

# [***American Teens Are Getting Arrested for Smuggling Migrants***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BTP-1K61-JBR6-917T-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Highlight:** "We're dealing with a virtual community which is almost infinite," a Homeland Security Investigator told Newsweek about social media's role in recruiting teens.

**Body**

American teens are smuggling illegal migrants into the United States at alarming rates. And law enforcement officials told *Newsweek* that money is the No. 1 reason that juveniles are entering into transnational crime.

Human smuggling is defined by the federal government as the [*illegal importation of people*](https://www.newsweek.com/border-crossing-secrets-revealed-human-smugglers-1876903?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) into the county by evading federal immigration laws, as well as the unlawful transportation and harboring of noncitizens already illegally in the country.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement ([*ICE*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/ice?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships)) serves as the leading U.S. law enforcement agency in combating the threat, which is described as a gateway for criminal offenses identity theft, document and benefit fraud, gang activity and financial fraud and terrorism.

Some methods deployed by ICE include targeting and investigating smuggling recruiters and organizers, fraudulent document vendors and facilitators, corrupt officials, financial facilitators and transportation and employment infrastructures that benefit from human smuggling.

**TEXAS**

The state of Texas, through its Department of Public Safety (DPS), has kept data on [*illegal smuggling and the transportation and harboring of illegal migrants*](https://www.newsweek.com/texas-soldier-caught-smuggling-migrant-1886517?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) as part of its Operation Lone Star (OLS) program that began in March 2021.

Last month, the office of Texas Governor [*Greg Abbott*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/greg-abbott?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) said OLS has resulted in more than 503,800 illegal immigrant apprehensions and more than 40,400 criminal arrests, with more than 36,100 felony charges.

Data updated in January of this year and shared by Texas DPS with *Newsweek* shows hundreds upon hundreds of seemingly endless recorded arrests and charges associated with human smuggling, with ages of suspected offenders running the gamut—some offenders born in the early 1960s to as recent as 2008.

In terms of those bringing in and harboring noncitizens, the ages of those with offenses range from 18 to 66.

In November, two Dallas teens were arrested for smuggling. One of them, 17-year-old Jonathan Rodriguez, [*told NewsNation*](https://www.newsnationnow.com/us-news/immigration/border-coverage/human-smuggling-suspect-arrest/) that they were offered $1,300 to transport. He was charged as an adult.

One month later, in El Paso, a 15-year-old male was taken into custody and [*charged with smuggling*](https://www.newsweek.com/trucker-forced-transport-migrants-gunpoint-1885072?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) and evading arrest/detention with a vehicle that was transporting five migrants later released to Border Patrol, [*according to NBC affiliate KTSM*](https://www.ktsm.com/news/update-teen-driver-charged-with-human-smuggling-in-incident-involving-helicopter/).

An El Paso Sheriff's Office spokesperson told *Newsweek* that the department had only one case of smuggling involving a minor, back in 2020, with money being the prime motivator.

*Newsweek* reached out to the El Paso Police Department for comment and statistics.

Senator [*Ted Cruz*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/ted-cruz?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) of Texas told *Newsweek* that many of the gang members who are involved in human trafficking or drug trafficking are teenagers.

"Whether in Mexico or in the United States, there are tragically a lot of teenage gang members who the cartels utilize directly for criminal activity," Cruz said.

He called the exacerbation of the issue the "deliberate" results of the Biden administration lacking federal immigration policies.

**Arizona**

Cochise County, located in the southeastern corner of Arizona, has traditionally been a hotbed for human smuggling due to its proximity to the border. Bisbee, the county seat, is approximately 92 miles southeast of Tucson and 11 miles north of the southern border.

County Sheriff Mark Dannels, who has spent 40 years in law enforcement in Cochise County and previously served in the [*U.S. military*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/u.s.-military?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), told *Newsweek* that human smuggling in a border community is nothing new and generally par for the course.

