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SMUGGLING CHILDREN, Part I: Young immigrants become human cargo

Business is up as border security separates parents from their kids

By Michael Marizco
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

NOGALES, SONORA Noé Lopez doesn't even bother to look up when he hears the shouts from across the grounds of the shelter.

Each shout signals hope for some lucky kid whose parent has called to say someone - an aunt, an uncle, or maybe a smuggler - is offering a ticket out of the Center for Repatriated Minors.

The calls are never for him.

Noé, 11, and his 13-year-old brother are among the nearly 2,000 kids this year to pass through the center, established by the city to give temporary shelter to children caught trying to cross the border without an adult.

The Border Patrol last year captured more than 43,000 children trying to get into the United States illegally. More than 6,000 of them were

Audio slide show

View images of one family's quest to bring two Mexican boys into the United States. With audio commentary from border reporter Michael Marizco and photographer Kelly Presnell.

Launch slide show

(Audio may begin automatically, so adjust your sound accordingly)

Interactive Map

Follow the brothers' journey from Oaxaca, Mexico to North Carolina

Launch map

About this series

Part One

Noé and Moises Lopez begin their journey to a new life with the mother they haven't seen in eight years.

Part Two

The journey Reyna Lopez planned for her boys was to be quick and safe. But one boy disappears into

were returned to Mexican children's shelters from Tijuana to Nogales, Agua Prieta to Ciudad Juárez.

Noé was lucky enough to find a bed at the shelter, but not all kids do. Throughout the summer, the staff puts extra mattresses on the floor to accommodate the crush of children. Their number has soared 70 percent in the past four years because heightened post-9/11 security makes it harder for illegal immigrants working in the United States to cross back and forth to visit their families. Instead, parents move to the United States alone and get settled, then hire smugglers to bring their children across the border.

The trend has spurred a thriving industry in border cities like Nogales, where a boy like Noé is worth \$1,500 to a smuggler. Sometimes much more.

The most conniving smugglers squeeze more money from desperate parents too afraid to complain to authorities on either side of the border. Their children unwittingly get caught up in what has become an international game of hide-and-seek, disappearing into sophisticated networks built on rental cars, plane tickets and fake IDs.

Noé and his brother, Moises, are near the beginning of their journey to join their mother in North Carolina. U.S. border agents have caught

a smuggling network where deals are made and promises aren't always kept.

A family divided After eight years apart, illegal immigrant Reyna Lopez is trying to bring her family back together with help from a smuggler.

Noé Lopez

TV commercials have fueled his fantasies of a rich life in the United States. But to get here, 11-year-old Noé must make it over the border, across the desert and onto a plane with the help of a smuggler.

Moises Lopez

As the big brother, Moises, 13, plans to protect Noé through their journey to North Carolina. But when the two suddenly are separated, Moises' adventure takes an unexpected and dangerous turn.

Reyna Lopez

Eight years after leaving her two oldest children with her parents in Oaxaca, Reyna, 30, puts her trust for a reunion in smugglers who promise a safe journey - but don't always keep their word.

Arrests by the numbers

- Children have been arrested in increasing proportion to the total number of illegal entrants arrested since the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

NATIONAL ARREST NUMBERS

Oct. 1, 2000 to Sept. 30, 2001

CHILDREN 40,936

TOTAL 1,266,214

3.2 percent

at the shelter.

Fernando Guerrero, the center's director, keeps his charges busy while they wait for their shout. They sweep inside and out, wash dishes, pluck chickens and do any other chores he can think of.

For two weeks, the boys wait for a call from the mother they haven't seen in eight years.

"Moises! Noé! Come here!" comes a voice, at last, from the shelter's white-walled office.

They bolt.

"¿ Mamá?" Moises says into the receiver.

"¿ Hola mijo, como están?" - "Hello, son, how are you?" - asks their mother, who left the boys back in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, but now worries her parents no longer can care for them.

