

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This is a PolitiFact Texas Truth-O-Meter article that was posted online on Aug. 12, 2014 but then removed that day after additional information arrived. A revised version of this article appeared on Aug. 22, 2014, [rating the congressman's claim Mostly False](#).*

The Truth-O-Meter Says:



Says drug cartels are using social media to offer rebates so more children from Central America get smuggled to the United States.

[Henry Cuellar](#) on Wednesday, July 16th, 2014 in an interview with ABC News

Henry Cuellar claim about social media, rebates and children in Central America lacks public proof



In a "did-you-know" moment, a Laredo congressman asserted drug cartels are offering rebates for children from Central America to lure other kids to make the dangerous overland journey to the United States.

In an interview with ABC News and Yahoo News, [posted online](#) July 16, 2014, Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar talked up legislation he and Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, had hatched to enable immigration judges to determine quickly if an unaccompanied child apprehended on the U.S. side of the border with Mexico should be shortly sent home.

Agreeing that poverty and violence in Central America have been factors in children flocking north, Cuellar told reporter [Jeff Zeleny](#): "The drug cartels found an incentive, and this is what we're trying to cut off, these incentives. Finally a last thing: Did you know that they're even using social media -- social media that says if you get recruited, we'll give you a rebate if you bring another child with you."

Zeleny: "So an advertisement of sorts?"

Cuellar: "Oh, without a doubt. They have marketing. They're very sophisticated organizations." We wondered about cartels offering rebates via social media for children to lure other children. By email, Cuellar spokeswoman Miranda Margowsky said the Laredo Democrat learned about the rebates at a briefing by the U.S. embassy in Honduras. We were ultimately referred to a spokeswoman in the U.S. embassy in Guatemala City, Mo Mimnaugh, who [said by email](#) there "are frequent reports that smugglers are using more creative recruitment techniques, including social media. They spread false rumors that promise immigration benefits to these children once they are in the United States, and attempt to minimize the very real dangers of the journey north." After we pressed for any evidence supporting what Cuellar said, a spokeswoman for the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Robyn Remeika, sent a [similar email](#).

News stories don't mention rebates

Neither that response nor a Spanish-language [news article she pointed out](#) mentioned cartels offering rebates. The article, posted online July 7, 2014, by *Prensa Libre*, a Guatemalan news service, was headlined, "Coyotes coordinate through Facebook." The story quoted a smuggler identified as Juan as saying he logs onto Facebook to smooth the logistics of guiding almost 100 people a month from Latin American countries into Mexico. Facebook is best for such operations, he said, because it's cheaper than a telephone call.

We dug for other indications of rebates being offered but found nothing so detailed.

An Associated Press [news story](#), datelined Tecun Uman, Guatemala, quoted smugglers about what they charge and services they provide. "Coyotes get their business through social networks, from friends and family, or referrals from prior customers," the story said, without saying where that information originated. The 1,900-word story didn't mention rebates. It also was published July 21, 2014, after Cuellar spoke to ABC News, making us loathe to consider it because Cuellar wouldn't have had it available to him.

We spotted news stories describing smugglers selling travel packages.

A June 26, 2014, [news story](#) in the *New York Times* quoted Raul L. Ortiz, deputy chief of the Border Patrol for the Rio Grande Valley, as saying families and children had become a high-profit, low-risk business for Mexican narcotics cartel bosses who, Ortiz said, had taken control of human smuggling across the Rio Grande. "They now offer family packages, migrants said, charging up to \$7,500 to bring a minor alone or a mother with children from Central

America to the American side of the river."

A July 9, 2014, [news story](#) in *El Universal*, a Mexican newspaper, quoted Ana Cecilia Oliva Balcarcel, director of immigrant protection at the National Institute of Migration in Mexico, describing special offers to migrants that, in some cases, cover up to three trips into the United States for a \$6,000 payment, the story said. She was further quoted as saying people prefer to purchase such packages from traffickers rather than going to the trouble of applying for a humanitarian visa from Mexico.

