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Houston Bus Companies Were Links in Illegal Immigrant Network

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HOUSTON — Raids on 14 illegal bus companies here have shed light on a seedy underground system that transported illegal immigrants all over the country and that sometimes held them captive until their relatives paid exorbitant fares, federal law enforcement officials said Thursday.

Using minivans, the companies were carrying hundreds of illegal immigrants from Mexico to cities across the United States, taking back roads and traveling primarily at night to avoid the authorities, according to criminal complaints filed in Federal District Court. Twenty-two people were arrested earlier this week on charges of using their businesses to transport illegal immigrants.

The bus companies worked exclusively with smuggling operations, officials said. The owners paid commissions of up to \$300 for each passenger to smugglers who had brought the immigrants across the Mexican border. Then they held the immigrants in safe houses for days, often under guard, until they loaded them onto vans, according to court documents.

Agents said that at one of the bus companies raided this week, Super Express Van Tours, they found the operators had used pit bulls and armed guards to keep the immigrants from leaving a safe house next door to the office.

“These were not legitimate transportation companies like Greyhound,” said John Connolly, the deputy special agent in charge in Houston for [Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#).

The companies also charged far more than legitimate carriers would for the trips, asking them to pay as much as \$650 for a ride to cities like Los Angeles, Atlanta and Miami. The fee was usually paid at the end of the journey by relatives of the immigrants, officials said. In some cases the drivers refused to release the passenger if the family could not pay, the complaints said.

“These companies did not treat their passengers as persons, but rather as commodities to be bought and sold,” said John T. Morton, an assistant secretary of homeland security, at a news conference Wednesday.

The raids in Houston signified a shift in strategy, officials said. In the past, [immigration](#) agents have intercepted individual drivers and arrested the illegal immigrants they carried, but this time the government went after the owners and operators of the bus companies, a critical link in the smuggling network.

Some of the companies had been operating for years. Super Express Van Tours vehicles had been stopped by the police and the [Border Patrol](#) seven times from 2004 to 2009, in several states, and each time the driver was arrested for transporting illegal immigrants, according to a criminal complaint.

The owner, Fermin A. Tovar, who was arrested Tuesday, charged riders \$200 to \$600, depending on their destination, but disguised the true fares on passenger manifests using a code, the complaint said.

The money for the fares was either wired to Mr. Tovar at Western Union offices or deposited by his drivers into his bank accounts at branches across the country, always in amounts small enough to escape the notice of regulators, officials said.

In one two-and-a-half year period, Mr. Tovar took in \$900,000 in cash deposits to two bank accounts he controlled, the complaint said.