

MIGRANT DEATHS IN SOUTH TEXAS

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Executive Summary

For more than a century, migrants have died in South Texas while attempting to enter the United States. The death rate has ebbed and flowed along with shifts in U.S. immigration and labor policies, as labor programs create legal pathways and more restrictive border enforcement policies push transiting migrants into increasingly remote areas. Yet through all the changes, migrant deaths have never ceased. Over the last 22 years, more than 3,253 people have lost their lives attempting to enter the United States in South Texas. Today, more migrants die in South Texas than anywhere else in the country.

This report builds on previous research related to migrant deaths in South Texas. It seeks to answer three questions: 1) Where are migrants dying in South Texas? 2) Who are these individuals? and 3) How do local agencies document and process the deaths of people who crossed the border without authorization? To answer these questions, the researchers created an original dataset compiled from records received through field visits and public information requests and added in additional migrant death datasets when possible. The report also relies on interviews with local law enforcement, justices of the peace, medical examiners and pathologists, forensic anthropologists, funeral homes, consulates, and civil society organizations, among others.

In total, the report collected 2,655 cases of migrant deaths in South Texas from 1990 to 2020 and an additional 615 cases of migrants who drowned in the Rio Grande but whose bodies washed up on the Mexican shore. This database documented 12 and 30 more migrant deaths than the Border Patrol's official count for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, respectively. Additionally, none of the drowning cases where the victim ended up in Mexico are included in the Border Patrol's numbers. This means that Border Patrol data almost certainly understates the true scope of migrant deaths in South Texas, especially since the hundreds of Rio Grande drowning deaths are left out of the totals.

The report also outlines deceased migrants' cause of death, discovery locations, and demographics. For the last two years, Webb County has reported the most migrant deaths, but migrants have died in every South Texas county. Historically, those dying in the Rio Grande or Texas ranchlands were primarily Mexican men. However, since 2012, the number of Central Americans both migrating and dying in the region has increased, representing about half of all deaths where nationality could be determined. Women also made up a significant portion of the dead. In 2013, women comprised almost a quarter of all cases where a sex could be determined.

County-level officials, who often work in some of the poorest areas in the state, are responsible for processing migrant deaths and paying for any related costs. A range of actors, including sheriffs' offices, justices of the peace, funeral homes, medical examiners, forensic anthropologists, and consulates all play a role in documenting the deaths, requesting autopsies and investigative tests, transporting the bodies, and submitting DNA samples. This report estimates that these costs can reach more than \$13,100 per deceased individual, with counties paying roughly \$2,000 on average just to remove the remains from the scene and obtain an autopsy.

