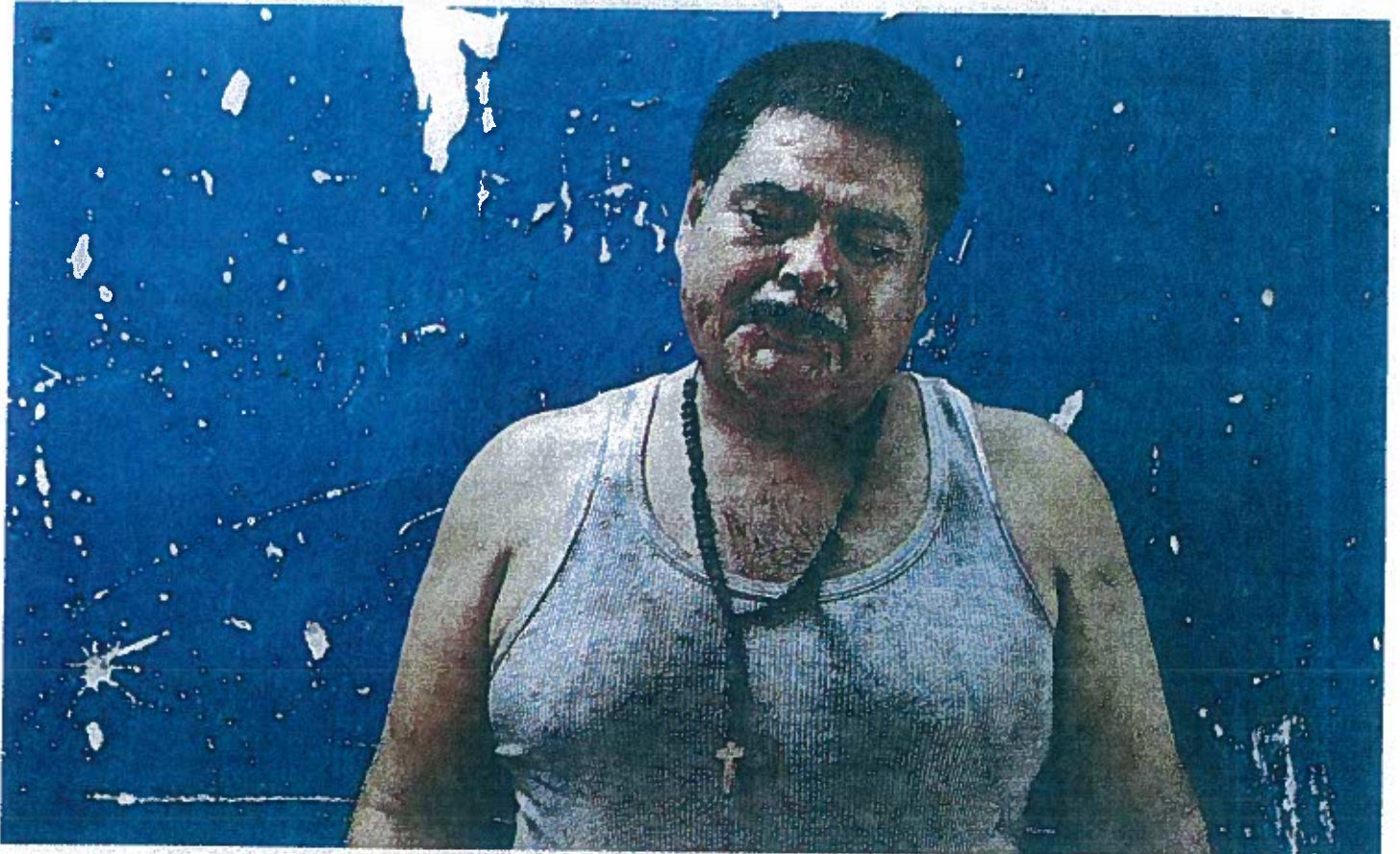






# ACROSS THE BORDER, BEYOND THE LAW



ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Abraham Caudel, charged with sexually assaulting one of his daughters, fled to Mexico and made no effort to conceal his whereabouts.

Law enforcement breakdowns make it easy for suspects to flee the country and live freely for years. Many of them are hiding in plain sight. It took Tribune reporters just 18 days to track down eight fugitives in Mexico.

