

around the country. To add insult to injury, Kroupa said, “many times the smugglers extort additional money just to keep their human cargo in putrid unsanitary conditions. “They can’t escape because often they are locked in.”

The scene Kroupa described is all too common for the veteran agent working in Laredo, Texas. The border town had 103 of all the 397 stash houses Border Patrol uncovered from October 2019 to October 2020 from Texas to California; neighboring Rio Grande Valley Sector headquartered in Edinburg, Texas, discovered 141 stash houses during the same time period. Part of the reason Laredo is such a hot spot for these human warehouses is that the border wall in place there is described as more ornamental than a true barrier, according to Chief Patrol Agent Matthew Hudak. He’s in charge of the sprawling sector that includes 171 border miles between Mexico and the United States and an area of responsibility that stretches from that border in Texas to the Oklahoma and Arkansas state lines.



CBP Acting Commissioner Mark Morgan tours a section of the U.S.-Mexico border wall along with senior Border Patrol officials during a visit to El Paso, Texas, Aug. 26. CBP Photo by Jerry Glaser

“The Rio Grande is the only impediment to freely crossing the border there,” Hudak explained.

Another reason is the huge amount of transportation infrastructure in Laredo.

“The Port of Laredo is the No. 1 port in the country for commercial cargo, because there are interstate-type highways in Mexico leading to Nuevo Laredo on the Mexican side of the border, and we have Interstate 35 leading up to San Antonio, with even more major highways there connecting to points all across the country,” Hudak said. A well-entrenched international criminal organization operating just across the border also contributes to Laredo’s popularity with the human smugglers. “They’ve traditionally had control over that area, and alien smuggling is an extremely profitable endeavor for them.”

And profitability is what drives smugglers to stuff as many illegal aliens as they can in houses where running water and decent food is seen as a luxury, and air conditioning is unheard of, despite the high temperatures all along the Southwest border.

“They don’t care about the people,” said Supervisory Border Patrol Agent Oscar Joanicot, who works intelligence for the Yuma Sector in Arizona and has been on numerous stash house raids. Those who run the houses only see the dollar signs they could earn. “When you talk to some of these illegal aliens, they say, ‘Well, they might have brought us a pizza once a day or something,’ giving those in the stash houses the bare minimum, because [the smugglers] don’t want to take [it] out of their profit.”

Eight stash houses were discovered in Yuma this past year, which is not many compared to Laredo or the Rio Grande Valley. Yet the number of stash houses in the Arizona community has doubled since October 2019. Further to the west in San Diego, only a handful of stash houses are discovered each year, in large part, because it’s more expensive to be smuggled across the border there.

“They used to pay about \$200 a head to get across, so they would pack as many as they could into a car,” said Supervisory Border Patrol Agent Mark Hansen from San Diego. “Now, they’re paying upwards of \$8,000 or more [per person], so it’s worth it to send the guy from LA to pick up one or two people. So there’s no need to go to a stash house.”

Hansen said they're using advanced technology to better identify the cars that are carrying the one or two illegal aliens since they might not stand out as much as cars, pickups and vans stuffed with dozens of illegal aliens. Smugglers are also using "cloned" vehicles – carriers made to look like genuine delivery trucks, such as UPS, to try to sneak across the border. He also credited more border wall infrastructure in the San Diego area for helping reduce the number of stash houses. "The secondary fencing and the wall going up along with the cameras going up are making it more difficult to get huge numbers across at the same time," he said.

Hansen added "there still are groups that are trying to do things the old way: cut the fences and drive trucks through packed full of bodies. Installing steel bollards on the new border wall pretty much shut down those tactics, and where there's just fencing, and they can try to cut through, Border Patrol is pretty good at interdicting those," he said.



Acting together on a report from a concerned citizen, Border Patrol agents from Laredo and Webb County Sheriff's Office deputies closed down a stash house in Rio Bravo, Texas. The incident occurred Sept. 30, when agents along with deputies acted on the information of a possible stash house. Agents and deputies apprehended 39 individuals who were determined to be in the United States illegally from the countries of Mexico and Guatemala. CBP photo

COVID Concerns

A big concern for agents walking into these stash houses is disease. Tuberculosis and flu were some of the health concerns agents have historically had to guard against. Now, with the coronavirus pandemic, the stash houses have become incubators for disease.

“That’s always been a concern when you’ve got large groups of people in small areas,” Joanicot said. He added that most people in stash houses have also traveled through areas rife with COVID-19. “A lot of them travel from southern Mexico, as well as Central American countries or even the Middle East. So they’re traveling through a whole country or multiple ones. And they cross the border, and obviously are not getting any kind of medical treatment or tests or anything, and then [the smugglers] pile them all together, staying in places that are very, very dirty and congested before they even get here. It’s always been an issue, and now with COVID-19, it’s even bigger.”

“Imagine your 1,500-square-foot house with 40-50 people in there for several days at a time,” Hudak said, adding that “while stash houses used to be in remote areas away from the city, now they’re in the middle of neighborhoods. You have them in areas where families are out walking and kids are in the neighborhood and a criminal organization is running a stash house in the middle of it. That’s dangerous. Now adding COVID to the mix is like [lighting] a match.”

Loaded Up Like Cargo

Another concern is the way the illegal aliens after being stored in the houses are crowded into even more dangerous situations, such as tractor-trailers and train grain cars, for dangerous journeys across the country for “distribution.”

“They’ll stockpile them for a couple of days in one of these stash houses until they have enough people to put in a tractor-trailer, then lock it with no way for them to escape the brutal South Texas heat,” Hudak said. “When we open up these containers, and it’s well over 105 degrees with no ventilation, no personal protective equipment, such as masks, no water. It’s tragic.”