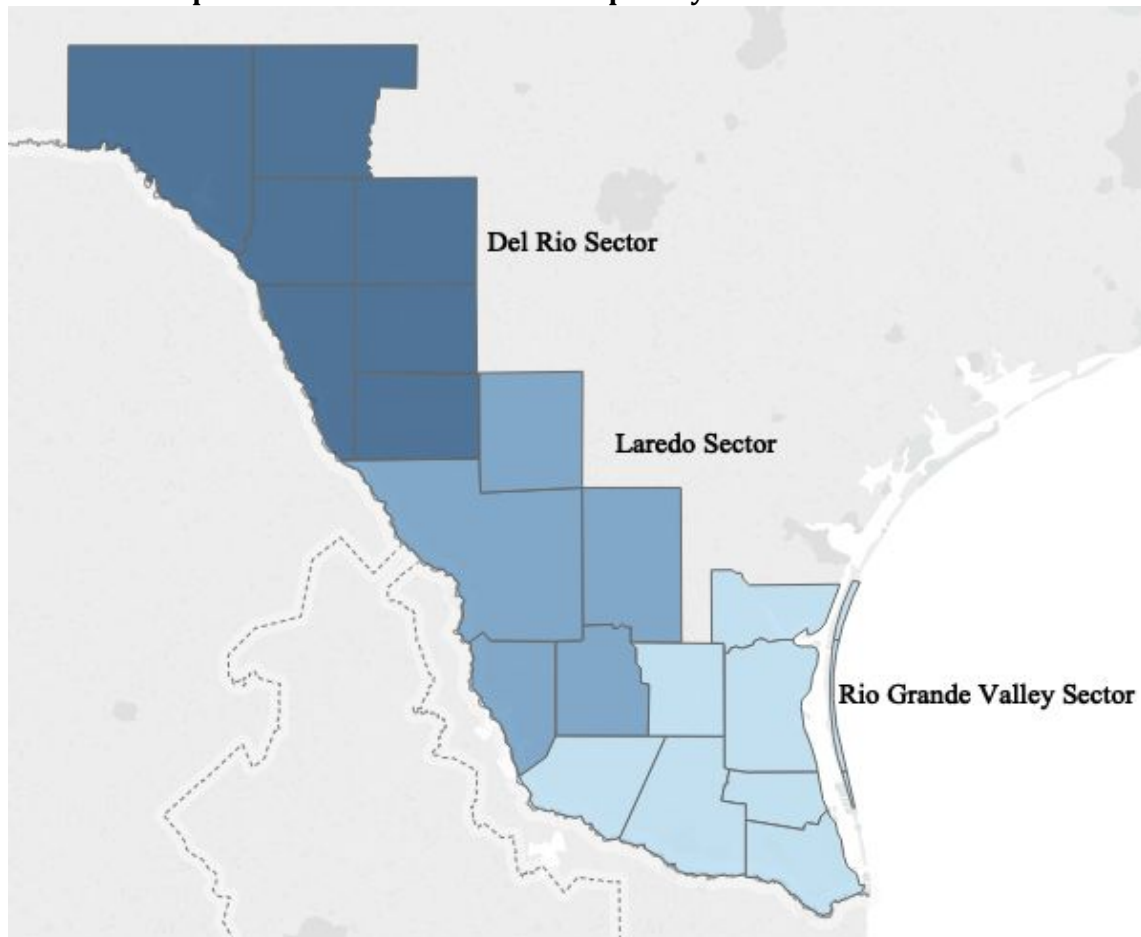
This report concludes with recommendations for streamlining migrant death processing through improved record keeping, mandated investigative testing and DNA samples, and increased state funding.

Migrant Deaths in South Texas

In South Texas, the Rio Grande forms the border with the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Coahuila. The river slices through wetlands and sand dunes, rows of palm trees and scraggly mesquites. The evolving ecosystems make for a dynamic and serene landscape, but they can also prove dangerous and even deadly for migrants who swim the river or hike the South Texas backcountry in the hopes of entering the United States undetected.

Over the last 22 years, the U.S. Border Patrol has counted 3,253 migrant deaths in South Texas, defined in this report as the counties closest to the border in the Rio Grande Valley, Laredo, and Del Rio Border Patrol Sectors.

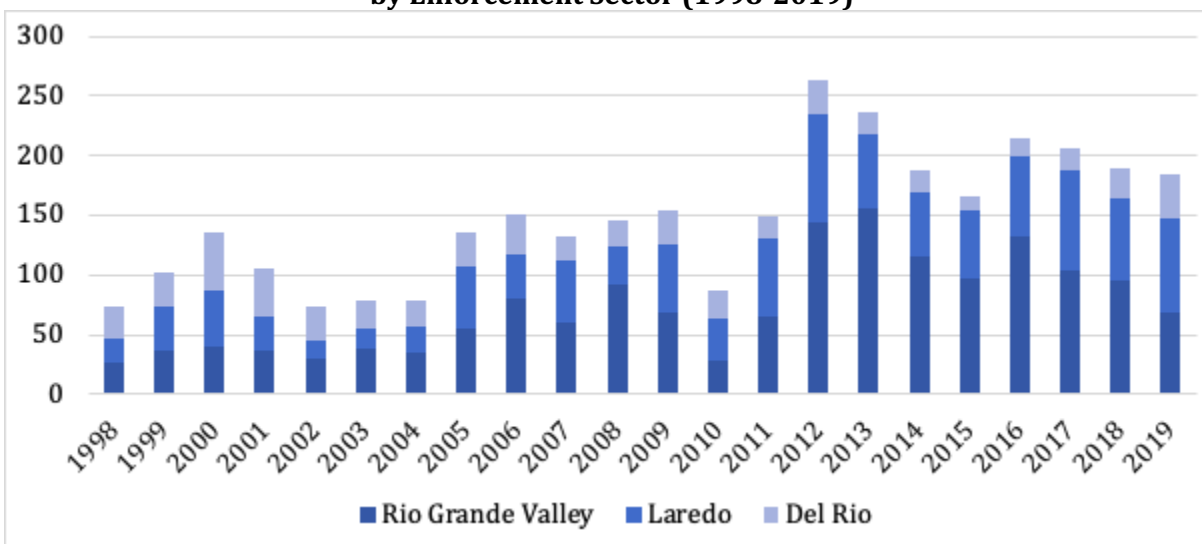
Map 1: Counties Covered in the Report by Border Patrol Sectors