"The difference of what we see in the last three years and what we're seeing in the past is [that] the magnitude is historical for us," Dannels said. "These are record numbers. No. 1, there are no solutions to fix it. No. 2, there is no engagement to fix it."

He said that national sheriffs throughout the U.S., working with Western State sheriffs, the National Sheriffs' Association, major county sheriffs and Southwestern Border/Texas sheriffs' associations have all come together to work with President Biden to address the issue at a community and national perspective.

"And we have yet to sit down with the president," he said. "In fact, he's the first president that we could think of in modern time through invites to him, through me talking to the White House with no responses from the president to meet with us.

"As long as we're not engaging to set up operational and collective messaging and plans, to enforce the rule of law, to address social media—which is the vehicle that a lot of our juveniles are being affected by—and last not least is to work together as one team that we were elected to do, whether it be the state, local and federal. That's where the fracture is occurring right now."

Cochise County-specific data shared with *Newsweek* by County Attorney Brian McIntyre shows that as of November 2023 (the most recent data accumulated), the Cochise County Attorney's Office prosecuted 33 juveniles for border-related crimes: 20 as adults and 13 as juveniles.

Those charged with human smuggling range from ages 14 to 77.

In 2022, the office prosecuted 49 juveniles: 38 as adults and 11 as juveniles.

"It's a complicated spiderweb, but in particular in what we're dealing with now, human smuggling being the primary driver for juveniles and adults—they're coming from everywhere," said McIntyre, who started his role in 2015. "We've become like a criminal tourist country. We've had them from Maine, Oregon, Chicago, you name it."

**Social Media Gateway**

McIntyre, like the other law enforcement officials who spoke with *Newsweek*, said social media ads on services like [*Snapchat*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/snapchat?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) are driving this uptick due to the encryption and ease for teens to easily get involved.

Ads shared with *Newsweek* show recruiters posting photos with wads of cash, calling it "easy money" to drive to checkpoints in cities like Douglas and Sierra Vista.

"That's what's driving it, plain and simple," he said. "If you can get paid $1,500 a body to drive down here from Phoenix and load 'em up and get 'em to Phoenix as fast as you can without getting caught, it's a risk people are willing to take."

Some will "literally crawl through the desert" while covered head to toe in camouflage, he added, with those being smuggled across having no intention to deal with Border Patrol or seek asylum.

The cartel runs the entire network for a fee, which costs between $6,000 and $8,000 if you're from Mexico. They tend to pay something upfront and then must pay off the rest of the debt while in the U.S., described by McIntyre as "indentured servants."

In November, two teens aged 18 and 19, one from Gilbert and the other from Mesa, were taken into custody after smuggling five illegal immigrants across the border, [*according to KTVK/KPHO*](https://www.azfamily.com/2023/11/13/east-valley-teens-arrested-after-five-illegal-immigrants-found-inside-their-car-cochise-county/).

Just last month, three teens aged 15, 16 and 18 were arrested in Cochise County in separate incident involving the smuggling of migrants, [*according to 12 News*](https://www.12news.com/article/news/regional/the-border/3-arizona-teens-recently-arrested-separate-instances-human-smuggling/75-5684b107-8618-4684-9f79-8e4238621d57).

Ray Rede, assistant special agent in charge for U.S. Homeland Security Investigations in Arizona, is responsible for overseeing operations in the Tucson metropolitan area. He has been in law enforcement for 28 years.

He told *Newsweek* that when he joined the [*Department of Homeland Security*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/department-of-homeland-security?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) in 2008, human smuggling was very familial based—basically a group of individuals who were relying on people that they grew up with or they knew within the family to take part in an enterprise, run by a figurehead who was giving commands.

Now, these transnational criminal organizations operate as a co-op where individual entities provide a service within that smuggling scheme.

"They communicate with each other, but they don't necessarily ever meet—nor do they no longer rely on that as a trusted individual that I know or someone I grew up with," Rede said. "And that presents challenges for us because anyone in the world can be a member of the organization and never having met other members of the organization. They're just essentially talking to someone online, who posted an ad and they answered that ad."