She tells Moises to get to the Hotel San Andres, an old hotel near the port of entry used by migrants about to cross the border illegally.

"We're leaving," Moises tells Noé once they're out of the office.

Two days later, they run away.

Nothing is easy

It seemed like such a simple plan: A smuggler

Oct. 1, 2001 to Sept. 30, 2002

CHILDREN 35,486

TOTAL 955,310

3.7 percent

Oct. 1, 2002 to Sept. 30, 2003

CHILDREN 36,287

TOTAL 931,557

3.9 percent

Oct. 1, 2003 to Sept. 30, 2004

CHILDREN 43,536

TOTAL 1,160,395

3.8 percent

SOURCE: U.S. Customs and Border Protection, Washington, D.C., headquarters

How to help

- The Center for Repatriated Minors in Nogales, Sonora, which is supported by the city government, needs children's clothes and board games. Call 011-52-63131-24043.

NewsTalk

- *How should the Border Patrol deal with Mexican children who are left behind when their families try to cross into the United States?*
- *Should any effort be made to help reunite them with their parents or other relatives?*

Share your thoughts on NewsTalk. Responses will be published on Tuesday's Opinion page. A sample will be selected to offer a range of opinions.

Please include your name, a phone number for verification and information about yourself, such as your occupation. Comments

friends would run the boys 1,000 miles to the border, then guide them for some days to an Arizona drop house. Then the brothers would jet off to their mother in North Carolina, all in less than a week.

But nothing, it turned out, was simple.

On Sept. 20, the boys boarded a bus in Oaxaca with their aunt and rode to Hermosillo, Sonora, then on to Altar, one of the most efficient points for smuggling people into the United States.

A border town three hours southwest of Tucson, Altar caters to migrants, offering *comida corridas* - inexpensive, hearty meals - and cheap places to stay, and stores where migrants buy supplies such as backpacks, hats, water and salt tablets for their journey.

Standing in the town's main plaza, their aunt sets her eyes on an old van, its shattered front window duct-taped to the frame.

A giant of a man, his stomach straining the buttons of his plaid shirt, steps out and looks down at Noé before turning to greet the boy's aunt.

"How much for the trip? They'll be two," she asks.

The giant looks down again on the two boys.

should reach us by noon.

E-mail: newsq@azstarnet.com.
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The series

Border reporter Michael Marizco, 32, spent three months investigating the business of smuggling children into the United States.

Noé and Moises Lopez are two of those children, who each day enter sophisticated, sometimes dangerous smuggling networks that reunite children with parents living here illegally.

Marizco met the boys at a Nogales, Son. deported kids' shelter, then he and photojournalist Kelly Presnell traveled to North Carolina for the end of the boys' journeys.

Their story was reconstructed through observation and extensive interviews in Spanish with the boys, their family, Mexican law enforcement officials, and children and operators of the shelter.

Glossary of terms

- **OPERATIVOS:** Mexican police units that set up checkpoints and carry out raids. They are similar to a U.S. police SWAT unit. The officers are more heavily armed than typical police officers and travel in groups for protection.

- **POLLERO:** A chicken wrangler. The term is slang to describe people smugglers because they round up illegal immigrants like *pollitos*, little chickens.

"And who will care for them?"

"You yourself can pass them, can't you?" she asks.

" *Señora*, that's complicated," he says.

They haggle. A price is set: \$30 to drive each boy to Sásabe, Sonora, and a waiting smuggler, the first link in the chain leading to North Carolina.

Another migrant, who shares the last name Lopez and is also heading north, agrees to pose as their uncle if Mexican authorities start asking questions.

"Take care of them," their aunt tells the driver.

From Sásabe, a smuggler will guide the boys across the border, lead them across the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge - a popular route since the only road points north all the way to Arizona 86 - and get them to Ironwood Forest National Monument.

