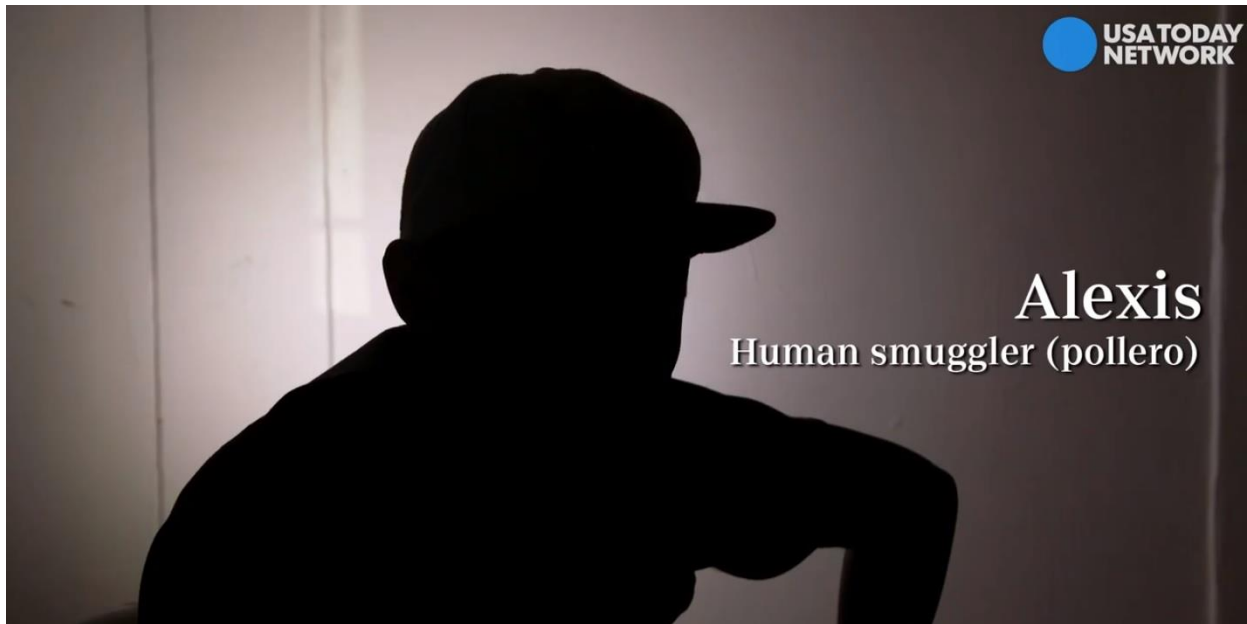


Dinora C., Migrant from Honduras (*Plaintiffs v. Sessions*)

I traveled from Honduras by train, on top of the train, with my one-year-old. We slept out in the open, where we could. When we got to the border we crossed the river with a group of migrants I found on the way. I paid \$20 to get information on how to cross the river and which way to go to find border patrol.

I know nothing about where or how to find a port of entry. We walked about two hours after crossing the river looking for border patrol and it was very hot. When we saw border patrol we waved them down and waited for them to come to us. They took us to the bridge, where we had crossed and now there were people there. Then they brought us all here [to Dilley Detention Center in Texas].

Alexis, Human Smuggler (pollero) from Mexico ([USA Today](#))



Alexis has smuggled thousands of migrants into the U.S. for the past 20 years.

The risks of his line of work include the Border Patrol agents who increasingly lock up smugglers, the drug gangs that charge tolls to pass through their turf and the Mexican police, who demand bribes to look the other way.

But he is not scared of the prospect of President Donald Trump's border wall. The border wall won't hurt his business. It might actually help.

Alexis practices a specialized form of human smuggling common in urban areas that straddle the border. Instead of taking migrants through remote areas of the desert, which are less heavily guarded by the Border Patrol but also far more dangerous, Alexis guides migrants over the border fence right in the center of town, practically under the noses of Border Patrol agents.

Polleros create a diversion, or wait until Border Patrol agents leave an area unguarded. Polleros then send migrants over the fence using a rope or ladder, or through a hole in the fence. Once on the other side, the migrants try to evade the Border Patrol by blending in with the local population in Calexico, which is almost entirely Latino.

"It is easy because you can distract the Border Patrol by jumping over and getting them to abandon the area they are patrolling and chase you," Alexis says. "Honestly, it is very easy."

The newer bollard-style fencing, constructed of vertical concrete-filled steel beams, is designed to be harder to climb over.

But smugglers are constantly adjusting their tactics, Alexis says. The trade is more sophisticated than when he started out. "One person alone used to be able to do it all, but not anymore," Alexis says. "Now it's like a team." Each pollero on the team has a role. Some are decoys; others are guides or drivers, transporting migrants to Los Angeles, the main destination for smugglers in Mexicali.

