

Brazen daylight smuggling pours illegals into U.S.; For as little as \$100, Mexicans join groups heading right past Border Patrol agents

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Byline: KEVIN G. HALL, Knight Ridder News Service

Body

NOGALES, Mexico — One by one, men and women crawled on their knees and bellies across the hot desert sand about 100 yards from where rumbling tractor-trailer rigs crossed from Mexico into Arizona.

In temperatures near 100 degrees, they looked like they were on a military reconnaissance mission, but their tattered clothing said these weren't soldiers. They were trying to make their way from southern Mexico to the United States.

President Bush and Congress have vowed to seal America's porous border with thousands of National Guard troops, miles of fences, surveillance cameras and aerial drones.

But in the Mariposa Canyon, those plans face a reality check.

In groups of 10 to 16, men, women and children routinely cross the border, led by brazen smugglers called polleros. It happens in broad daylight, under a blazing sun at high noon, around and through the 12-foot-high wall that Uncle Sam erected in the late 1990s.

The scene unfolds under the noses of Customs and Border Patrol agents. Once across, the immigrants dash to a warehouse parking lot, where a ride takes them to a safehouse in the Arizona border town of Nogales.

On May 22, the polleros allowed a Knight Ridder reporter and photographer to view their seedy world up close. The men, many in their 20s, earn about \$100 a head for sneaking mostly Mexicans into the United States. From there, the illegal immigrants will fan out to look for work just about anywhere they can find it.

After first hurling rocks at reporters and threatening them, the smugglers loosened up and let journalists accompany them.

SMUGGLERS OUT IN OPEN

Finding smugglers is easy. At one wooden shack, more than a dozen were gathered, all talking at once on their cell phones and walkie-talkies.

The shack was a stone's s throw from the Mexican government's border crossing, where an agent shooed away reporters. The smugglers also shared a joint in plain view of the authorities.

In turn, the polleros led groups of Mexicans down a trash-covered ravine to the 12-foot-high metal fence that guards the border. It's routinely blow-torched or cut to make space for passage.

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At the point closest to the U.S. crossing station, the immigrants crawled on their bellies and through a cattle gate instead of the high metal fence.

"They should've gone that way," said one smuggler as he watched from the top of the canyon. There was a crowd around the rickety shack, and the men all commented and criticized the tactics of the smugglers below, as if analyzing a soccer game.

A few hours later, a Border Patrol agent in his trademark dark green outfit started walking the U.S. side of the ravine, putting an end to several hours of uninterrupted traffic.

Now it was a race back into Mexico for a group of about 16 aliens, including a mother with a daughter younger than 5. When the U.S. lawman slipped on the steep terrain, the gathered smugglers pumped their fists and cheered loudly as if someone just scored a goal.

Undaunted, the 16 marched back along the Mexican side of the border to regroup behind a large metal fence.

BAD BOYS

Three smugglers, all young men from the state of Sinaloa, a drug-trafficking hub, waved over a Knight Ridder reporter to accompany them as they tried again.

The smugglers identified themselves only by their street-gang nicknames — El Chumi, El Cholo and El Tacohuayo. They were all in their early 20s and seemed half-mobster and half-Beavis and Butthead. They joked and bantered constantly, razzing each other and using language that would make a sailor blush. But look at the fear in the eyes of their human cargo, and you knew these three weren't choirboys.

"Why do you want to build a wall when we'll just find a way around it?" asked Chumi.

The pudgy, baby-faced smuggler complained that Mexicans are just seeking work and shouldn't face such obstacles to entry. All efforts to stop smugglers will fail, he insisted.

Since Oct. 1, 2005, more than 288,000 illegal immigrants have been apprehended in and around Nogales. Almost 489,000 were caught here in the 2005 fiscal year. Clearly, not everyone is getting across.

But with an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants living in the United States, lots do get across, as was evident on this scorching afternoon.

Juan Carlos, a timid man from the state of Puebla, quietly interrupted the sermon of the man smuggling him to America.

"If the U.S. doesn't want illegal workers, why are companies coming here to contract them," he asked, telling of recruiters who come through his region south of Mexico City with buses. They offer to take people across to waiting jobs, he said. The cost of the illicit transit would be deducted from their pay.

During the only moment the smugglers were out of earshot, one man said he paid \$1,000 to be taken across the border. Another angrily referred to the smugglers as "corruptos," or the corrupt ones.

When the smugglers returned to the resting spot in the canyon — littered with discarded water bottles, dirty clothing and toilet paper — the sun-baked immigrants fell silent again.

SIZE UP SITUATION

Chumi and Tacohuayo, a serious-looking dark-skinned man with a mustache and a sweat-soaked green golf shirt, shared their strategy.

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They pointed to the pole-mounted cameras on the other side of the high fence. They would have to time their sprint across the border to the movement of the cameras, which are remotely operated from a control room in a Border Patrol station. The men were patient. They watched the cameras closely over nearly an hour to see if they could detect a pattern.

Along the rusting fence, blue metal hacksaw blades littered the ground, used to cut peepholes that would help determine when to run across.

Suddenly, it was time to move.

Tacohuayo swiftly led the first group of six through a makeshift door cut out of the American fence.

The pudgy Chumi brought up the rear. The immigrants scurried across the desert on their knees to a rancher's chain-link fence, which they'll slide under.

A Border Patrol van appeared to watch much of the attempt from a few hundred feet away. Later that evening, during a tour of the Border Control station, it was clear the cameras probably did see it all.

So how did it happen? The smugglers insisted Border Patrol agents are paid to look the other way.

Nonsense, said Manuel Coppola, publisher of Nogales International, the Arizona border city's twice-weekly newspaper.

Coppola's May 19 editorial blasted President Bush's plan to send up to 6,000 National Guard troops to the border, calling it "lame." Like many on the border, Coppola said that far more boots on the ground are needed and that the Border Patrol is forced to leave smaller groups alone while it concentrates on larger numbers of crossers.

"Do we stop everything? No," senior agent Jim Hawkins, a Nogales Border Patrol spokesman, said when asked about the daylight crossings.

"I don't think people understand the sheer scope of this issue," Hawkins said.

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