Once in Ironwood, they will walk for three days to a drop house in Phoenix, the hub of the smuggling network the boys are using. Then - and only then, because families don't pay until kids are safely in the United States - it will be time to call *Mamá* to wire \$3,000 to the Phoenix smuggler.

70 rough miles

The rutted dirt road jostles

- **DENUNCIAR:** To formally accuse a person, the first step in beginning a criminal investigation in Mexico. Under Mexican law, if nobody enters a formal accusation, there can be no crime. This is why, under Mexican laws, smuggling into the United States is a crime that is rarely prosecuted unless it involves bringing people from other countries into Mexico. Illegal immigrants rarely complain to police about their smuggler unless the smuggler blackmailed or kidnapped them.

Guide to locations, events

- **ALTAR, SONORA:** A border town of about 15,000 people three hours southwest of Tucson. Migrants use the town as a staging area to buy supplies such as backpacks, hats, water and salt tablets before illegally crossing the border into Arizona. Companies operate groups of vans that shuttle the people 70 miles to the border at Sásabe, Sonora along a lone dirt road. Altar drew more than 110,000 migrants into the Border Patrol's Tucson Sector this year.

- **BUENOS AIRES NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE:** About 118,000 acres of public land south of Three Points adjacent to the U.S.-Mexican border. The refuge has an estimated 1,400 linear miles of foot trails created by illegal entrants. On average, one abandoned car left behind by smugglers is pulled out of the refuge each week.

- **BUENOS AIRES NEIGHBORHOOD:** The eastern section of Nogales, Sonora. It's known as a rough part of town, with hilly streets and dilapidated homes. The area lends itself to

people in the van for the 70-mile trip. Mexican border music blares from the radio as Noé watches the long trail of dust growing behind them.

Moises thinks about his new life in North Carolina, with its promise of an operation to fix his eye, left watery and blurry from the time he ran into a barbed-wire fence on his grandfather's ranch.

The trip is slow. The only sense of forward movement is the passing saguaros and mesquite trees, the occasional van driving south for more people.

Finally the van slows as it reaches a checkpoint set up by Grupo Beta, a Mexican agency that doesn't aim to stop illegal immigration, only advises migrants of the risks they face crossing the border.

A Grupo Beta agent opens the rear doors and eyes the two boys, asking if they are with an adult. The old man next to Moises nods, saying the children are with him.

The agent ignores him and talks to the boys instead.

Are you safe, you can climb out of the van right here if you'd like, he asks.

Moises speaks:

"We are fine. We're traveling with our uncle."

illegal crossing, especially on paths made between the homes that span the length of the border. Police and the military patrol the streets only in convoys.

- **CASA DE HUÉSPED:** It means guest house, but also describes the cheap hotels that cater to illegal immigrants, who rent rooms for as little as \$10 a night and rest before they cross into the United States.

- **COMIDA CORRIDAS:** Cheap, hearty meals popular with migrants passing through border towns like Altar, Sasabe and Agua Prieta where migrants gather before crossing north.

- **DROP HOUSE:** Homes or apartments where illegal entrants are dropped off and stowed away until the next leg of their smuggling journey begins. Drop houses are most common in Phoenix, but are also beginning to be seen in Tucson and other areas of Southern Arizona.

- **GRUPO BETA:** Mexico's border safety agents. Their purpose isn't to stop illegal immigration into the United States but to warn Mexican migrants of the danger they face from the weather, the terrain and bandits who prey on illegal border crossers.

- **IRONWOOD FOREST NATIONAL MONUMENT:** About 129,000 acres of public land west of Tucson. In recent years, it's become one of the more popular corridors for illegal entrants, who walk there from the U.S.-Mexican border and are picked up by people smugglers.

The agent stares at him for a moment and Moises doesn't dare breathe until they're moving again.

Staying clear of the bandidos

They sleep that night in Sásabe, in a *casa de huésped* - a cheap migrant hotel - where the van driver leads them.

That next morning, there's nothing to do but wait in front of the hotel for their smuggler. They're bored.