Source: U.S. Border Patrol

These deaths include individuals who drowned in the Rio Grande and those who died from heat exhaustion, dehydration, or hypothermia on Texas ranches. However, this number is undoubtedly an undercount. First, some migrant remains may never be discovered. Second, individuals who drown in the Rio Grande and whose bodies wash up on the Mexican riverbank—as opposed to the United States’ shore—are not counted in these numbers. While third, local officials in certain counties may not always call Border Patrol to alert them of a migrant’s death.

**Graph 1: Border Patrol's Count of Migrant Deaths in South Texas
by Enforcement Sector (1998-2019)**



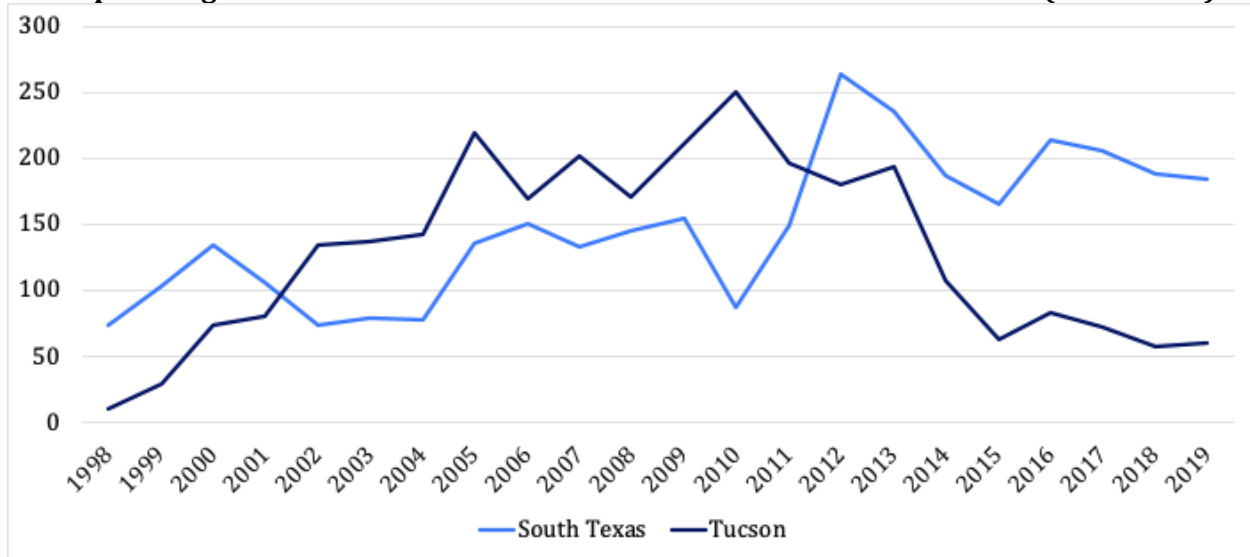
Source: U.S. Border Patrol

Unlike other areas of the U.S.-Mexico border, such as Arizona and California, migrants in South Texas are often moving through private land.^{a 1} This has several important implications for migrant deaths. First, civil society groups—primarily the South Texas Human Rights Center—must negotiate with private ranchers to walk migrant trails, leave water for migrants, or conduct grid searches for human remains. Second, researchers studying the phenomenon cannot physically access the land where migrants are dying without local government or rancher connections. Third, media attention is also limited, especially since many ranchers prefer not to publicize the deaths that occur on their land and migrants' bodies are whisked away to local funeral homes or the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office with as little publicity as possible.

