

Sex traffickers are among ICE's most wanted



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(Photo: U.S. Immigration and Customs)

For a decade, federal authorities say Paulino Ramirez-Granados and Raul Granados-Rendon were known for their skill at professing love to young, lonely women.

Then they smuggled the women into the U.S. from Mexico and forced them to work as prostitutes.

Today, they are known as something else: fugitives.

The men have been on the lam since they were indicted in 2011 for their part in leading a family ring of sex traffickers from Tenancingo, Mexico, who took dozens of women to Queens, N.Y., and made them turn tricks for \$30 to \$35 per quarter-hour.

The duo have made the Immigration and Customs Enforcement list of the 10 most wanted fugitives indicted for human trafficking, the agency announced Tuesday.

Most are wanted for sex trafficking. Half come from Tenancingo, a Mexican town of 10,000 people 80 miles southwest of Mexico City that has become known as that country's sex trafficking capital.

"We've seen the horror that these defendants are capable of," says Special Agent James Hayes of the ICE New York office. He is asking the public's help to find the fugitives.

The release of the list of fugitives comes as the number of trafficking cases in the USA has increased from 651 in fiscal year 2010 to 987 in fiscal year 2014. In the past two years, the Obama administration has trained more police to identify trafficking victims and pushed for more counseling, legal services and other help.

The issue isn't limited to foreigners brought to the United States. Polaris, an advocacy group that works to end human trafficking, says that of the [3,840 cases](#) reported through their hotline last year, almost 1,500 involved victims who are American citizens. Many are young teens who are in foster care, have run away or live in troubled homes.

Trafficking comes in two forms, sexual exploitation and forced labor. Either way, it is difficult to track, says Sharon Peyus, who heads ICE's victim assistance program.

She says victims are afraid to flee because they are brainwashed and beaten, and they and their families are threatened with harm.

"The traffickers' hold on victims is incredibly strong," she says.

Top row, from left: Raul Granados-Rendon, Rustamjon Shukurov, Sandjar Agzamov, Saul Romero-Ruggerio, Severiano Martinez-Rojas. Bottom row, from left,: Nodir Yunusov, Jamal Moore, Eugenio Hernandez-Prieto, Jose Isidro Gutierrez-Marez, Paulino Ramirez-Granados (Photo: U.S. Immigration and Customs)

Trafficking can happen in a number of ways.

In sex trafficking, the most common scenario involves a man who finds a vulnerable young woman, often at a mall, train station or bus stop. He befriends her, makes promises of a better life and romances her so she believes the man is the only person who cares about her.

The trafficker then convinces her that if she loves him, she will work as a prostitute to make money for him.

Traffickers control their victims' every move – where they live, who they talk to and even when they eat.

"This is a global pandemic," Peyus says. "It's overwhelming to get your mind around the indignity of how we can treat another human being this way. It's modern-day slavery."

The members of the Granados sex-trafficking ring followed the script to a T, Hayes says.

For about 10 years, starting in 1998, members of the Granados family romanced young women in their native Mexico, then forced them into prostitution. Some of the women were smuggled into the U.S. and taken to work in an immigrant community in Queens, N.Y., the indictments said.

The sex ring handed out pamphlets in Spanish called "Chica cards" on one of the borough's busiest thoroughfares, advertising a phone number to call for cheap sex.

Ramirez-Grandados, 44, and Granados-Rendon, 28, were integral to the operation, Hayes says.

When federal authorities made arrests in 2011, they found 26 victims, at least one of whom was younger than 14.

Thirteen other members of the organization have been indicted, arrested or convicted, but the two men fled and are probably in the Tenancingo area, Hayes says.

Federal authorities say sex trafficking is one of the town's biggest exports going back to the 1960s. The illicit business makes so much money for families there that town festivals feature elaborately dressed traffickers showing off their prostitutes, Hayes says.

Three Uzbekistan nationals, Sandjar Agzamov, 33, Nodir Yunusov, 28, and Rustamjon Shukurov, 27, are on the ICE list for labor trafficking, which authorities say is harder to detect than sex trafficking.

The three were indicted for what authorities allege was their part in a complicated labor scheme. From 2005 through 2009, the indictments say, they defrauded the government into issuing visas for jobs that didn't exist, then brought more than 40 people into the U.S. from Uzbekistan, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines to clean hotel rooms or work in other low-wage jobs for more than 40 hours a week for as little as \$50.

The fugitives were college students in St. Louis and Kansas City, where they met other Uzbekistan nationals and came up with the scheme, according to court records and the federal agents who investigated the case. All told, 11 men have been indicted.

The traffickers charged the workers as much as \$5,000 in fees to obtain visas, bring them to the U.S. and find them work.

The traffickers required them to live in apartments the ring leased, charging them up to \$350 a month to live with as many as 12 other people, the indictments said. The traffickers drove them to and from work to control their movements.

If the workers complained, the traffickers threatened to cancel their visas and charge them \$5,000 to return home.

When federal agents broke up the ring in 2009, they found more than 40 victims working in hotels and factories in Kansas City, St. Louis, Wyoming, Florida and Virginia.

Mark Fox, ICE supervisory special agent in Kansas City, says the traffickers exploited the extreme poverty in developing countries.

"One gentleman, he was a civil engineer and came to work here in housekeeping," he says. "The money is better in housekeeping. ... Five billion people in the world live on less than \$2 a day. That's the pool these traffickers were taking from."