



Mexican drug cartels 'hide in plain sight' in U.S.



Atlanta is a perfectly placed transportation hub, and drug traffickers have taken advantage of this. Trucks leaving the region can reach more than 80 percent of the U.S. population within two days, according to the Atlanta Metro Chamber of Commerce. (Getty Images)

By [Ben Conery](#)

Sunday, June 7, 2009

ATLANTA | Angel Haro-Perez certainly didn't look like a drug lord.

Police and federal agents arrested him in December 2007 in a rented house in a lower-middle-class neighborhood about a half-hour's drive from downtown Atlanta. The raised ranch is tucked off the interstate, where billboards advertise \$69.99 motel rooms and secondary highways are dotted with strip malls and commercial shipping centers.

Inside, agents found air mattresses on the floor, a few changes of clothes, a laptop computer.

And \$750,000 in cash stuffed in closets.

"You'd see this guy on a street corner and you'd say, 'He could barely rub two nickels together,'" said Rodney Benson, special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration's Atlanta

Field Division, "never mind he's here directly taking orders from representatives in Mexico."

Authorities say Mr. Haro-Perez was the Atlanta head of the Gulf Cartel, one of Mexico's most powerful drug-trafficking organizations, in charge of distributing drugs, collecting proceeds and keeping the books for the entire operation.

Mr. Haro-Perez's lawyer, Thomas Wooldridge, says his client is an American citizen who has no connection to Mexican drug cartels and was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. He faces life in prison and is scheduled for trial later this month.

Authorities say Mr. Haro-Perez is typical of cartel members and associates working in the U.S.: They keep a low profile, avoid violence and work quietly to traffic tons of drugs — cocaine, heroin, marijuana and methamphetamine — into the U.S. while smuggling billions of dollars back across the border. And they do it while remaining virtually invisible to the community and general public.

While brutal violence among drug-trafficking groups in Mexico, especially along the U.S. border, has drawn unprecedented attention from politicians, the media and the American public, among U.S. law enforcement officials, the cartels are old news. They've been seeping into American cities for more than a decade; a 2008 report noted the presence of distribution networks linked to them in 203 cities throughout the U.S.

In that time, the metropolitan Atlanta region has emerged as one of the nation's richest drug-distribution hubs, which authorities say supplies most of the eastern U.S. In 2008, DEA agents in the Atlanta region led the U.S. with \$70 million in drug-related seizures.