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Crackdown driving up costs for illegals

Smugglers charging thousands of dollars more amid federal government's tougher border enforcement over past decade

By **JEREMY HAY**

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Jesus Maciel first crossed the border illegally from Mexico 10 years ago this month.

A smuggler charged \$300 to lead him on foot from San Luis Río Colorado on the Mexican border to a house in Yuma, Ariz., then by car to Phoenix, where Maciel bought a plane ticket to San Francisco.

In the decade since, Maciel, 28, has crossed illegally from Mexico into the United States four more times, most recently at the beginning of May.

That passage, which included a ride in a smuggler's BMW, cost more than tenfold what he paid in 1996, said Maciel, who works part of the year in Sonoma County.

The progression of fees charged by coyotes, as the smugglers are known, offers a window into the convulsive larger debate over illegal immigration.

Rising fees testify to a decade of stepped up border enforcement, which hasn't stemmed the flow of immigrants but has made the illegal crossing

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KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat

Jesus Maciel has crossed the border five times since 1996 and says the cost is going up.

SMUGGLERS: Economist calls costs a matter of supply, demand

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more difficult, according to migrants as well as experts on the fees charged by smugglers.

The rising fees also reflect the continuing lure of U.S. jobs to Mexicans and others willing to ignore the risks.

And they are evidence of the swelling population of Latinos in the United States who can pay coyotes to lead family members and relatives safely across the border, experts said.

"The economics is quite simple," said Pia Orrenius, a senior economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas who studies legal and illegal immigration.

"You have a supply and demand for smuggling services," Orrenius said. "If you think enforcement is being effective, then you should see rising prices and rising (coyote) usage, which you have. There are fewer and fewer places left to cross — where a border crossing isn't too dangerous — and the prices just go up."

Now, far more than in decades past, she said, "you really need a lot of skills and insider knowledge to get across the border safely."

That puts a premium on a coyote's abilities to outwit both Border Patrol agents and such hazards as the California, Arizona and Texas deserts, where about 3,000 migrants have died trying to cross since 1993.

President Bush, who supports a guest worker program, has called for more border fencing and has proposed that up to 6,000 National Guard troops patrol the border until the Border Patrol can add more agents. Some troops already are on duty.

Congress has called for 375 to 700 miles of additional border fencing.

Enforcement measures begun by the Clinton administration, including hiring thousands of more Border Patrol agents, miles of fencing and thermal-imaging lights and sensors, appear not to have reduced the number of illegal crossings. But they have sharply increased the risks to both coyotes and migrants in terms of apprehension, penalties and physical safety, which have pushed fees up.

Coyote fees have been rising, said Lori Haley, a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokeswoman. "Smuggling has become an increasingly bigger and bigger business."

"Mas peligros en el frontera, mas dinero para los coyotes," said Valentine Chi, 28 — "More dangers on the border, more money for the coyotes."

A day laborer in Fulton, Chi said his family in Santa Rosa paid \$1,850 to the smuggler who led him from Mexicali into California a year ago. The

same crossing cost \$2,000 for a friend who made it in March, he said.

People from Guatemala and El Salvador, other common points of origin for illegal immigrants from Latin America, pay coyotes as much as \$7,000 each, Orrenius said.

Since the Border Patrol started a series of long-term enforcement efforts on the southwest border in 1995, the number of agents there has more than doubled to 10,000. That year, coyote fees, which had been dropping overall since researchers began tracking them in the mid-1960s, also began an upward climb that hasn't stopped.

At the same time, the number of people caught trying to cross the border illegally has gone from 1.27 million in fiscal year 1995 to 1.17 million last fiscal year. There are an estimated 12 million or more undocumented immigrants nationwide now, compared to about 4 million in 1995.

"The experience of the last 12 years shows that concentrated border enforcement doesn't deter entry. In fact, more Mexicans than ever are coming across the border without documents," said David Fitzgerald, field research director at UC San Diego's Center for Comparative Immigration Studies.

"But there are other per-

verse effects, like that coyotes can raise the fees they charge people to smuggle them across the border," he said.

Maciel is unusual in that he regularly returns to Mexico and then again crosses illegally into the United States. Experts generally agree that since 1986, stricter enforcement has caused the rate of illegal immigrants returning south across the border to drop; by half, according to some estimates.

So Maciel's account of what each crossing has cost in coyote fees is a useful ledger of their climb in the past decade.

In 1998, two years after his \$300 crossing, his family paid \$900 for his passage from Nogales, Mexico, into Arizona. In 1999, the coyote who led him from Agua Prieta to Phoenix charged \$1,400.

By 2003, the price was \$2,200. That time, a woman drove him from Tijuana into California through the border checkpoint, he said. That crossing is about \$4,000 now, he said.

Last month, his family paid \$3,700 to the coyote who led him and five others into the United States.

That trip included three hours walking from Tecate in Baja California to the side of a road southeast of San Diego, where he and his companions — two women and three men — were picked up by three BMWs driven by American women, Maciel said.

The group — first with two people hidden in each BMW trunk, then, after a Border Patrol highway checkpoint, seated in the cars' cabins — was driven to a San Diego gas station, where a Mexican man collected them, took them by van to a safe house and began the process of collecting the fees from their relatives, he said.

For Maciel, who said he has a wife and two children in Michoacán, the Tecate route

came after four unsuccessful attempts at other locations in two weeks. For those crossings, he said, the cost was to be \$2,000 from San Luis Río Colorado and \$2,500 from Mexicali.

Smuggling penalties were strengthened in 1996. Fines were raised and the law changed to allow a sentence of 10 years for each person smuggled. That raised the stakes for smugglers and the costs for their customers, Orrenius said.

Another factor supporting higher coyote fees, she said, are "huge and very rich networks" of established immigrants, legal and illegal who earn dollars rather than pesos and can pay more to bring family members across.

"Think of it as purchasing power," Orrenius said. "The ability to finance the smugglers' fees has really grown because they are able to finance it on this side of the border instead of that side. It takes fewer days to earn the \$2,000 that you need to pay the coyote."

That human network — tying millions in the United States to Mexico and, to a lesser but growing degree, other Latin American countries — combined with the pull of American jobs, will continue to drive illegal immigration and probably coyote fees, said Deborah Meyers, a senior policy analyst with the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute.

"Jobs are the magnet," she said. "Until the magnet's eliminated or greatly reduced, people will continue to take risks that we might find unimaginable to get to the United States."

Maciel said each time he comes to Sonoma County — he lives with family in east Santa Rosa — he works at a carwash and in vineyards near Healdsburg, where during harvest season, depending on how fast he picks grapes, he can earn as much as \$300 to \$400 a day.

He expects to go back to Michoacán, where he has opened a grocery with his earnings, in November. How much the coyote will charge will be when he next returns to Santa Rosa, he doesn't know but, he said, it will likely be more.

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PIA ORRENIUS,
expert on illegal immigration

You can reach Staff Writer
Jeremy Hay at 521-5212 or
jhay@pressdemocrat.com.