

## FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE MIGRATION

# Coyotes and Alien Smuggling

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**C**oyotes or polleros or pateros are persons who, for a fee, assist individuals wishing to enter the U.S. without legal authorization to do so. There have always been coyotes along the Mexico-U.S. border, but their activities became significant only after 1964, when the Bracero Program ended.

The number and range of services provided by coyotes have expanded. We surveyed 6 coyotes in Guanajuato, 2 in Michoacán, and 3 in Tijuana, as well as 3 INS investigators dealing with alien smuggling in California, and one 1 in El Paso. We also interviewed migrants seeking unauthorized entry into the U.S.

Since 1983, we found that most migrants attempting unauthorized entry into the U.S. used coyotes, although even in 1996, there were about one in four migrants who attempted to cross the border with the help of only friends or relatives or on their own.<sup>1</sup> We distinguish between three major types of coyotes: local agents, local and border smugglers, and border-only smuggling businesses, each with a menu of prices and services. The type of coyote used depends on migrant access to networks of friends and family—migrants without access to networks are most likely to arrive at the border by bus, and find a border-area business smuggler to help them to attempt entry into the U.S.

**Table 1**  
**Migrant Use of Coyotes**

Type of Coyote	Migrants— No Network	Migrants— with Network
Local	9%	16%
Local and Border-Informal	18%	40%
Border-Business	53%	17%
No coyote	20%	27%

Source: questionnaires from the “International Migration in the Bajío project, CER/ ColMich

A local coyote normally operates with at most two helpers from the same town or region, and specializes in telling potential migrants who to contact at the border to cross, and where to go once in the U.S. Some migrants go with family members or friends to the border, and make contact with a coyote from their town or region; such a local and border coyote may guide migrants across, have them picked up on the other side, and transport and deliver them to their destination. Such local-border coyotes often involve five to ten people and work with migrants from a particular town or area; many are loosely-structured groups.

The Bracero Program offered legal entry options and reduced coyote activities, but coyotes offered a means of entry for workers with no U.S. job contacts and thus little possibility of entering legally. In the late 1960s, when an offer of employment from a U.S. employer could be used to secure a green card and permanent residence, some workers used coyotes to find U.S. employers who would sponsor them. However, some of the workers who were eligible for green cards never completed the process, and instead continued to migrate seasonally and illegally to the U.S.

### **Local-Interior Coyotes**

In Michoacán and Guanajuato, “everyone knows” where to find coyotes. These coyotes have one or two assistants (usually family members) to help them to organize groups of 5 or 6 migrants, take them to the border, help them cross into the United States, and then transport them to their final destination, which is often the where the coyotes themselves are going. The coyotes may then work in the U.S. for several months before returning to their hometown to organize another group of migrants. Their level of operational sophistication is minimal, and they normally use the same method to smuggle people across the border: crossing the Rio Bravo (in the case of

people from the north of Guanajuato state), or across the mountains of Tijuana and the Arizona desert (in the case of people from Michoacán state).

Once in the U.S., these coyotes use public transportation, including trains, buses and planes. Their failure rate is high—some report four attempts before successful entry, versus a claimed one attempt and your in by border business coyotes—but their commitment to the group means that they make as many attempts as necessary until they succeed in getting across. Paradoxically, when the local coyote himself is captured, he is rarely processed as a smuggler, because he appears to be just another migrant. Those with him are not inclined to denounce him as a smuggler, since they are acquaintances and friends; local coyotes are often considered paisanos or countrymen.<sup>2</sup>

Until the INS launched the IDENT and ENCATS systems in 1994, local coyotes had certain advantages over other coyotes because of their relationship with the people they tried to take across. Things have started to change, however, because at some border crossing points all undocumented workers captured are fingerprinted and photographed, enabling INS to detect local coyotes because of their more frequent apprehensions.

Although the fees charged by the local coyotes are generally lower than those of the other types of coyotes, the new INS identification systems have increased their risks and raised their fees. Price differences have narrowed, and made price a less important factor in which type of coyote to use to enter the U.S.

Safety is one of the major reasons to use the services of a local coyote; migrants assume that they will have fewer physical risks if they go with someone they know from their area, someone whose family resides in the region, and someone who can bring news back to the town. This means that the prestige of the local coyote depends not so much on his rate of success in getting people across the border in as few attempts as possible, but upon the safety of the people who travel under his guidance and responsibility.

Economic factors also come into play. It is by not unusual for the family that stays behind to pay the coyote for his services once they are notified that their family member has arrived safely at his/her destination. In this situation, both the reputation and social position of the coyote are important; these will be determining factors in terms of the number of clients that he will be able to attract in the future.