**BY GARY MARX AND DAVID JACKSON**  
Tribune reporters

GUADALAJARA, Mexico — Just days before authorities charged him with sexually assaulting his own daughter, Abraham Caudel hopped a Greyhound bus from DeKalb to California, then crossed into Mexico in a pickup truck driven by his brother.

In the eight years since he returned to this sprawling city where he once lived, Caudel never changed his name or made any effort to conceal his whereabouts from U.S. or Mexican police.

"They've never looked for me," he said.

Federal law enforcement officials say finding a fugitive abroad is often difficult and dangerous. Yet it took Tribune reporters less than two days in Guadalajara to locate Caudel. Facing open warrants on charges of

child sex assault and fleeing the United States to avoid prosecution, he readily agreed to an on-camera interview to profess his innocence and describe his easy escape from American justice.

Caudel was just one of eight Chicago-area fugitives Tribune reporters located during an 18-day trip to central Mexico. Five other escapees are accused of homicides, one of child molestation and the other of shooting a man.

All eight went right back to their hometowns, where they registered cars, got birth certificates for their children or recorded marriages using their own names. In only one case did the fugitives or their families tell the Tribune that law enforcement officials had come looking for them, even though authorities had learned their addresses in Mexico soon after the crimes.

Those fugitives are among a growing number of criminal suspects who flee the country each year to evade trial for murder, rape and other serious felonies. Breakdowns at every level of the U.S. criminal justice system allow the suspects to escape, then cripple efforts to bring them to justice, the Tribune found in an investigation based on new Justice Department data as well as sealed warrants and other government records on 129 border-crossing fugitives from northern Illinois.

"It's like, anybody can kill anybody and just leave the country," said Brenda Molina, whose mother was allegedly slain by a drunken driver who then fled to South Korea.

Government records document an alarm-

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ing lack of coordination between U.S. Justice Department officials, county prosecutors and local police; a failure by these agencies to keep track of their mounting caseloads; inexplicable years-long delays, and outright errors.

For example, although the Tribune identified more than 60 fugitives who fled to Mexico rather than face trial in Cook County, local prosecutors listed only 12 they are seeking for extradition or deportation from Mexico.

Justice Department officials had in many of these cases filed court papers stating the fugitive's whereabouts in Mexico — sometimes listing an exact address or tiny village — but Cook County prosecutors told the Tribune that this information was never presented to them, so they couldn't initiate formal extradition proceedings.

"The system is broken right now," said former Joliet Police Chief Fred Hayes, who watched numerous fugitives disappear across America's borders without repercussions during his decades in neighboring Will County. "This work is not getting done. Federal officials and state and local officials should sit down and really come up with a single point of tracking these cases, instead of the disorganized system that's out there now."

In case after case, the failure to apprehend international fugitives makes a mockery of the law, leaving victims' families shattered and communities distrustful of police.

As suspects fled to Mexico, Brazil, the Philippines, India and other locales, the Tribune found:

■ Many of the escapees paid a startlingly low price for freedom, fleeing America after posting as little as a few thousand dollars in bail when charged with murder, rape and other violent felonies. At the same cursory bond hearings, county judges failed to confiscate passports or impose other travel restrictions, even when the accused was a citizen of another country.

