

KIDNAPPERS FIGHT OVER HUMAN CARGO

IMMIGRANTS NABBED AND HELD FOR RANSOM

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Body

PHOENIX -- Moving with the cunning and cruelty of modern-day pirates, gangs of **kidnappers** are swooping down on Arizona highways, attacking smugglers transporting illegal **immigrants** and stealing their **human cargo**.

The **kidnappers** stash the **immigrants** in hundreds of drop houses scattered around this city, using violence and threats to extort money from their relatives.

Now smuggling gangs are **fighting** back, shooting it out with **kidnappers** on sidewalks and freeways in broad daylight.

A gun battle last month between **kidnappers** and smugglers on Interstate 10 at the height of rush hour left four dead. Four others were killed this month in the desert near Phoenix; authorities blamed the deaths on violence between the two groups.

Kidnappers operate simply enough; they let smugglers take all the risks of getting **immigrants** into the country, then rob them once they get here. When they can't intercept smugglers on the road, they snatch migrants from houses where they are hiding.

The wave of violence has made this the deadliest year in Phoenix history with 247 homicides, edging out the previous high of 245 in 2001. Police say 60 percent of the city's crime is related to smuggling and kidnapping.

"It's impacted the whole quality of life here," said police spokesman Sgt. Randy Force.

The increased crime is largely a result of tighter border restrictions in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, officials say. California and Texas are now considered too tough to penetrate, so illegal **immigrants** are flooding across Arizona's large, desert border.

And the cost of the journey has skyrocketed from \$200 to about \$1,500. **Immigrants** are now considered as valuable as narcotics, and many **kidnappers** are former drug dealers.

The spiraling violence prompted the U.S. Department of Homeland Security last month to launch Operation Ice Storm, a massive campaign to regain control of the streets. Fifty new customs and immigration agents have come to Phoenix, the border patrol has stepped up activities along highways and criminal penalties for hostage taking now include life in prison.

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"Phoenix is (the) epicenter of illegal smuggling of people and contraband," said Kyle Barnette, special agent in charge of the immigration and customs enforcement bureau in Phoenix. "And now these bandits are stealing each other's loads."

The victims, including children, are often sexually assaulted or tortured until their relatives come up with the ransom, about \$1,800 for Mexicans and as high as \$10,000 for South Americans.

"It's a whole new breed," said Armando Garcia who heads the human smuggling division of the Phoenix immigration office.

In a recent case, kidnappers threatened to hack off the arm of a 9-year-old girl and send it to the family if they didn't pay up. Authorities tracked the calls and raided the house where they found the girl cowering in a bathroom about to be raped. Another woman was sexually assaulted so often she screamed whenever a man came near.

"They realize there are hardships along the way," said customs agent Angel Rascon. "But they don't expect to be raped, extorted and kidnapped."

Along with the carjackings, Phoenix has seen 300 home invasions this year, as heavily armed kidnap gangs storm houses they think are holding illegal immigrants. People who look like recent immigrants have been abducted from their front yards.

"The immigrants are seen as vulnerable," Force said. "They are reluctant to call the police for fear they will be deported."

A customs agent with experience in Latin America said the kidnappers are highly organized family members who number about 30 or 40 and work in 10- to 12-man cells. Many come from the city of Culiacan in Sinaloa, Mexico.

Using an intelligence network along the border, the gangs are alerted when a load of illegal immigrants is on the way.

Agent Rascon figures there are at least 1,300 drop houses in the city where immigrants are being kept by smugglers awaiting their payment or held hostage by kidnappers demanding ransom.

Authorities have found up to 100 people crammed in a single room. Kidnapping victims are often bound head to toe in duct tape with only an opening to breathe through.

Despite the perils, Arizona is seen as the easiest gateway to the United States, though controls are tightening near border cities, pushing immigrants to cross farther out into the desert.

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