Some local coyotes are part-time operators, taking people across the border only occasionally, or restricting their activities to friends and relatives. Some of these occasional coyotes have legal permission to enter the U.S., so they do not cross the border with migrants. Instead, they travel to the border with the migrants, and help to find a smuggler who will guide the migrants across, and then wait for the migrants inside the U.S. These occasional coyotes do not play a substantive role in the migratory flow.

## **Local and Border Coyotes**

Some coyotes originally from the migrants' area of origin live in border areas, and get referrals from local coyotes or friends and family of past migrants. In many cases, migrants seek border area coyotes using a telephone number, an alias, or the name of a specific restaurant or hotel. With such a border contact, and someone who will take responsibility for the person once they make it into the U.S., migrants from Michoacán, Guanajuato, Zacatecas and Jalisco set out for the U.S.

Local and border coyotes set up loosely-structured groups characterized by a low level of technological sophistication. Most have two or three vehicles (usually vans) and use hotels as "safe rooms." They rarely use cellular telephones, citizen band radios or "beepers," and usually cross the border over the mountains, through ravines or by swimming and wading across the river; they rely on evading the INS rather than understanding its activities and attempting to outwit INS with decoys etc.

Membership in these groups is flexible. There is a leader, but the group is only brought together when there are migrants to be smuggled. Furthermore, the leader generally calls only those members whom he considers ideal for the job, thus minimizing losses and guaranteeing the continuity of his services.

## **Border Business Coyotes**

Business coyotes have a long history in the border area, but smuggling migrants into the U.S. has evolved from a supplementary business to a full-time occupation. However, as the number of Mexicans entering the U.S. increased, and as U.S. employers sent their supervisors to the border area to recruit workers, some coyotes began to specialize in the movement of workers across the border.

Business coyotes developed after the Bracero Program ended in 1964. Some were unauthorized workers who had experience crossing the border, while others developed relatively sophisticated organizations that could recruit migrants as they arrived in the border area and provide a variety of services to them.

All business coyotes have three major elements; recruiters, guides, and U.S. agents or delivery persons. The recruiters linger around the bus and train stations—every day, 125 buses arrive from the interior of Mexico in Tijuana, and two trains arrive in Mexicali—or hotels that provide shelter to the migrants, or hang out in the bars and restaurants frequented by migrants, and make deals with potential migrants. As smuggling has evolved, there has been a shift from the "cash-in-advance" payment system and to the "payment-on-delivery" system—when the migrant reaches his U.S. destination, the migrant tells a family member or friend within the United States to pay the coyote.

The process of the crossing is straightforward: wait until dark, get the group together at a hotel or some other safe place, lead it to the border, cross through

some gap or hole or tunnel under the fence, or jump over the fence. The coyote then guides the group over the countryside on foot, walking, running, and hiding, until it arrives at a prearranged place where a delivery person with a vehicle is waiting to pick up the migrants and take them to a U.S. destination. Once the pollos have been dropped off, payment is made, and the coyote returns to Mexico to share the proceeds with his confederates. There are many variations; the distance to be walked is variable, depending on whether the vehicle meets the migrants in a rural or urban area, and affects the price paid by the migrant—more walking means lower prices.

Migrants do not need to use a coyote to attempt such entries, and some do not. Some know the border area so well that they use public transportation inside the U.S., such as the suburban trolleys in San Diego and then Amtrack to reach Los Angeles, or they take planes away from San Diego, El Paso or Laredo.

Smuggling women is more complicated. Business coyotes began to add women to their organizations, and to offer women and children one contact person from recruitment to guide to delivery. In some cases, the wife of the coyote helps to negotiate the agreement—virtually all are verbal—and then travels with family members to the border to watch the guide take women across. The coyote's wife remains with the family members until the women reached their destination in the U.S. as a form of security and a guarantee of delivery.

Most migrants attempt to elude the border patrol. But stepped up border controls and more women migrants have led more migrants to attempt to enter the U.S. using false documents. Especially during peak traffic periods, inspectors reportedly spend more time looking at the document than the person, so that it is relatively easy to borrow genuine documents and cross, a method preferred by many women. Some coyotes obtain green cards (known as “micas”) and distribute them to migrants, taking into consideration physical similarity and ensuring that the migrant using them is older than the person shown on the card. Many coyotes also offer migrants Social Security cards and identification cards like those issued by the Department of Motor Vehicles. In some cases, valid Mexican passports with temporary U.S. visas are used. Children and babies are simpler to smuggle with false documents, because they typically do not require identification or photographs. In some cases, U.S. birth certificates can be used to enter the U.S. at border entry ports until children are 18.

False documents are used to attempt to enter the U.S. on foot or in autos, with the on-foot method preferred because of the risk that the vehicle will be confiscated, and the migrants' fellow passengers accused of smuggling. In most cases, coyotes send migrants, one at a time, and separated by 50 or 100 other crossers, to the port of entry. Once inside the U.S., the migrants report to a telephone booth or some other easily visible spot for further instructions. Walking through the port of

entry is one of the simplest and most expensive smuggling methods, costing as much as \$800. Fewer coyotes attempt to conceal migrants inside vehicles, inside cargo containers, or in cars with double trunks; these methods often lead to tragedies, and are used less and less frequently.