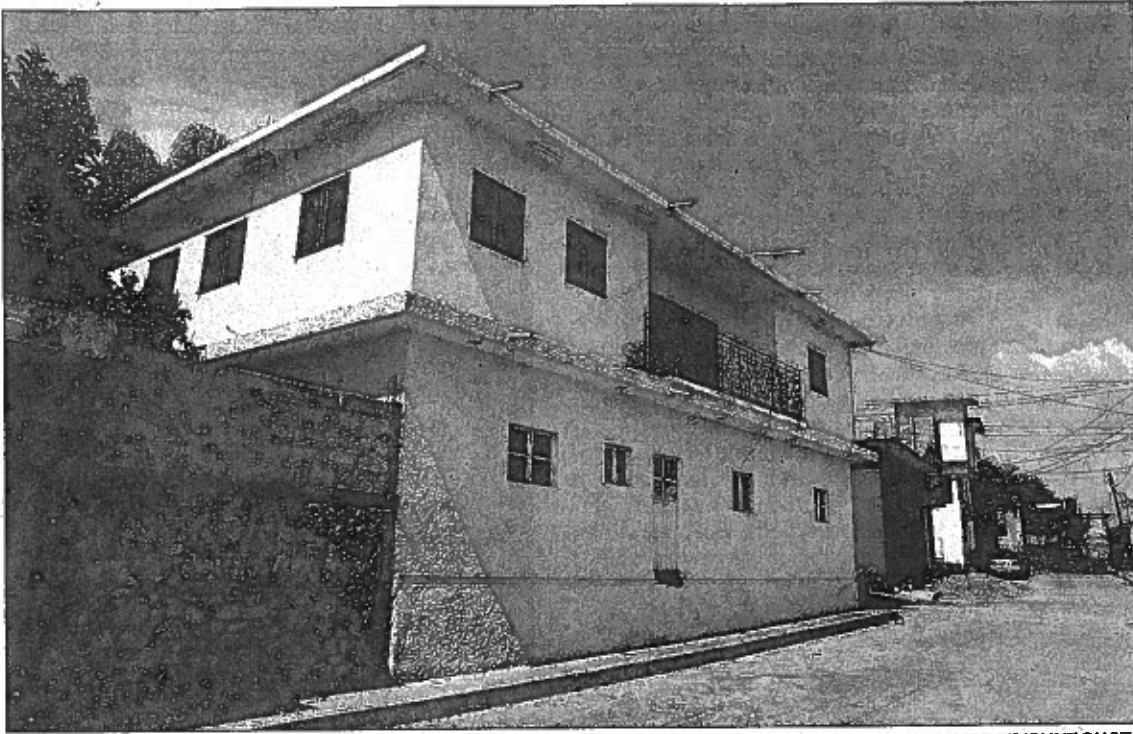
■ When fugitives' families helped them flee, these relatives could not be held responsible or even be pressured for information by detectives because, unlike in most states, the law in Illinois specifically exempts close family members from being charged with aiding a fugitive. Some who fled sustained themselves or enriched their families by selling property or conducting other financial transactions in Illinois while on the run.

■ Gaps riddle the patchwork of local and international warrants meant to alert authorities that a person is wanted. Only two of the 129 border-crossing fugitives from northern Illinois were listed as wanted by Interpol, the global agency responsible for capturing international suspects and funded with millions of U.S. dollars annually.

Justice Department data obtained by the Tribune show that the number of new leads on international fugitives — and the number of suspects captured — generally grew every year over the last decade. In defending their efforts, department officials said in a statement: "We have seen a marked increase in extraditions from Mexico, and many other countries around the world."

Still, American law enforcement officials at all levels com-





ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Pedro Aguilar's relatives long ago gave Chicago police the location where he was staying in Mexico.



Pedro Aguilar is accused of killing a woman in Chicago before fleeing in 1996. He ended up in Emiliano Zapata, Mexico.

plain about a lack of resources while shifting blame to other agencies, arcane international treaties and foreign governments.

For families of the victims, those excuses mean little as the years drag on and their hopes for justice fade.

Gina Rodriguez is still waiting for the capture of Pedro Aguilar, accused of gunning down her mother in Chicago before fleeing to Mexico in 1996.

"Justice has not been served," she wrote in a July 2008 email to the FBI.

At one point, Rodriguez and her sisters bitterly recall, a law enforcement official suggested they hire a bounty hunter to bring Aguilar across the U.S. border — advice that shocked them.

In Mexico, Tribune reporters found Aguilar in two days.

### 'A sad conclusion'

Before traveling to Mexico to search for Pedro Aguilar and other fugitives, Tribune reporters ana-

lyzed thousands of pages of U.S. government records and discovered that many suspects were clustered in the urban neighborhoods and farming villages of states that have been a steady source of immigration to the Chicago area, including Michoacan, Morelos and Jalisco.

This is where Aguilar fled soon after he allegedly shot and killed Maria Rodriguez, a single mother and restaurant owner who had spurned his romantic advances.

Within two months, relatives of Aguilar disclosed his whereabouts to Chicago police, handing detectives the name of the street where Aguilar was staying with his parents in the Cuernavaca suburb of Emiliano Zapata, according to a warrant filed by the FBI in 2000. The relatives even supplied a telephone number where the fugitive could be reached.