Expert: 'Sounds like talk-radio chatter'

Lacking confirmation of the congressman's statement, we turned to experts on immigration, none of whom expressed awareness of rebates being offered to families or children via social media, though some said smugglers might use social media occasionally.

[Wayne Cornelius](#), a professor emeritus at the University of California at San Diego, said via email he hadn't heard of evidence supporting the rebate claim "and I deal frequently with attorneys providing legal representation for unaccompanied child migrants. It sounds more like talk-radio chatter."

Also by email, Austin-based security and intelligence consultant firm Stratfor, [which describes itself](#) as a "geopolitical intelligence firm that provides strategic analysis and forecasting," provided a statement from Tristan Reed, its security analyst for Mexico, who said that while drug cartels employ social media, Stratfor had no specific examples of rebate offers "at the moment." Generally, Reed said, "even if Mexican organized crime were advertising their human smuggling services via social media -- which itself makes their operations more vulnerable -- it's only occurring in an isolated manner."

By phone, Texas professors versed in immigration across the Rio Grande expressed skepticism. Tony Payan, director of the Mexico Center at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, said the congressman's statement struck him as flawed in several ways. Drug cartels don't smuggle people, he said, leaving that to others, though one cartel levies a "right-of-way" charge for people being smuggled through its territory, he said.

"No. 2, this assumes the people doing this, both fleeing and doing the human smuggling, have access to the Internet," Payan said. "Most do not have access to the Internet; they do not operate that way. They don't want to leave any record of this." And, Payan said, the people who are leaving have no web access at home and don't necessarily even have cell phones.

"Smugglers tend to operate person to person, do their own recruitment, go colonia to colonia," Payan said. "I haven't seen any of this evidence of social media."

Payan suggested we query Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, an associate professor of government at the University of Texas-Brownsville, who called Cuellar's claim unfounded and ridiculous. "I would love to see that evidence," she said. "I've never heard that."

Margowsky of Cuellar's office, stressing the House member based his comment on a consular briefing, repeatedly told us officials could vouch for his claim, but no one among the officials who engaged with us did so.

Among people offered up as authorities by Cuellar's office, San Antonio consultant [Alonzo Peña](#), former deputy director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, said by email that from his experience, "I can tell you that what the congressman said is not at all outside the realm of possibility or incredible." Peña earlier said by phone: "I haven't heard the word 'rebate'

used" in the context of smuggling children."

Our ruling

Cuellar said drug cartels are offering rebates via social media so more children from Central America get guided to the United States.

We're not saying Cuellar didn't hear this. But we found no confirmation of his claim while reasons for doubt range from the cartels not being known for trafficking people from Central America all the way through Mexico, rebates being an unfamiliar concept to the people Cuellar described as getting the offers and also the Internet and social media not being widely accessible to children and families contemplating such journeys.

Strike a match. Pants on Fire!

PANTS ON FIRE – *The statement is not accurate and makes a ridiculous claim.*

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About this statement:

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Sources:

[Email](#), Miranda Margowsky, press secretary, U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, July 22, 2014

[Email](#), Mo Mimnaugh, press attache/information officer, Public Affairs Section, U.S. Embassy, Guatemala, July 23, 2014

[Email](#) quoting Tristan Reed, Mexico security analyst, Stratfor, (received from Thomas Atchison, director of public relations, Stratfor, Aug. 1, 2014)

[Email](#), Wayne Cornelius, Theodore Gildred Distinguished Professor of Political Science and U.S.-Mexican Relations, Emeritus, University of California at San Diego, Aug. 1, 2014

Telephone interview, Tony Payan, director, Mexico Center, Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, Houston, Aug. 1, 2014

Telephone interviews, Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, associate professor of Government, University of Texas-Brownsville, Aug. 1, 2014

Telephone interview and [email](#) (excerpted), [Alonzo Peña](#), president, DMEP, San Antonio, Aug. 8, 2014

[Email](#), Robin Remeika, information officer, U.S. Embassy, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Aug. 11, 2014

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