He said that cartels "prey on the fact that they create a false sense of anonymity" through social media and encrypted apps, finding a way to utilize and exploit them.

In southern Arizona, Rede said they see ads across all different forms of social media where they're looking for individuals to engage in human smuggling activities like providing transportation and, to a lesser extent, advertise the sale is illicit narcotics.

"So, when these individuals answer these ads, they're just looking for easy money," he said. "And at the end of the day, that's really what it is. They're just looking for easy money. And these members of these organizations are basically telling them law enforcement can't see it, and they're providing instructions.

"There's no vetting process anymore from the organization who they're dealing with. Now that's a vulnerability for them because they're exposing themselves. But on the flip side, they're useful. They're also using that anonymity to recruit these individuals and tell them law enforcement can't see this."

That messaging is "false," Rede asserts, saying that anonymity is nonexistent in today's age due to the tools at law enforcement personnel's disposal. He said it's the same type of arrogance from older days when cartels assumed law enforcement would not thoroughly search at a checkpoint or put a canine on a vehicle.

It presents a danger to the younger individuals who are answering these ads, however.

"If you're a 20-year-old sitting in Phoenix, Arizona, and you're on your favorite social media site, and you see the advertisement pop up, and it's easy money for you, and you answer the ad and you decide to do it—those are individual choices," Rede said. "They really are. No one is forcing them to do this. They answered the ad. They responded to the ad. They're being directed. They're picking up people that they have no idea who these individuals are. They have no idea who they're dealing with. These individuals are caught doing that."

The financial motivation for the young adults is also "the greatest exploitation" because social media is their preferred space, Rede added. And economic motivation is not the main indicator for getting involved, as individuals from all walks of life—including very wealthy families—get roped into it.

"We're dealing with a virtual community which is almost infinite," he said. "So, when we're talking about this, we're talking to every person in the world. Anyone can access the internet. So anyone that can access the internet could be exploited by these organizations if they choose to participate in these operations.

"And it's really just bringing awareness to it. It really goes down to just know what your loved ones are doing. Know what your kids are doing. And if you are an adult, and you decide to answer one of these ads, understand that you are joining an organized crime outfit; this isn't you providing a ride-share service. You could be picking up a family or you could be picking up hardened criminals."

Dannels, who has testified about border issues in front of [*Congress*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/congress?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships), said juveniles get involved for reasons like greed and immaturity. Making over a grand while driving three hours to Tucson can be lucrative, especially for a teen.

He has worked collectively with local, regional and federal colleagues to highlight the prevalence of human smuggling and teens' involvement. They go to schools, give talks, try to make minors wary of the repercussions and hazards.

"It is no secret that if you know, this is what the consequences will be, and the fact that we have not put our head in the sand to protect the political parties, but promote our oath of office and that is to protect these kids," he said. "Because every time I see a kid behind the wheel of a car or involved in some kind of international criminal act, whether it be smuggling or drugs, a juvenile's life has changed. And if I can stop that from happening, or my colleagues can stop that from happening, we're doing something right."

There's too much ***politics*** at play and not enough focus on results across the board, Dannels added.

"The recipe of success right here is that the federal government's been absent on that. They talk like they're involved," he concluded. "I'm not talking about the agents who wear a badge, but the bureaucrats. I don't care if you're [*Republican*](https://www.newsweek.com/topic/republican?utm_source=Synacor&utm_medium=Attnet&utm_campaign=Partnerships) or Democrat or independent, quit protecting your party and let's protect this country. That's the most important thing we do but dang it, we're so worried about reelections and so worried about political affiliations that people are dying every day in this country."

[*Link to Image*](https://d.newsweek.com/en/full/2379344/human-smuggling-teens.jpg)

**Graphic**

Human smuggling teens

Photo-illustration by Newsweek/Getty

Juveniles being arrested for smuggling illegal migrants into the United States is the worst it has been, according to law enforcement officials who spoke to Newsweek. Teens are roped into opportunities through social media apps and can make thousands of dollars.

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