Eleven years later, Tribune reporters found, Aguilar hadn't moved.

In the Emiliano Zapata telephone directory, reporters found a

relative of Aguilar's living on the same street listed in the 2000 federal warrant. Land records and business licenses showed that his sister and others had run a restaurant from a spacious two-story corner home on the street. Birth records revealed that Aguilar had a daughter in June 2001 and listed that street as his address.

In the close-knit blue-collar neighborhood, local residents immediately recognized a photograph of Aguilar, said he lived in the home and added that he worked unpredictable hours driving a white cab. A brother who lives half a block away, Armando Aguilar, said he had seen Pedro washing his taxi at the house just days earlier.

Shown the FBI wanted poster for his brother, Armando Aguilar cursed softly and said: "I am shocked that this happened in 1996 and I didn't know about it."

He and several other family members said authorities have never questioned them about Pedro. "Why didn't the authorities

come in 1996? If this happened then, why didn't they come?" Armando asked.

Justice Department officials told the Tribune they never received a request from Cook County authorities to extradite Aguilar.

For their part, county prosecutors said they received information only in recent years that Aguilar had been located in Mexico, leading them to re-examine the case.

But by then, the lack of action had undermined the government's ability to try Aguilar. One of two eyewitnesses to the shooting was incapacitated by a brain tumor, while the other had been deported to Mexico.

"The case was unprosecutable," said Fabio Valentini, head of the Cook County state's attorney's criminal prosecutions bureau. "It's a sad conclusion. I'm not sure where to point the finger on that, though."

In interviews, Rodriguez and her sisters recounted how their single mother had raised them to be high achievers while running the bright Sabor a Mexico restaur-

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ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Armando Aguilar said he was shocked that his brother Pedro was a murder suspect and wondered why police didn't come to get him.

# Suspects often not pursued

rant on North Narragansett Avenue in Chicago.

The sisters desperately wrote letters to politicians and law enforcement to keep the fugitive hunt alive. They provided authorities with tips about potential witnesses but said officials discouraged them from posting and distributing wanted fliers in the U.S. and Mexico — saying any such action would scare away the fugitive.

Gina Rodriguez wept as she absorbed the news that reporters could so quickly find the man alleged to have murdered her mother.

“What strikes me most is the audacity — that he didn’t have the decency to change his identity. He’s just walked about freely,” she said. “He has his daughter to enjoy, whereas my siblings and I grew up without our mom.”

## Inexplicable delays

While it took the Tribune little time to locate the fugitives in central Mexico, compiling a list of border-crossing fugitives from northern Illinois took months.

The U.S. Justice Department and other federal agencies have long shrouded America’s international fugitive apprehension program in secrecy, arguing that suspects would be tipped off and investigations compromised if officials released even basic statistical information.

In an unprecedented effort to gauge the overall effectiveness of America’s fugitive apprehension program, Tribune reporters used law enforcement records to identify 216 northern Illinois suspects wanted for the most serious crimes during the last two decades who were believed to have fled abroad.

Just under half of those border-crossing fugitives were charged with homicide; the rest were accused of rape and other serious felonies. Today, 129 of them remain at large, the records show.

Even when authorities have a strong lead on a fugitive, the hunt is often stalled by years-long delays.

Consider 18-year-old Jacob Maldonado, who fled in May 2000, just before authorities charged him with fatally shooting his mother’s boyfriend in the face.

As in many other cases, local police quickly obtained information about the suspect’s whereabouts by interviewing his extended family. Within a month, police learned Maldonado had been spotted in his mother’s hometown, Espinos de Judio in the central Mexican state of Jalisco.

At that point, local and federal U.S. law enforcement agencies are supposed to work together so police in the foreign country can arrest the suspect and begin the process of extraditing or deporting him to the U.S.

But Maldonado’s case underscores the miscommunication between local police, county prosecutors and Justice Department agencies; the baffling lack of accountability, and the bureaucratic mishaps that often follow.

In 2001, the Justice Department filed court papers saying Maldonado had left Cook County. The document stated that Chicago police had learned his whereabouts in Mexico.

But, according to the Justice Department, federal officials couldn’t request the cooperation of Mexican authorities until Cook County prosecutors asked

them to do so — and the Justice Department says that didn’t happen until eight years later.