Coyotes who have been in business since the 1970s report that there was relatively little demand for their services in the 1970s, because there were too many coyotes for the number of migrants who wanted to be smuggled—it was also easy to enter the U.S. without the help of a smuggler. Most migrants who turned to coyotes in the 1970s had special needs—women, children, the elderly, Central Americans, Asians. IRCA stimulated interest in coming to the U.S., and the possibility of obtaining a green card via the legalization programs led to a huge increase in the demand for coyote services, especially for the service of getting from the border area further inside the U.S. Smuggling people into the U.S., and moving them around within the U.S., proved to be enormously profitable, and made previous training and investments in safe houses and vehicles pay off.

After 1994, the coyote business changed once again. Business coyotes with a network of safe houses and vehicles have an advantage in evading stepped up border controls, and they have been able to charge migrants premium prices of \$500 to \$1500 because of their superior ability to smuggle them into the U.S.

Business coyotes remain centered in the border area, but they tend to recruit only the most profitable migrants, such as Central Americans and Asians. The smuggling system resembles a series of semi- autonomous links in a chain which extends from Chiapas to Chihuahua, in which the agents decide which transportation systems to use, which links to follow, and when it is most advantageous to “sell” their human cargo to the next agent. A large number of people participate as service providers, and none of them are surprised when 20 Salvadorans or 5 Chinese suddenly show up on their doorstep to eat or to spend the night. The principal objective is to get these (doubly undocumented) migrants into the United States; Central Americans and Asians are especially highly-valued since they pay the most to be smuggled into the U.S.

## Conclusions

It is best to think of coyotes as business operators who are breaking both Mexican and U.S. law. Within Mexico, coyotes are considered somewhat shady characters, but they are perceived to be engaged in a business that harms no one. Indeed, many people think that the coyotes are providing a service to Mexico (by alleviating the poverty of thousands of families), and to the United States (providing needed workers). Migrants consider the coyotes to be a “necessary evil”—but one which could

**Table 2**  
**Coyotes: Principal Characteristics by Sphere of Operation**

Type	Target Population	Logistics	Price Range	System of Payment	Advantages/Disadvantages
Local only	Relatives; friends; word-of-mouth recommendation; limited geographical area	Access to a social network in hometown; takes migrant to border; arranges crossing; meets migrant on U.S. side and delivers to destination	250-600 USD depending on arrangement for crossing	Variable: -by family member or friend in U.S. upon safe delivery; -by family in hometown upon confirmation of safe delivery; -installments by the migrant him/herself from coyote-related employment	Personal safety; worry-in hometown; modest price range; suitable for the cautious person; possibility to get a job arranged by the coyote himself. High rate of failure
Local-Border	Word-of-mouth recommendation; wide geographical area; contacts in both hometown and border	Informal organization; contact made in places frequented by migrants (hotels, restaurants), use of fake documents	400-900 USD depending on arrangement of crossing	In almost all cases by family member or friend in U.S. upon safe delivery	Personal safety suitable for women and children. Higher prices.
Border only	Contacted at bus station, train, hotel, restaurant, near the border and other places frequented by migrants	Formal, structured organization; use of cellular phones, beepers; contact on both sides of border; pick-ups, fake documents, U.S. airports	600-1500 USD depending on arrangement for crossing	Generally by family member or friend in US upon safe delivery	High probability of success. Expensive, vulnerability during wait at border; lack of social support network

Source: Fieldwork, Gustavo López Castro, CER/Colmich, 1997

be much worse than it actually is. The local coyotes rank higher than the border coyotes for the obvious reasons of familiarity; but not even the border coyotes are perceived as being particularly nasty. Much more to be feared are nocturnal encounters with bandits or with one of the many groups of police that patrol the border area.

We found no evidence of collaboration between coyotes and drug traffickers in the towns; not even in the drug-producing areas of Michoacán. Interviews carried out with Border Patrol agents towards the end of 1996 also suggested few connections. We were told of cases in which migrants were urged to pay for part of the cost of being smuggled by also taking a small package along, but it is not clear how common this practice is, and it does not seem to be common for migrants to take packages from producing areas to the border.