They eat using some of the cash Moises carries. He doesn't have much, counting on a debit card his grandfather gave him in Oaxaca. His mother replenishes it with deposits of \$200 every few months from a bank in North Carolina.

Carrying cash, she had worried, would make the boys a target for the *bandidos*.

Late afternoon, and a short, fat man approaches the boys and motions toward a waiting truck.

It's time.

"Noé, you stay close to me, you understand?" Moises orders his little brother.

The truck rolls over the dirt road toward the Baboquivari Mountains, whose downward slopes meet the U.S.-Mexico border west of Sasabe, Ariz.

The Sonora-Arizona smuggling corridor - fraught with danger from bandits, kidnappers, heat and the cactus spines both boys will get sick of plucking - awaits them. But so does their mother and that makes Noé's heart hurt, because he misses her and because he is so excited about his new life in the United States.

Along with money over the years, Reyna has sent pictures to the boys in Oaxaca. Pictures of herself, of their little half-brother, Victor, of life in North Carolina. The Star is not naming the city at the family's request.

There's also the American soda commercials, the "Spider-Man" cartoons and the "Teletubbies" episodes. And memories of visits from his Tío Juan, an illegal immigrant and successful roofer who always leaves wads of cash with the grandparents and stories with the boys.

"In America, I'll have video games, clean clothes, a nice place to live and my mamá," Noé says.

First, though, there's this desert to cross.

The human coyote

Late on the night of Sept. 24, two smugglers called El Chapo and El Gordo -the short one and the fat one - lead the group of 20 across the cheap barbed wire fence that separates the two countries. Despite his girth, El Gordo moves quickly ahead of the group, staying barely within view. He watches for Border Patrol agents, helicopters or anything else that will disrupt their forward movement.

He glides over the desert, one moment a half-mile away, the next walking with the group, moving effortlessly like the coyote that gives smugglers their nickname.

For three days, they sleep when the sun is high and would make them easy to spot. As the sun sets on the 99-degree days, they stir and move on. Noé tires but his feet are healthy - the sun does not send out the same sickening waves of heat it does in the summer. By the end of the third night it's Moises who falters, the blisters on his right foot stinging, then burning as sweat drips into the raw, exposed flesh.

"Move yourself, *mijo*, or we'll leave you behind," Moises remembers El Chapo telling him. The boy bites his lip, saying nothing as a fresh burst of pain shoots up from his foot.

Chopper and agents on the ground

On Sept. 27, a U.S. Border Patrol helicopter drops its black shadow over the group like a cloak. A giant plume of dust swirls grit and dirt around them, stinging their eyes as the group scatters.

El Chapo yells for everyone to hide and runs away with a teenage girl he pulls by the hand. The boys separate, Noé running up a hill and then stopping to look for his brother.

Three agents roar down on all-terrain vehicles, the combined snarl of their engines almost matching that of the helicopter above them.

Noé runs - into another pair of agents, these in trucks. He stops when he sees them coming, too tired to keep moving. The agents offer him water and put him in the back of their truck, with the air conditioning on, as they process the illegal entrants.

El Chapo and El Gordo are nowhere to be found.

But Moises is found. He reappears, walking slowly, his face grimacing in pain with every step.

Processing goes quickly, the agents scrawling down the boys' personal information, then driving them to the Tucson station in the

back of an SUV. They place the boys in a holding cell together and give them juice and crackers.

By noon the boys walk through the long steel gate into Mexico and are escorted to the home for deported children.

They've lost their backpacks, filled with clothes and food for their trip, but Moises still holds two vital items: his debit card - a card that later would get him into trouble - and a worn phone book with numbers for his mother and, more importantly, his smuggler in Phoenix.

It takes three days for the news to reach Reyna, who is finally contacted by the Mexican consul. At the center, time crawls.

Sometimes the boys play basketball with other children. Other times they sweep the parking lot incessantly, stopping to talk with other kids about their own adventures trying to get into the United States.

