and runs the overall stash house operation—the dataset's most common demographic profile was a Mexican citizen man. For the cases with information about the gender, 80 percent were male and 20 percent were female. For the cases with available nationality information, 60 percent were Mexican citizens, 30 percent were U.S. citizens, and one person (10 percent) was a Venezuelan citizen. For the six people with a listed age, the median age was 40 years old, but the arrested individuals' ages ranged from 22 years old to 47 years old.

Women engaging in stash house roles typically performed domestic tasks, including cooking and cleaning.[63] However, women were sometimes responsible for overseeing the migrants in the stash house. In a September 2023 case, a migrant stated that a female stash house caretaker would check on her and the other migrants in their stash house in Chaparral, New Mexico. This smuggler threatened the migrants, carried a knife (and possibly a gun), and prevented them from bathing. She also worked with a male smuggler to transport the migrants to another stash house in Las Cruces.

Migrant smuggling coordinators and other individuals recruited stash house caretakers through various channels. First, there were cases where they recruited their family members. For example, in a January 2023 case regarding a stash house in Sunland Park, the arrested caretakers included two brothers and another family member. Second, there were also cases where the stash house caretakers appeared to be working directly with organized crime groups in Mexico. For example, one man told law enforcement that he was working with the "La Nueva Empresa" gang in Ciudad Juárez to receive migrants transiting through the region. The individuals who were arrested for stash house-related activities appeared to be primarily motivated by the prospect of financial gain.

Some individuals also act as drivers that transport migrants between stash houses. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there was a March 2023 case, where the driver transported 58 migrants from a motel in El Paso to a motel in Las Cruces. This arrested driver was a man from New Mexico with dual U.S. and Mexican citizenship. The driver told authorities that his girlfriend had contacted him on WhatsApp and asked if he would be interested in transporting the migrants. She had promised him $250 per migrant that he drove to Las Cruces.

Checkpoint Concealment or Circumvention

To help migrants pass through or circumvent the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, smugglers play various roles. For this phase, smugglers may serve as brush guides to lead migrants on foot through the West Texas or New Mexico desert, act as vehicle or tractor trailer drivers, or serve as pilots on private planes. The following subsections analyze the arrested individuals' roles, demographics, and motivations by their method of checkpoint circumvention.

Circumventing Checkpoints on Foot

Some smugglers lead migrants around the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints on foot. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, it is difficult to distinguish the starting point for migrants circumventing checkpoints on foot. However, for the cases where there is information, all of the groups began their journeys in Mexico. As such, the analysis for these brush guides' demographics and motivations is fully covered in the border crossing section.

Passing Through or Around Checkpoints in Private Vehicles

Smugglers transport migrants through and around checkpoints in private vehicles. The Smuggling Incident dataset includes 42 individuals who were arrested while participating in this activity. The most common demographic profile was a U.S. citizen man, but there were additional demographics in the dataset. Among the arrested individuals with information about their gender, 80 percent were male and 20 percent were female. While for the individuals with a listed nationality, 68 percent were from the United States, 29 percent were from Mexico, and one person was from Guatemala. The arrested individuals' median age was 32 years old, but the ages ranged from 15 years old to 52 years old.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there appeared to be a relationship between a driver's nationality and their specific transit route. The drivers that transported migrants directly through Border Patrol checkpoints were generally U.S. citizens. However, the drivers that transported migrants on roads without Border Patrol checkpoints—such as on New Mexico's I-10 and I-25 highways or on local West Texas roads that bypass the Sierra Blanca checkpoint—were often from Mexico or other countries.

Migrant coordinators and other involved smugglers appeared to use various methods to recruit drivers for this migration phase. [xxx] Some arrested drivers reported that they had been recruited by strangers, acquaintances, or family members. While other individuals reported that they began driving migrants through the West Texas or New Mexico borderlands after being recruited through social media posts. There were also two cases where migrants agreed to drive groups of people in exchange for reduced smuggling fees. Overall, the drivers seemed to be primarily motivated by the prospect of financial gain. For example, in an August 2019 case, a U.S. citizen woman from Albuquerque reported that she was recruited by her apartment complex's manager. She agreed to drive the migrants in exchange for reductions in her monthly rent.