The local coyotes and local-border groups appear to keep their distance from drug smuggling. Some of those associated with business coyotes may also be involved in drug smuggling, but there appears to be a firm line between the two activities due to the high risks involved in drug smuggling.<sup>3</sup>

## **Quotes from Smugglers/Migrants**

### **Costs**

People come to us from, say, Leon, Guanajuato and when they get here they say; "Hey, I heard you take people across in airplanes. How much do you charge?" Then, "how much do I need to make it?" Then we say "look, from here to the border its 362 pesos right now, plus another \$100 the jump, between \$100 and \$120 for the airplane ticket and you'd better have fifty or sixty dollars more for your expenses on the other side, like, I mean, for taxis, meals or whatever you need to spend; so we're talking about a total of around \$300."

### **Contacts**

Back in San Felipe a lot of folks say that in Ocampo there are real good coyotes, real quiet, you know, good people. Here and anywhere you look there's lots of them, especially if you have friends or relatives, they'll set you up with one in a flash. Over in San Felipe it looks like they're charging about \$500. It's a lot, but if you have good luck, and work hard, cause sometimes you can get caught, but if you work hard, in about three weeks, or at the outside a month, you pay it off; and from there on it's gravy.

I used to make it as a wetback walking across country. It's all a question of finding contacts. The first three times I went I couldn't get any contacts, not even with the people that crossed with me. It'd take me eight or nine days to get to San Antonio, walking day and night; but then I started making contacts about

a three days' walk from here. I'd go to this farmer's place and ask for a chance to call San Antonio by phone. That's right, I'd get there at night and sit on the fence, the dogs would start to bark and the old man, an "old gringo," would come running over and I'd ask him "... gimme a chance to call my boss in San Antonio?" "How many guys are with you?" I'd say "three or four," "ok, bring 'em over, that's all right," and then he'd call and the boss would send someone over to pick us up. That's what I mean by contacts.

## Guarantees

Up there at the border there's lots of coyotes, but there's no safer way than going with one right from here, like one's got more guarantee, more safety, it's somebody you know and you're with a group and they take better care of you, cause you never know what it's gonna be like up there. I mean, you always hope things will go well for you, but the way things are right now it's a bitch, and this way you're safe.

Up there, you could find yourself with a bunch of people who are just starting and... that's tough. But these guys from Mezquite come and go and if you don't get across but get caught, they take you back across again. Ya, they've got good contacts. If you got contacts that'll answer for you, you give them the telephone number and they call and then they take you to your house and they pay him there, but you're safe.

People come from all over to use this coyote; from Leon, and other places, they're finding out that these guys are doing well and so they come to look for them and they get comfort and they protect them. They've got their trucks to bring the folks this far; they've got a good setup. They take care of you here, and things are safe, you even go like friends with all the others; the other way you just gotta take your chances alone up there at the border. But here, here they take responsibility. They're good guys, once they take you on as a client, you go under their responsibility; the other way, up there at the border, who'll take you?, who knows?, who guarantees you anything?, who knows?. But these guys give you a guarantee.

## My Way

I always like going across by way of Juarez, on a plane, for this reason: that way I don't run any risks, none, cause it's real hard for them to catch me among all the people; with all the people around they'll never grab me; if they get some, they're gonna get some of them, but not me. And if they do get me, they'll just take me like any other illegal migrant.

And when they get caught you just tell them "Know what, if they grab you I'll see it when they get you. Where they send you—there's three bridges or four—and you just stay there around the bridge where they send you back, don't

move, cause I'll go there to pick you up and send you back across again." That is, whoever wants to, right?; cause some say "know what, I'm not going again." So what do you do?, you say "gimme your ticket," you go and change it and then you got your money. But as long as the folks say they want to keep trying to get across, you gotta keep at it.

## **Papers**

You get the cards in El Paso, Texas. They're lost or stolen. The thing is that they gotta look something like the migrant who wants to get across. You get a lot of these things by telephone. Then, when you make a connection you take things as they come... and you take your time cause you don't want to get in with just anybody. I mean, in these cases there are straight people and crooked ones, but with time you come to learn who you can work with and who you can't.

## **Ethics**

Ok, so let's say... it's a crime, right?... but at the same time the person, the illegal migrant, the folks who want to get across, don't see it as a crime, but still they're grateful, they don't say... I mean... the fact is the people are never satisfied, they always say... one thing or another, look you didn't give us anything to eat, like what do I know, right?, but you know you gotta economize as much as you can cause you never know if they're gonna get across or if they're gonna get sent back from the airport.

## **Notes**

1. We have included questions concerning the method chosen to cross the border in various questionnaires used in community studies. Among these we can mention the survey carried out by a group from the Colegio de Michoacán in 1983, 1986, 1988, and 1992 as well as 390 questionnaires which were applied in three towns in Michoacán and two towns in Jalisco in 1996.
2. The village connections explain how some families of migrants can pay off the cost of smuggling with dollar remittances to the family of the local coyote. Such a payment method would not be acceptable to border area coyotes.
3. A coyote in Guanajuato said that he cannot afford to take the risk of sending drugs along with migrants, who would be too nervous during the numerous police stops in Mexico.