Jazmín Gonzalez Ybañez, 9, blames the smuggler who tried to lead her and her little sister through a tunnel.

"I don't think he knew what he was doing," she says, playing with a tree leaf that has fallen to the ground. Her sister, Amaironis, 4, giggles and runs across the parking lot to the basketball game, tottering away with the ball to the dismay of the players.

The girls are also from Oaxaca and crossed through a tunnel under the Nogales Port of Entry in early September. One night, a smuggler led them and a group of 20 migrants into the open maw of the gutter system at Calle Elias and Buenos Aires.

What they climbed out of was a manhole on Grand Avenue in Nogales, Ariz.; they'd made it to the Promised Land, through the wastewater that washes from Mexico into this country, smelling of rotted garbage and sewage. They were greeted by Border Patrol agents, who fingerprinted and deported them within hours. Now they're waiting for their father, Carlos Ybañez, a roofer in Ohio.

He arrives one morning and takes his daughters back to a Nogales hotel to meet their smuggler and try again.

"What kind of life would we have here if we didn't?" he asks as they walk away, past the burned-out skeleton of a bus rusting by the side of the road.

Sometimes, the smugglers come up with bizarre tactics to get kids across. Victor Angel Acuña, 8, was caught on his third attempt to cross when the smuggler had him crawl underneath a truck that was about to cross through the downtown port of entry.

Smugglers are "a mafia now"

As the United States beefed up its security to the east and west of Arizona, the smugglers rose to power in Sonora. They're not like the drug cartels, proudly known by family names - the Zambada Organization, the Arellano Felix Organization - or geographic monikers - the Juárez Cartel, the Gulf Cartel. Human-smuggling organizations live in the shadows.

"It's a mafia now," says Guillermo Alonso Meneses, an anthropologist who studies human trafficking with Tijuana's Colegio de la Frontera Norte. He estimates human-smuggling surpassed \$1 billion last year through Arizona alone.

The warnings this would happen were there.

In a little-known 1994 report, the former Immigration and Naturalization Service predicted an increase in smuggling dollars and a growing sophistication of smugglers. The report, "Border Patrol Strategic Plan 1994 and Beyond," forecast increased illegal entry through international "twin cities" along the Mexico border as San Diego and El Paso were sealed off.

That prediction came to be, as kids like Noé and Moises try time and time again to get across.

On Oct. 12, at his mother's direction, Moises calls their smuggler, El Toro, who gives him directions to the Hotel San Andres in Nogales.

El Toro, 32, does a booming business in Nogales, Sonora. Police know him well, says Chief Ramses Arce Fierro. But he likely will never be prosecuted since it will take one of his own customers, an illegal entrant, to formally accuse him, Arce Fierro says. Unless he steals from them or gets carried away in his prices and angers someone, no one will go to police.

Shortly after noon the next day, Noé and Moises wander out the back door of the center's kitchen as the old cook warns them that they'd better hurry up plucking that chicken if they want dinner tonight.

They hitch a ride back to town from an old man who drives them to the Hotel San Andres, where they call El Toro - Spanish for "the bull."

"We'll leave this afternoon," the smuggler tells them as he drives them to his house. Once he gets them over the border wall, he tells them, his job is done. Another man will pick them up from a small park near City Hall in Nogales, Ariz.

They drive to the border wall that night in a green Ford Explorer -

and promptly retreat when they see dozens of U.S. Border Patrol agents El Toro wasn't expecting.

Back to the smuggler's small home then, little more than a tiny wooden shack with springboards from old mattresses serving as a rusty fence around the yard.

The boys are put in a dark room with a single mattress to share. In the next room sleeps a Polish family El Toro is taking across.

In the middle of the night, Noé awakes to the sounds of yelling and a young girl's sobs.

He moves to the doorway where he sees a Mexican man rubbing his bleeding scalp. The Polish girl stands clutching a rock; her brother grips a piece of rusted metal like a blade.

