



*Border Patrol agents apprehended a large number of individuals inside a tractor-trailer during a failed human smuggling attempt in north Laredo, Texas, July 13. Upon opening the trailer, agents found 35 individuals who were illegally in the United States from the countries of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. The inside trailer temperature was recorded at 126.1 degrees Fahrenheit at the time the individuals were discovered. CBP photo*

Some of the containers have seen more than 100 people at a time. The large amount of stash houses in Laredo has translated into a 40% increase in the use of dangerous trailer conditions in the last year, as the smugglers try to move their human cargo out.

*Agents from the Nogales Border Patrol Station in Arizona working at an interstate checkpoint thwarted two smuggling attempts 45 minutes apart, which led to the arrest of seven illegal aliens hidden in car trunks. Three of those in the hot car trunks were children. CBP photo*

In places such as Yuma and San Diego, many times the tactics have changed into smugglers using lower profile – but not less dangerous – pickup trucks and car trunks, where the aliens are crammed into conditions exposing them to baking heat and vehicle accidents. Joanicot recalls an incident where he uncovered three small children hidden under the back seat floor carpet of an SUV.

“The children were probably anywhere from 3 to 6 years old hidden under this carpet,” he said. “I saw these little kids looking up at me, all dirty and sweaty, because it was a hot day and I thought, ‘What are these smugglers thinking?’”

### **Changing Tactics to Counter the Threat**

Border Patrol officials cite the use of air assets, such as Air and Marine Operations helicopters, small unmanned aircraft systems – or “drones” – and better intelligence with local and other federal law enforcement agencies as helping break up these stash houses.

“It’s not exclusively Border Patrol agents breaking up the stash houses,” Hudak said. “We have a task force team of Border Patrol agents, Homeland Security Investigations, sheriff’s department, constables, and the city’s police department, as well, all working together. They are taking away the criminal organizations’ ability to blend into the woodwork. We’ve gotten a healthy number of tips on stash houses from citizens within the community. It’s a team approach.”

“We focus everything we do based on intelligence,” Kroupa said. “That plays a major role in allowing us to be effective.”

CBP officials also point out how the stash houses are part of the larger issue of the futility of making the journey like this. At the end of 2018 and into 2019, [migrant caravans originating in Central America put nearly a million illegal aliens on a perilous journey through Mexico that ran for more than 1,500 miles in some cases and took months to complete](#). Once they arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border, they faced enhanced measures, such as concertino wire and more Border Patrol agents, and crowded into detention centers once caught and returned home or back into Mexico. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, Border Patrol agents were able to use legal authority – [known as Title 42 protocols](#) – granted because of the infectious disease that allowed the agents to return illegal aliens to their originating country within a couple of hours of being caught. In fact, the officials point out that even if migrants claim asylum, they will wait

in Mexico while a U.S. judge hears the case, and less than 1% of Central America migrants waiting in Mexico are granted asylum.

To inform migrants of the futility and dangers, such as a stash house, CBP has a campaign dubbed “No Arriesgue Su Vida – Don’t Risk Your Life” that airs on social media. Those who would consider crossing the border illegally are told the truth about how things will really go, countering messages from transnational criminal organizations. [In one video](#), an anonymous young Central American mother described her frightening experience. “You suffer a lot, and you encounter people that try to sexually abuse you. Sometimes you travel in tractor-trailer boxes unable to breathe. At the end of it all, nothing was like they said it would be.”

### **Compassion for Those Treated Like Cargo**

While agents realize those in the stash houses have broken the law by crossing into the country illegally, they have a tremendous amount of compassion for the conditions the illegal aliens find themselves in. That’s especially true for children who had no choice in the matter.

“Some say when you do it for a long time, you get numb to it. I don’t believe that at all,” Joanicot, a parent himself, said. “I don’t care who you are, when you walk in and see something like [a stash house], especially when there’s children involved, your heart goes out to them.”

And Joanicot said the more agents see stuff like this, the more they want to shut down the people who only see dollars signs instead of human faces in those they stash away. “We want to get the smuggler who did this to them. Their commodity is people. They don’t care if someone dies. They just go and find another person waiting to come across.”

Hudak agreed that greed drives the smugglers, and his heart does go out to those being crammed into the squalid conditions. “It gets you viscerally, because we all have homes and kids, and you want to provide a clean and safe environment, and one of these stash houses is completely counter to anything that is your sense of right,” he said.

Kroupa knows there are criminals at the border willing to take advantage of people and that a united front is what it will take to shut down these human warehouses and stop more criminal elements and carriers of disease from entering the U.S.

It's very important to know what the threat is," Kroupa said. "Criminals and gang members are often hidden within these stash houses and they are the things we want to remove from our community."

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