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## Mexican Indian beggars are a daily in, out at border

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EL PASO — Josefa Gonzalez Loya has sneaked across the Mexican border at least 128 times in the past eight years. And each time, the Border Patrol has been nice enough to give her a lift home.

Gonzalez and a group of other women and children — all Indians from the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca — have no interest in staying in the United States. All they want to do is panhandle outside El Paso businesses, using the children as lures.

At the end of a productive day, they wait for the Border Patrol to come pick them up and drive them back to the border.

Little dramas like this play out day after day, accounting for thousands of arrests but hardly any prosecutions in the past several years.

The Oaxacan migrants fall under a loophole that gives border agents discretion to keep some adults and children together and out of jail.

"They do qualify for jail and prosecution," Border Patrol spokesman Ramiro Cordero said. "However, we've got to look at the humanitarian factor first if we are going to have to separate the family."

Nearly 500 Oaxacan women and children in colorful serapes have been rounded up since the fiscal year began in October, accounting for thousands of arrests.

The middle-aged Gonzalez and some of the others make a mad dash across the Rio Grande with the help of a guide. Occasionally they get caught trying to slip across, but evidently they are good at evading the Border Patrol, even though they use the same general area over and over. Sometimes, authorities realize they have arrived when they see the little footprints the diminutive immigrants leave along the banks of the Rio Grande.

Once she makes it across, Gonzalez, who speaks only a language common among Indians in Oaxaca, catches a bus to a strip mall a few miles away from the border, just far enough into El Paso to evade agents on patrol. There she starts begging for spare change.

Border agents say when she and her entourage are ready to go home, they muster in front of a store. Then they wait, knowing their presence will create enough of a nuisance that agents will come pick them up. When they do, the beggars' mugshots are taken and their fingerprints checked. Then they are walked back across the border.

Gonzalez has been arrested 128 times. Despite a crackdown on illegal immigration along much of the border, she and most of her tribal members have never been jailed.

Most illegal immigrants cannot count on the goodness of immigration officials' hearts. Unlike the Oaxacans and other Mexicans caught near the border, illegal immigrants arrested in the U.S. interior are routinely separated from their children, with some youngsters placed in foster care while their parents are deported.

Cordero said agents have the authority to "look at the totality of the circumstances" when deciding if an illegal immigrant should be prosecuted.

"They are coming to beg. They are not trying to further their entry into the United States," Cordero said.

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He said it is impossible to say how much each arrest costs the taxpayers.

Gonzalez and her crew seem well-aware of the law. The women all claim the children as their own, but that would mean women obviously in their 50s and 60s have just had babies. Often the same child is claimed by different women on different days.

"We're pretty sure they are family units or at least close-knit groups," Cordero said.

Even David Hensley, manager of an El Paso department store, gives the panhandlers a few dollars before calling the authorities to take them away.

"It's good to see that the Border Patrol is showing some common sense in dealing with the reality that is life on the border," said Ruben Garcia, who runs a shelter in El Paso. "Nothing is served by locking these people up."

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