After the man flees, the Poles gather their packs and leave. The boys later learn why: The man had tried to attack the girl when she went outside to relieve herself behind a rock.

Simplest of crossing plans

By morning, the pedestrian gate at the downtown port of entry is beginning to fill with shoppers and workers heading into the United States.

A man working for El Toro drives the two boys to the border, explaining his plan: Wait for a large group to gather around the turnstiles, then simply walk into the group and keep going.

Moises stays behind. He's too tall to try such a thing.

"Walk, don't run," the smuggler says, pushing Noé gently toward a group of people waiting to pass the inspection gate.

But nobody notices the small boy moving toward the crowd, then slipping behind the heavy coat a crossing woman carries in her arm.

The boy, in his clean, new, blue T-shirt and his same old jeans, begins to walk tensely, expecting an agent to grab him. Nobody questions him as he walks up Grand Avenue toward City Hall. A man in a Mazda truck pulls alongside him.

"He's here," he says into a cell phone, opening the door for the boy, then driving to Tucson.

Noé's first impression of Americans: They drink too much. Brenda, a pregnant woman in the drop house where he's staying, treats him kindly, cooking him breakfast and dinner and letting him watch television. He doesn't care for the three men who walk into the

house, popping in a pornographic videotape and cracking open a bottle of rum. It's 9 a.m.

"Please send me my son"

After two days at the drop house, Noé is taken to Phoenix, where he meets the smuggler his mother had hired. From there, he will go to Las Vegas and board a Southwest Airlines flight to North Carolina - but not before the smuggler gets paid.

"Please send me my son," Reyna says when he calls.

He'll be on his way as soon as the money arrives, she's told. He's already raised the price \$500 above the \$1,500 they originally agreed upon. Now he wants another \$200.

Reyna pauses before answering. "Excuse me?"

"We'll have to charge you more. We didn't take into account having to feed him for so long," the smuggler says.

"This is not the price we agreed on," she retorts.

He won't budge. She asks to speak to her son.

" *Hola, mijo*, how are you?" she asks cheerily as she clenches a napkin, twisting it into a tight spear. "Good, baby. I'm - What? No, no. I'm going to gather the money together. I don't know if I'll be able to do it today but don't worry, *mijo*," she says.

Again with the smuggler on the phone, she acquiesces, the whole time twisting and twisting the paper napkin.

For \$2,200 borrowed from her brother and sent by wire to Las Vegas, Noé is flown to North Carolina.

As the plane touches down, Noé clenches his armrest and fingers a small glass angel he brought his mother from Oaxaca.

After eight years, and with his newly shaved head to make him look more American, he wonders if she'll recognize him.

Following the smugglers' instructions, in her distinct Mexican accent thickly laced with a Southern twang, Reyna asks for a ticket to enter the airline terminal to pick up a child traveling alone. She doesn't say the boy is her son, simply shows her ID. Her last name is different from the name on Noé's boarding pass, which is actually that of the smuggler's son. Nobody questions her.

She passes through a wall of four Transportation Security Administration agents who search her clothes for weapons, her

shoes for bombs. Then she sits facing the door, watching the clock on the wall anxiously.

Her heart pounds and she forces herself to stop twisting the corner of her jacket.

At 7:30 p.m., the flight lands. Almost there now as a flight attendant escorts Noé off the plane. A voice over the loudspeaker asks Reyna to come to the counter.

He sees her first, a small, dark woman in a bright, peach shirt and a long, flowered skirt. She approaches, eager to see her son but unsure of herself. Will *migración* agents be waiting?

Then, "Hi mamá," from around the counter.

" *Mijo*," Reyna breathes, hugging the boy to her. "We'll be a complete family now," she says.

But first she must get Moises across. And to do that, she will have to confront the third arm of the rich smuggling business.

Kidnapping. And ransom.

• Contact Star border reporter Michael Marizco at 573-4213 or mmarizco@azstarnet.com

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