

Smuggler gets 20 years in prison; crashed into CHP car

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Body

A **smuggler** who was driving a GMC Suburban that **crashed** head-on into a California Highway Patrol car while going the wrong way on an East County freeway last year was sentenced yesterday to nearly 20 years in federal **prison**.

No one was seriously injured in the Aug. 17, 2005, **crash** on eastbound Interstate 8 near Pine Valley.

Jovanni Mendoza, 26, a U.S. citizen who was living in Tijuana, was convicted in a nonjury trial in August.

His Suburban was going about 55 mph, fleeing from a CHP officer, when it **crashed** into another patrol car that was weaving back and forth with lights flashing in an effort to stop traffic.

Border Patrol agents arrested five of the six passengers in the Suburban, none of whom had documents to be in the country. Authorities also found 693 pounds of marijuana in suitcases in the truck, prosecutor John Kraemer said.

Mendoza ran away but was captured a week later when he tried going through an immigration checkpoint while driving a different Suburban, the prosecutor said in a court filing.

U.S. District Judge Dana Sabraw cited Mendoza's criminal history when he imposed the 235-month sentence and ordered him to pay the Highway Patrol \$9,874 in restitution.

Mendoza was arrested driving the wrong way on the freeway six weeks before the **crash** but was not charged with smuggling because he did not have any contraband or illegal **immigrants** with him then.

Authorities believe he had dropped off people he was smuggling before his arrest, Kraemer said.

In 2002, Mendoza was arrested after Border Patrol officers discovered 31 illegal **immigrants** in a **van** he was driving, Kraemer said.

That was one of more than eight prior incidents, including one in which he nearly hit a Border Patrol agent after driving through a checkpoint, Kraemer said in a court filing.

Defense lawyer Felix Martinez said Mendoza, who was raised by a single mother in East Los Angeles, had not been prosecuted in those earlier smuggling arrests because authorities thought he was Mexican.

Martinez urged the judge not to take those incidents into account.

Smugglers driving the wrong way on freeways have posed a vexing problem in East County in recent years.

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Immigrant smugglers moved routes to the mountains and deserts east of San Diego following a crackdown known as Operation Gatekeeper that began in the mid-1990s near San Ysidro and Otay Mesa.

Guides walk **immigrants** across the border on rugged terrain and meet up with drivers who sometimes take reckless means to avoid checkpoints and law enforcement.

Highway Patrol officers sometimes call off pursuits when **smugglers** endanger other drivers. When he was arrested for the head-on **crash**, Mendoza told Border Patrol agents that he had been smuggling people since he was 16 and his father was also a **smuggler**, Kraemer said.

Mendoza also bragged he had been chased by law enforcement 34 times in a one month, claiming that was a record, he said.

He later denied those statements.

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