These differences have obscured the scope of migrant deaths in South Texas. Migrant deaths have been best documented in the Tucson Border Patrol Sector. Through books such as *Devil's Highway: A True Story* by Luis Alberto Urrea and *The Land of Open Graves* by Jason de León, the tragic stories of migrant deaths in the Sonoran Desert have been shared around the world. While high-profile groups such as No More Deaths, which leaves water along migrant routes, have also continuously raised awareness of the issues. However, since 2012, migrant deaths in South Texas have surpassed deaths in the Tucson Border Patrol Sector. By 2019, the number of deaths in South Texas was three times more than in the Arizona desert. Yet, there has been far less documentation of these individuals' deaths.

^a Texas is 96 percent private land.

Graph 2: Migrant Deaths in South Texas and Tucson Border Patrol Sectors (1998-2019)



Source: U.S. Border Patrol

This report expands on previous research related to migrant deaths in South Texas to include migrants' demographic information and trends in migrant deaths over time. Using an original dataset, it aims to identify demographic information about the migrants, where the deaths have occurred, and highlight deaths that the Border Patrol does not count. Additionally, the report also details South Texas' county-level structures for processing migrant deaths. It examines the roles and responsibilities for the Border Patrol, local law enforcement, justices of the peace, medical examiners and pathologists, forensic anthropologists, funeral homes, and consulates.

History of Migrant Deaths in South Texas

South Texas has a long history of migrant deaths, corresponding to changes in U.S. immigration and labor policies and border enforcement. Over the past century, changes in U.S. policy shaped the ways that Mexicans and other migrants from around the world entered the United States and transited through South Texas. The first restrictions on Mexican migration at the U.S.-Mexico border date back to 1917, when the U.S. government established a literacy test and a \$8.00 head tax for Mexican laborers entering the United States. To avoid these regulations, Mexicans entering South Texas to work on farms or railroads began to wade or swim across the Rio Grande, instead of walking across the international bridges, exposing them to the river's swift and dangerous currents.^{b 2}

In 1942, the U.S. government responded to World War II labor shortages by establishing the Bracero Program and welcoming Mexican labor to U.S. agricultural fields. Lawmakers initially excluded Texas from the agreement, after farm owners rejected the program and lobbied to weaken its provisions.^{c 3} Yet, in the following years, hundreds of thousands of Mexicans continued to cross the Rio Grande without documents to work on Texas farms. In 1952, Texas farm owners succeeded in formalizing this arrangement, getting a "Texas Proviso" written into the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). This Proviso claimed that "employing" an illegal worker was not the same as "harboring" the worker. This meant that farm owners could knowingly hire individuals without documents and avoid sanctions, but workers would still have to sneak into the state to reach the farms.

During this period, Mexican laborers continued to enter into South Texas without documents and attempt to evade the Border Patrol, often with deadly consequences. A July 1949 *New York Times* article noted that approximately one Mexican drowned in the Rio Grande every day.⁴ Additionally, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, the Border Patrol set up highway checkpoints located 10 to 75 miles into the United States.⁵ These checkpoints pushed Mexican laborers off the roads and onto remote paths, where they faced exposure to the arid landscape and extreme temperatures.