Alexis has helped thousands of migrants from all over the world cross into the U.S. His customers mainly come from poorer states in southern Mexico or from Central American countries.

"Look, I'm not a hypocrite," he says. "I do it for the money."

Verónica G. Cárdenas, Photographer ([NPR](#))



“I want to convey what it's like for people to travel on these caravans. I'd like to show that indeed, it is a tiresome and dangerous journey, but along the way, life goes on — some daily routines do not stop happening because they're traversing. I also want to portray them in a more dignified way where they are not solely victims of violence or lack of opportunities in their countries.

This is a work in progress and I hope to do this movement justice. We tend to talk about numbers when we speak of immigration, but I want to show the people behind the numbers. I want to show how Andrea continues with her daily life aboard *La Bestia*, brushing her hair as if she was in her room back home or how triumphant they all feel just hours before seeking asylum.



Andrea, 14, brushes her hair. A man living across the railroad tracks offered up his house for people in the caravan to shower or wash their hair while the train stopped briefly. Mazatlán, Oct. 23, 2017. Photo by Verónica G. Cárdenas

The caravan offers major protection against such dangers, although migrants are still at danger on the road. They can still get robbed, kidnapped, or raped. I did not come across a woman or girl that had been raped during the journey. Because there were so many of us together all the time, I noticed it was difficult for a person to open up without having someone else listen to their story. Some women did share how they had been victims of domestic violence, gang threats, and in some cases, a family member had been killed and they now are fleeing for their lives.

Even when I have only joined the caravans for a week each time, it is impossible not to form strong bonds with the people. At the end, you are exposing yourself to nearly the same dangers as they are, but there is a major difference: They are there because they are forced to migrate, and I am there by choice.”

Norlan Yadier Garcia Castro, 20, and Nelson Gabriel Valladares Funes, 21, Migrants from Honduras ([USA Today](#))



Nelson Gabriel Valladares Funes, 21, (left) and Norlan Yadier Garcia Castro, 20, are both from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, but met for the first time in Nogales, Sonora. They decided to stick together as they tried to cross the border. Photo by USA Today Network

Norlan Yadier Garcia Castro had gone to the U.S. from Honduras to look for work. After two years, he hit a pedestrian in a traffic accident. He was arrested and deported. Nelson Gabriel Valladares Funes was forced to join a gang before he was a teenager.

For both, the future was bleak. Honduras has one of the lowest family incomes of any country in Latin America. It has the world's highest homicide rate. So they left.

They walked back roads, took buses when they could, and rode the freight train known as la bestia — the beast. It's the fastest route north, but also the most dangerous. Migrants go without food as they ride the train. They face mutilation if they fall off and extortion from criminal gangs that charge to be on board. As they went, they joined a river of migrants making the journey.

The route to Nogales, Sonora, took Norlan a month. Along the way, he tried to dodge Mexican officials and bribed them when he had to. He endured extortion attempts and regular beatings at the hands of drug gangs because he didn't have cash to give them. As he rode la bestia, he saw others, who had no money, thrown from the moving train.

Nelson took even longer. He left home on Christmas Day and had run out of cash by the time he reached Mexico's southern border. He begged and did odd jobs to feed himself. When he arrived in Nogales, in late May, he attempted to cross into the U.S., but was caught by the Border Patrol. Because he had no criminal record in the U.S., agents sent him back to Mexico, warning that if they caught him again he'd be sent to jail.

After meeting each other for the first time in Nogales, Norlan, 20, and Nelson, 21, decided to stick together.

Instead of staying at a shelter, Norlan and Nelson opt to sleep at the municipal cemetery — remaining closer to the border and the migrant services they use on a daily basis — where city workers turn a blind eye to the small groups of migrants and deportees staying there until it's their time to move on.

The two were waiting only on the weather. June is too hot to risk a Sonoran Desert crossing. The late-summer monsoon, they hoped, with its rain and cloud cover, would bring the time for them to jump the fence.

But in the night came three men wearing black bandannas, and Norlan and Nelson were stuffed into the black SUV, headed away from the border. They escaped from the kidnapers later in the night, and ran back to the cemetery.

It's a few days after the escape from the kidnapers. Nelson and Norlan are back at the cemetery sleeping among the graves, a short walk from the nearest U.S. port of entry.

“Supposedly ... you can't get close to the border ... and since we didn't know that, they came for us,” he says. “And now they think that's where we will cross, and for that you have to pay.”

The fee is \$500 per person. But Norlan and Nelson have no money.

Both men say they're determined to attempt a crossing. Norlan could not make a living in Honduras. Nelson fears the gang he fled would kill him if he returned. There is no going back. Only a wait until the time they will try to go forward.