Cook County prosecutors told the Tribune that, as far as they knew, police and the FBI had no solid information about Maldonado being in Espinos de Judio until January 2009. It was only then that prosecutors asked the U.S. Justice Department to work with Mexican authorities so Mexican police could arrest him.

The Mexican government issued an arrest warrant for Maldonado in 2009, but by then the trail had apparently gone cold.

Justice Department spokeswoman Laura Sweeney defended her agency’s handling of the case, saying in a statement that the department’s Office of International Affairs “isn’t in a position to take any action, or even know about the cases, unless the (local) prosecuting authorities submit a request.”

Sally Daly, spokeswoman for the Cook County state’s attorney’s office, said: “It is extremely frustrating for us when offenders flee the jurisdiction. But our obligation is to prosecute, not hunt down these offenders. As an agency with extremely limited resources, we feel we are doing the best job we possibly can.”

Rosalinda Kilmer, the eldest daughter of Maldonado’s alleged victim, 42-year-old construction company owner Manuel Robles, said her family made monthly calls for years to Chicago police. Even last year, they visited the Near North District station in a frustrating effort to reactivate the manhunt, she said.

Kilmer said police repeatedly told her and her sister that the

## “I’d like to know why my dad’s murder is such a throwaway.”

— Rosalinda Kilmer, lamenting that suspect Jacob Maldonado hasn’t been found

hunt for Maldonado was in the hands of federal authorities.

“I’d like to know why my dad’s murder is such a throwaway,” Kilmer said.

The Chicago Police Department declined to comment on any specific case or provide any information about its Fugitive Apprehension Section, citing “the sensitive nature of ongoing investigations.”

Kilmer said learning from reporters that authorities had a fix on Maldonado just weeks after her father’s murder “is very surprising to me — infuriating, actually.”

“The detectives assigned to the case, they should have stewardship,” Kilmer said. “They should be the ones to hold the other departments accountable until someone hunts down the guy who fled to Mexico. They told me: ‘There’s nothing we can do.’”

Wherever he is today, Maldonado has gone from a teenager to a 30-year-old, and his family in Chicago doubts he is still concerned about being brought back to Cook County for trial.

“Why would you look over your back if you know you won’t get caught?” said Maldonado’s youngest brother, Edgar Lopez.

“He’s living his life,” added sister Joana Maldonado.

## Living a new life

Abraham Caudel’s life in DeKalb unraveled in April 2003, when one of his daughters told his wife that Caudel had been sexually assaulting her for many

months.

The wife, Irene Arias, went to police and filed for an order of protection on behalf of her children, saying the 14-year-old daughter alleged that Caudel had "started touching her when she was 12" and raped her three times. Another daughter accused Caudel of molesting her, Arias' petition added.

During the next days, the self-employed house painter was arrested twice for violating the order of protection. He followed Arias and the children, and he grabbed and threatened her, Arias contended in court papers. Both times, authorities released him after he put down \$100 cash in bail.

Then Caudel fled — just days before the DeKalb County state's attorney charged him with 10 counts of criminal sexual assault and aggravated criminal sexual abuse of a family member under 18.

Four years later, in 2007, Arias learned while visiting her ailing father in Guadalajara that Caudel was renting a second-floor apartment in a tightly packed neighborhood where streets are paved with broken rock.

She went there to demand that Caudel divorce her in the Mexican state of Jalisco, where their marriage was registered in 1983. But Caudel said he would grant the divorce only if she could get authorities to drop the criminal charges against him in DeKalb, according to Arias and a U.S. federal warrant.

Arias instead secured a divorce in DeKalb and provided a police detective there with Caudel's exact address in Guadalajara. FBI agents filed a federal warrant for Caudel's arrest, often the first step in an effort to extradite an international fugitive.

But no visible action followed.

DeKalb County Assistant State's Attorney Phil Montgomery said that as far as he knew, federal authorities still hadn't located Caudel.

In September, Tribune reporters traced Caudel to the family's tannery in Guadalajara, only blocks from the apartment where Arias confronted him four years earlier.

As reporters approached the tannery in the late afternoon, an elderly worker was taking a break on a log outside. At the reporters' request, he called through the black metal gates into the darkened interior, and the fugitive appeared.

