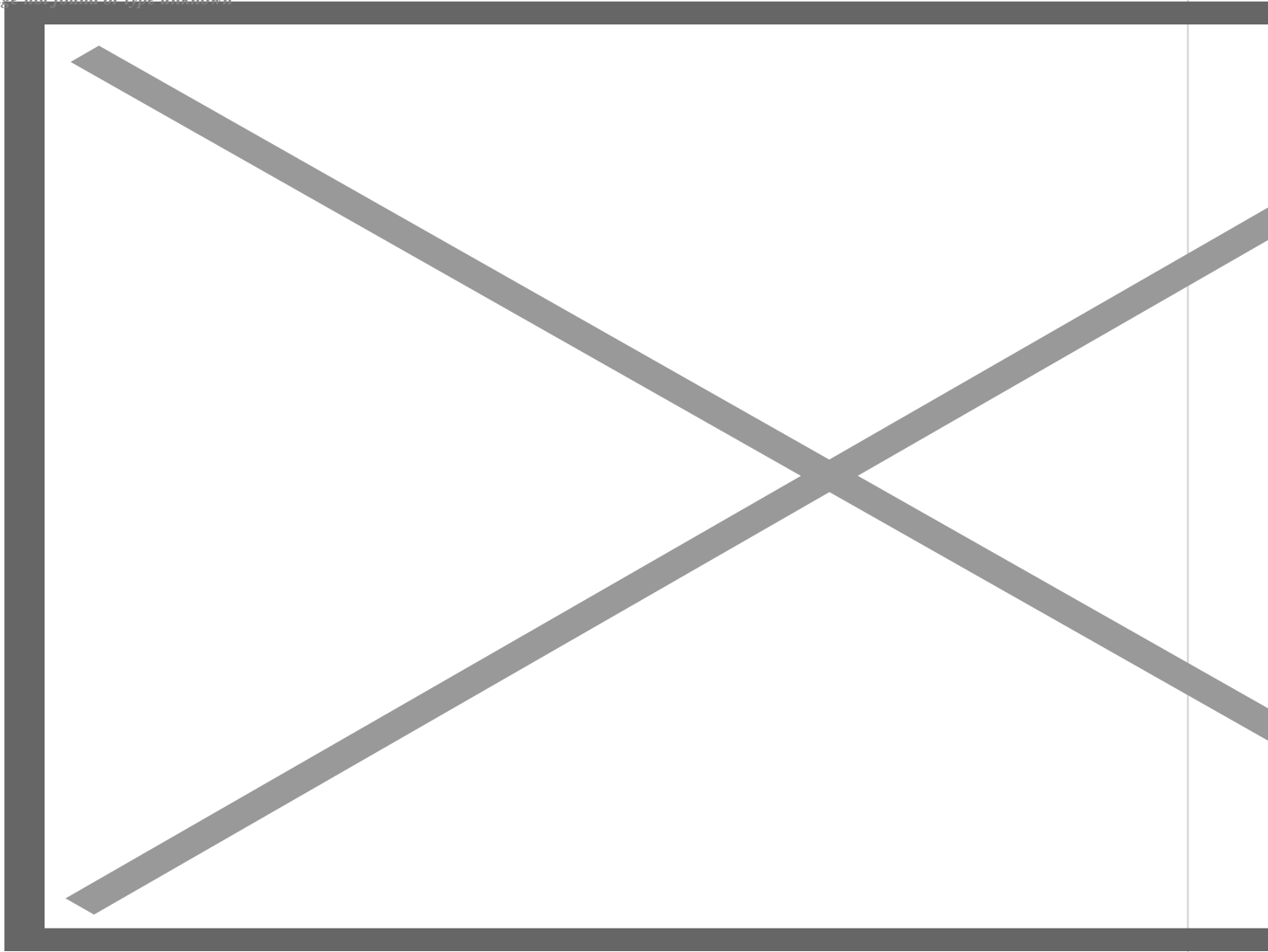


Major human smuggling investigation underway in Texas

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Police officials stand outside 12200 Chessington Drive in southwest Houston, Texas, (Photo: Reuters)

Houston, May 1 (RHC)-- U.S. authorities have opened an investigation into a possible human smuggling operation after police responding to reports of a kidnapping in Houston said they had found more than 90 people jammed into a two-story house in the Texas city.

Houston Police Assistant Chief Daryn Edwards said in a Friday news conference that officers following up on a kidnapping tip from the previous night were granted a search warrant to enter the home. The 90 victims, all but about five of them men, were removed from the house and given food and water, the chief said. No children were among the group.

“They were all huddled together, split between two rooms, wearing basic clothing, and were not tied up,” Edwards said, adding: “It was a big surprise when we got in the house and saw what we saw.” “It is definitely more of a smuggling thing than a trafficking thing,” he noted.

At least several of the victims showed symptoms of COVID-19 infection, including fever and lack of taste or smell, Edwards said. Homeland Security and Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents were seen at the house along with local police and firefighters.

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) will lead a smuggling investigation. There is no information yet on the proprietor of the house, or who may have brought the victims into it, Edwards said, adding that no arrests had been made in connection with the case as of Friday afternoon.

“We always ask the community if you see something say something ... we all need to work together,” the police chief said. “This isn't something we see often but it is disturbing,” he added. Residents in the neighborhood did not report any suspicious activity in the house and police did not release any information on the kidnapping call that led to the discovery.

Police also did not provide any information as to where the people in the house might have come from but the Texas-Mexico border is a known crossing point for undocumented immigrants trying to enter the United States.

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