Passing Through Checkpoints in Tractor Trailers

Smugglers also transport clandestine migrants through checkpoints in tractor trailers. These individuals often travel to the border to pick up the trailer and then follow the smuggling coordinator's instructions to reach their final destination. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 17 individuals who were arrested for participating in this activity.

[xxx] Additionally, in a March 2023 case, an arrested individual told law enforcement he was a member of the Chuco Tango gang, but it remains unclear if and how this membership is related to driving migrants.

The most common demographic profile for an arrested tractor-trailer driver was a U.S. citizen male. For the cases with information about the gender, 10 drivers were male and one assisting passenger was a female. This demographic aligns with truck drivers' general demographic profile in the United States. In 2023, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 97 percent of truck drivers were male.[64] For the cases with nationality information, 69 percent of the arrested individuals were U.S. citizens and 31 percent were Mexican citizens. One individual did not have a listed nationality but was identified as a non-U.S. citizen with a visa. The median age among the arrested drivers was 22 years old, with drivers ranging from a minor—who was operating a vehicle with a large trailer—to a 44-year-old man.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there appeared to be a relationship between a tractor trailer driver's nationality and their specific transit route. In the dataset, drivers who transported migrants directly through the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints were primarily U.S. citizens. By contrast, drivers who transported migrants in tractor trailers on roads without Border Patrol checkpoints—such as local roads in West Texas that avoid the Sierra Blanca checkpoint—were more frequently from Mexico.

Migrant coordinators and other involved smugglers appeared to recruit the tractor-trailer drivers through various methods. According to interviews with legal service providers, most tractor-trailer drivers are professional truck drivers who transport legitimate loads and, at times, smuggle migrants as a source of additional income.[65] However, some drivers in the Smuggling Incident dataset reported that they were not professional truck drivers but were recruited by strangers. For example, in an August 2017 case, a man in Ciudad Juárez allegedly approached a U.S. citizen and asked him if he would transport migrants from El Paso to Pecos, Texas. Further, coordinators and other individuals also recruited migrants to drive the tractor-trailers in exchange for smuggling fee reductions of $5,500 to $8,500.

Circumventing Checkpoints on Airplanes

Smugglers may also transport migrants over checkpoints in planes.[66] In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there was only one case of a plane transporting migrants to an interior city. In this incident, the pilot was a U.S. citizen male, who was 49 years old.

Stash Houses in Interior Cities

Once migrants have passed the Border Patrol's checkpoints, smugglers take them to stash houses in interior cities. The individuals who participate in this phase undertake various roles, including maintaining the stash houses, providing food to the migrants, and collecting the final smuggling payments. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were eight individuals who were arrested while helping to maintain a stash house in a New Mexico or West Texas interior city.

There was no one common demographic profile for this smuggling activity in the Smuggling Incident dataset. For the cases with information about the arrested individuals' gender, 63 percent were male and 37 percent were female. Only three individuals had listed citizenship information, with two people from Guatemala and one person from the United States. For these individuals, the median age was 38 years old, and the age range was 35 years old to 43 years old.

In the Smuggling Incident dataset, the individuals acting as interior stash house caretakers were recruited through various methods. Some stash house caretakers appeared to have become involved through family members or romantic relationships. For example, in the Smuggling Incident dataset, there was a case of two brothers working together and another case of a married couple running a stash house. Additionally, some stash house caretakers were migrants who were paying off their smuggling fees. In a March 2023 case, two migrants were arrested for working at an Albuquerque stash house. One of the men reported that he was making $500 a week, which he was using to pay his smuggling fee.

Another group of individuals act as drivers in interior cities. After circumventing Border Patrol checkpoints, private vehicle or tractor trailer drivers may drop off migrants at a predetermined location in the interior city. Drivers then pick up the migrants and take them to the interior stash house. Conversely, these drivers may pick up migrants at the stash house and take them to another predetermined location, where a driver will then transport them to their final destination. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were three drivers who played this role. All of the drivers were non-U.S. citizen men, with two from Mexico and one from Ecuador. These drivers were between the ages of 23 years old and 25 years old. One of the drivers reported that he earned $600 per trip.