Standing in a sweat-soaked undershirt, with flecks of white leather-treatment residue dotting his face, Caudel maintained that his daughter fabricated the accusations against him because he was a strict parent. "My heart is clean," he said.

He said he fled the U.S. because he didn't think he could get a fair trial. After he returned to Guadalajara, Caudel said he felt despondent for a time but soon fell in love and started a new family with two daughters.

Caudel described himself as a devoted parent. If there were a prize for best father, he said, "I would have won."

His 4- and 6-year-old daughters in Guadalajara are the reason, he said, that he doesn't end his life on the run and return to face trial in America.

"I can't leave them," he said. "What gives me strength to continue to live now is my new girls."

*gmarx@tribune.com*  
*dyjackson@tribune.com*

## Hiding in plain sight

Chicago Tribune reporters identified more than 100 northern Illinois fugitives accused of murder, rape and other serious felonies who were tracked by authorities to Mexico and remain at large today. Many were believed to be in parts of central Mexico that have been a steady source of immigration to the Chicago area. Traveling by car through that region Sept. 22-Oct. 9, reporters used government records and interviews in seven towns to determine the whereabouts of eight of the nine fugitives they were trying to find. Two agreed to on-camera interviews. In all but one case, the fugitives or their families said no law enforcement officials had come looking for them.



### 1 GUADALAJARA, JALISCO

**Fugitive:** Abraham Caudel

**Charged:** In DeKalb in 2003 with sexually assaulting his 14-year-old daughter

**Current status:** Now working in a family-owned tannery, he started a new family and has two daughters. He told the reporters, "My heart is clean."

### 2 LA LUZ, MICHOACAN

**Fugitive:** Daniel Lopez

**Charged:** In Chicago in 2006 with killing Ubaldo Salgado

**Current status:** He has been sheltered by his family in a brick house with iron gates and has several girlfriends, relatives say.

### 3 UCACUARO, MICHOACAN

**Fugitive:** Alberto Pulido

**Charged:** In Cook County in 1993 with shooting a man

**Current status:** Now a local town official, he is a rancher who raises cows and sorghum and lives with his family in a large, gated house.

### 4 RINCON DE TAMAYO, GUANAJUATO

**Fugitive:** Daniel Carrillo

**Charged:** In Berwyn in 2001 with sexually abusing two girls, one age 11 and the other 15

**Current status:** Today he works in his father's carpentry shop and has a new family with four children. In an interview he declared his innocence.

**Fugitive:** Baltazar Martinez

**Charged:** In Palatine with the 2001 homicide of co-worker Jose A. Lopez

**Current status:** Martinez returned to his hometown, married a schoolteacher, has two children and has been a taxi driver, construction worker and stay-at-home dad.

### 5 TEXCAPILLA, STATE OF MEXICO

**Fugitive:** Roberto Valdez-Callxto

**Charged:** In Harvard, Ill., with the 2005 knife murder of nursery worker Cecilio Hernandez

**Current status:** He first fled to Mexico City and then returned to his hometown, where he has a wife and three children, lives on a family farming compound and works as a laborer and auto mechanic.

### 6 EL ESTUDIANTE, MORELOS

**Fugitive:** Oscar Hernandez

**Charged:** In Chicago with the 1994 murder of college freshman Armand Browning

**Current status:** He returned to his birthplace, lives in a family-owned home and has two children with a common-law wife.

### 7 EMILIANO ZAPATA, MORELOS

**Fugitive:** Pedro Aguilar

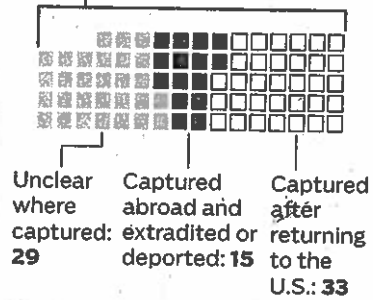
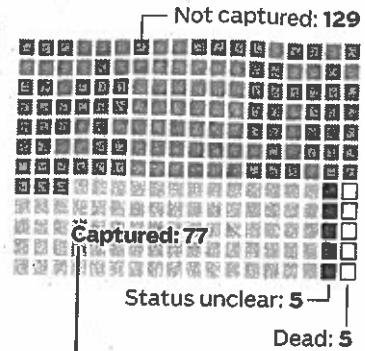
**Charged:** In Chicago with the 1996 murder of restaurant owner Maria Rodriguez after she spurned his romantic advances.

