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## 109 entrants discovered at drop house

**Border Patrol: Crossers crammed into 3-bedroom home in Rio Rico**

**By Dale Quinn**

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A team of plainclothes Border Patrol agents found 109 illegal entrants Tuesday in squalid living conditions in a drop house about 60 miles south of Tucson, authorities said Wednesday.

The illegal border crossers were arrested, the home was seized, and six illegal entrants will likely face prosecution for human smuggling in connection with the operation of the drop house, said Sean King a U.S. Border Patrol spokesman.

The case began when agents in Rio Rico — an area known for human smuggling — saw a vehicle with several passengers and later saw that same vehicle with no passengers, King said.

They questioned the driver and found out he was in the country illegally, and he led them to the drop house, King said. Border Patrol agents seized the vehicle.

King said living conditions in such drop houses — where smugglers hold illegal entrants until they can move them north — can be abhorrent. The entrants use buckets for toilets because the overloaded plumbing gets clogged. The homes aren't cleaned as migrants move through them, and unsanitary conditions escalate, he said.

In this case, more than 100 illegal entrants were crammed into a three-bedroom home littered with soiled clothing and garbage, King said. Several women and children were preparing food in a kitchen littered with paper plates.

Each room in the house was filled with people except for the master bedroom, which appeared to be the smugglers' living quarters. That room had two mattresses on the floor and closets filled with personal items, King said.

Otherwise, the house had no furniture, blankets or anything that would provide comfort.

"The smuggler doesn't care" about conditions in the house, King said. "All he's doing is keeping them there until he can move them north and get paid."

Thirty-four of the illegal entrants were female and 75 were male. Twelve were under age 18.

The Border Patrol usually will find drop houses every other week, often with about 30 illegal entrants, but sometimes as many as 70, King said.

Smugglers usually limit the number of border crossers in each house to keep from attracting attention.

They hold the illegal entrants for short periods then move them to Tucson or Phoenix, King said. The smugglers keep them in the houses until their family members can afford to have them released.

"They're basically being held for ransom," he said.

Arizona has become a "transportation hub" for smugglers, said Lauren Mack, a spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Smugglers will often take the illegal border crossers to Phoenix because it's farther from the border than Tucson and they can blend into the metropolitan area.

The smugglers will then make arrangements to move them to different parts of the country.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement works to find drop houses where illegal entrants are being held against their will, King said. Sometimes smugglers will demand more money from the entrants or abuse them once they're in the United States, she said.

Recently, there has been a decrease in the number of such houses found in areas like Phoenix and Tucson, but that could be because migration patterns fluctuate, Mack said.

"What we're trying to do is dismantle these organizations from the top level," she said. To do that, investigators track the large sums of money illegal entrants pay.

Smugglers usually receive \$2,000 to \$3,000 per migrant to move a person from Mexico to the United States, Mack said.

The cost can increase, depending on the method of entry and whether a family wants to stay together.

One way Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials follow that money is by tracking wire transfers, a common way smugglers get paid.

To launder the money, sometimes smugglers will try to sneak cash into Mexico, deposit it at a bank or exchange house and bring it back into the United States, Mack said.

The agency works with banks and exchange houses on both sides of the border to find the smugglers, Mack said.

The smugglers "are very organized," King said. "They have a way to get (illegal entrants) from Chiapas, Mexico, to Tennessee."

In May, agents discovered 118 migrants at another house in Rio Rico. The Border Patrol said at the time that it was one of the largest drop-house discoveries in Arizona in recent years.

That same month, agents in Yuma found more than 150 illegal entrants in three separate drop houses within a week.

Busting the drop houses can be dangerous for Border Patrol agents because human smugglers are often involved with drugs and will violently protect their financial assets, King said.

Smugglers will guard the door to make sure no one leaves and keep an eye out for authority, King said. There was no evidence of drug smuggling in this situation, but taking more than 100 people involuntarily into custody can still be a dangerous process, King said.

The agents involved in this drop-house discovery were members of the Border Patrol's Disrupt team.

The agents work in civilian clothes, conduct surveillance and rely on calls and information from the community to conduct their operations.

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