Coordinators

Migrant smuggling coordinators oversee the various phases that make up clandestine migrants' journeys. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, there were 12 individuals who were arrested after acting as migrant smuggling coordinators. These individuals engaged in a range of activities, including purchasing properties to be used as stash houses, acquiring vehicles for transporting migrants, receiving migrants' payments, and paying the involved actors. These coordinators managed the movement of money via Zelle, wire transfer, counter transactions (when cash is deposited or withdrawn at a bank counter), and cash.[xxxi] Some people may also get promoted to smuggling coordinators after working in other smuggling roles. For example, in an August 2021 case, a stash house coordinator reported that she was a driver before "graduating" to stash house management and then stash house coordinating.

At times, these coordinators appeared to be working fairly independently, and at other times they were part of organized or family-based networks. The family-based networks often involved multiple coordinators or family members playing various roles. For example, in April 2023, authorities arrested individuals related to the López family smuggling group. During the previous years, this U.S.-based family group had steadily built a network of smugglers and stash houses across Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States and coordinated migrant smuggling activities from Central America into the United States. At the center of the López family smuggling group was a married couple, who eventually recruited more family members as co-coordinators. They also recruited friends and acquaintances as stash house operators and drivers.

[xxxi] Across these incidents, migrants paid smuggling sums that ranged from $14,500 to $21,000 per person to be smuggled from Ecuador or Guatemala to the United States between 2015 and 2022. These fees were paid in small increments.

There was no single demographic profile for the coordinator role. In the Smuggling Incident dataset, demographic information was available for eight individuals. For these individuals, 50 percent were male and 50 percent were female. Notably, most of these women were either married to or dating the male co-conspirators. For cases with nationality information, four of the coordinators were identified as U.S. citizens, while two individuals were Ecuadorian citizens. Overall, these individuals had a median age of 40 years old, but the ages ranged from 35 years old to 47 years old.

In 2021, Border Patrol leadership estimated that transnational criminal organizations based in Mexico generated more than $13 billion from human smuggling activities.[67] Overall, the level of connection between migrant smuggling coordinators, the various individuals involved across the migration phases in the United States, and criminal organizations in Mexico is unclear. Yet, the potential to generate large amounts of revenue from transporting clandestine migrants through the West Texas and New Mexico borderlands likely incentivizes participation and cooperation at multiple levels.

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 examines clandestine migration in the West Texas and New Mexico region (Border Patrol's El Paso and Big Bend sectors), with an emphasis on three research questions. First, how do clandestine migrants make their way into the United States through this region? Second, what risks do migrants face during each phase of their journey? Finally, who are the people facilitating clandestine migration in West Texas and New Mexico?

The research revealed three primary findings. First, clandestine journeys can vary significantly if a migrant crosses into the United States in an urban area or a remote desert area. For example, if a migrant crosses into El Paso, a vehicle will typically pick them up close to the border and they will often pass through three to five migration phases before reaching a U.S. interior city. However, if a migrant crosses the border in a remote desert area (e.g., in the New Mexico boot heel or near Big Bend National Park), they may have to hike for miles before a vehicle picks them up and they will often pass through three to four migration phases. Second, the report found that urban and remote routes pose different risks for migrants. In the El Paso area, migrants' biggest risk came from crossing—and potentially drowning—in the canals and Rio Grande. By comparison, migrants that cross in remote areas are most at risk of exposure to extreme temperatures and dehydration. Lastly, the report found that there is no single demographic profile for migrant smugglers in the West Texas and New Mexico region. While the most common demographic profile was a U.S. citizen male with an average age of 30 years old, arrested smugglers comprised a range of demographics.

This report's findings provide insights into clandestine migration in the West Texas and New Mexico border region and can inform policy, advocacy, humanitarian efforts, and general understanding of the issue. By mapping migration phases and identifying risks to migrants, the research breaks down a phenomenon that is often viewed as a single activity and allows for nuances and variations by route. Further, the demographic analysis of smugglers also moves away from a single explanation of who becomes involved in these activities. It also sheds light on the social and economic factors behind smuggling and how different types of individuals engage in the various activities.

This report lays the foundation for future research that could engage the same questions through different methods or look at related issues. For example, there is a need for in-depth qualitative work on migrants' experiences and decision-making processes during the various clandestine migration phases in this region. Further, a survey of migrants in the United States could provide a more representative sample of clandestine migration routes. Lastly, more research could shed light on smugglers' organizational dynamics, such as exactly how the process is organized and the connection between U.S. based coordinators and organized criminal groups in Mexico. This research, or similar work, could help build a more robust understanding of clandestine migration in West Texas and New Mexico.

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