**Current status:** He fled immediately back to his family's spacious home, had a daughter and now works as a taxi driver.

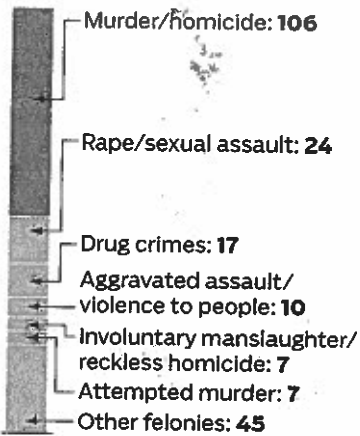


## Breaking down the findings

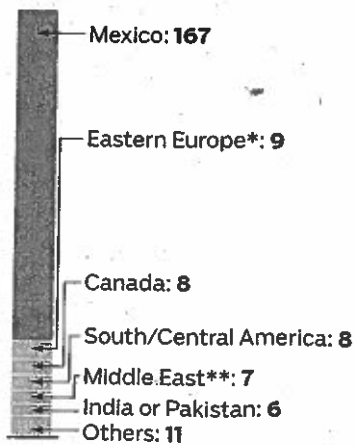
To gauge the effectiveness of America's fugitive apprehension program, the Tribune used law enforcement records to identify **216 northern Illinois fugitives** accused of the most serious crimes who authorities believed fled across U.S. borders during the last two decades. While officials said these are just a fraction of the countless fugitives who disappeared, here is what the 216 cases show.



### Charges by fugitive



### Where fugitives were said to have fled



\*Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, former Yugoslavia

\*\*Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank

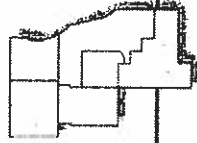
SOURCES: Tribune analysis of law enforcement records

# Flaws in the criminal justice system help fugitives cross borders

Justice Department officials say they are capturing more international fugitives than ever. But breakdowns at every level of law enforcement enable uncounted numbers of suspects to flee across the U.S. border and then hamper their apprehension.

SOURCES: Chicago Tribune reporting, federal warrants, court and police records, other government documents

TRIBUNE



## County prosecutors

Local prosecutors prepare voluminous extradition packages that are sent to the Justice Department and then to foreign governments. County officials can be overwhelmed by the complex paperwork and the costs of translators, outside counsel and even airline tickets for sheriffs and returning fugitives. The Tribune identified more than 60 Cook County fugitives law enforcement traced to Mexico, yet the Cook County state's attorney's office said they are actively seeking the extradition or deportation of only 12 of those suspects.

**Example:** Among those not on the county's active list is career criminal Juan Jacquez, wanted on charges of killing a South Side man in 2002. Months later, a family informant provided Chicago



detectives with Jacquez's exact address in Santiago Papasquiaro, Mexico, but no visible progress has been made in the case.



## County judges

At cursory bond hearings, judges gave some murder and rape suspects the keys to their own escape by setting low bonds or failing to limit the travel of foreign-born and dual-nationality citizens by confiscating their passports or imposing other restrictions.

**Example:** Chicago maintenance mechanic Dimitrios Amasiadis posted a cash bond of just \$1,000 after being charged in 1998 with sexually assaulting his 10-year-old stepdaughter over a period of



years. Born in Guatemala to a Greek father, Amasiadis mortgaged his house to raise more than \$30,000 and then fled to Greece, where he remains today. Amasiadis was convicted in absentia. His sister Patricia Echeverria professes his innocence and told the Tribune that Amasiadis is "still happily married" and raising a new family. "He's not looking over his shoulder," she said.



## Illinois law

A family exemption in Illinois law bars authorities from charging close relatives with harboring or aiding fugitives. There is no deterrent against family helping suspects flee by driving them to bus stations and airports, providing cash or withholding information from police.

**Example:** In 2005, after 21-year-old Muaz Haffar was charged with murdering a university student with a bike lock, he fled to Syria. Haffar's father in the Chicago area helped arrange his trip and a brother accompanied Haffar on part of his journey out of Chicago, according to law enforcement sources. Muaz Haffar remains at large.