By the late 1950s, Texas began accepting Bracero workers in a shift that lasted roughly a decade. This meant that some laborers could obtain legal papers to enter the United States and pass through official ports of entry. However, other individuals continued to enter Texas without documents if they could not join the Bracero Program or if they did not want to accept the program's low wages.⁶ The Bracero Program ended in 1964, but hundreds of thousands of Mexicans continued to come to the United States for seasonal agricultural and ranching jobs. Once again, there were no legal pathways to work in the United States, leading laborers to cross the river and hike through ranchlands to reach their destinations.⁷

In the late 1980s and 1990s, U.S. policies shifted the immigration landscape. In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) legalized 3 million immigrants who had arrived in the country prior to January 1, 1982.⁸ It also removed the Texas Proviso and increased Border Patrol funding. While some individuals received legal documents under IRCA, others were not eligible to regularize their status and continued traveling back and forth across the border. In 1996, the U.S. Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which took a more punitive approach to unauthorized immigration.⁹ It increased the types of crimes that made an individual eligible for deportation, added 5,000 Border Patrol agents over the following five years, required additional border fencing, and increased the criminal penalties for irregular entry and smuggling.

^b By one account, 75 percent of Mexicans began to come illegally after the head tax imposition.

^c Mexican officials also balked at having their workers sent to Texas, given the notoriously bad conditions.

The tougher approach went hand in hand with a new series of Border Patrol strategies. In September 1993, the Border Patrol began “Operation Blockade” in El Paso, with agents stationed in large numbers on the Rio Grande’s bank to create a human wall. The efforts stopped people from crossing through El Paso’s downtown, and the Border Patrol hailed the operation as a success. As a result, the Border Patrol formalized this enforcement method in its 1994 Southwest Border Strategy and expanded it across the border.¹⁰ In 1997, the Border Patrol adopted this approach in South Texas in “Operation Rio Grande Valley.” Along the border, strategically placed border fencing in city downtowns also reinforced these operations.

Yet while the Border Patrol’s operations and fencing reduced the number of people crossing through U.S. border cities, it led to a new phenomenon: migrants began to cross along city outskirts or in more remote areas. As this enforcement shift funneled migrants into more desolate and rugged migration paths, migrant death numbers began to tick upwards. In 1999, researchers at the University of Houston, the Universidad de Monterrey, and the University of California, Los Angeles counted more than 1,600 possible migrant fatalities along the border between 1993 and 1997.^{d 11} These researchers noticed an increase in the number of deaths from hyperthermia, hypothermia, and dehydration as migrants began hiking through more remote areas. Around this time, Mexican crossers also began to stay in the United States for longer periods of time in order to avoid re-crossing the increasingly dangerous and well-monitored border.

In the late 1990s, the Border Patrol started to count the deaths. In 1998, the Border Patrol began the Border Safety Initiative (BSI) to collect information on migrant deaths, advertise the dangers associated with crossing the border, and erect rescue beacons in the Tucson Sector. Soon after, in 2000, the Border Patrol created the Border Safety Initiative Tracking System (BSITS) as the main repository for data collected on border crossing deaths and rescues.^{e 12} Yet a 2006 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found inconsistencies in the Border Patrol’s system for tracking and recording migrant deaths.¹³

The Border Patrol has also taken additional steps to address migrant deaths. In 1998, the Border Patrol created its Search, Trauma, and Rescue team (BORSTAR) to assist in search and rescue operations. While in 2015, the Border Patrol began its Missing Migrant Program, which is an outgrowth of the Border Safety Initiative. It provides three types of assistance: 1) Border Patrol database searches for missing migrants; 2) search and rescue; and 3) remains recovery. The Missing Migrant Program also places signs in Spanish throughout South Texas’ ranchland and beacons with high-intensity blue lights. Yet, even with these efforts, hundreds of migrants continue to die in South Texas each year and official numbers continue to understate the full scope of migrant deaths.^{f 14}

^d During the 1990s, an estimated 50 to 75 migrants died in South Texas each year, according to a 2006 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report.

^e The Border Patrol defined a migrant death as: “A border-related death is defined as a suspected, undocumented migrant: 1) while in furtherance of an illegal entry; 2) within a designated target zone whether or not the Border Patrol was directly involved; and/or 3) outside the designated target zone when the Border Patrol has direct involvement with the incident.”

^f In 2018, CNN journalist Bob Ortega noted a Border Patrol undercount of more than 560 migrant deaths over the previous 16 years.

Methodology

This paper uses a mixed methodology to answer three broad questions related to migrant deaths in South Texas. The first question looks at county-level administrative processes, asking: How do local agencies process and document the deaths of individuals who attempted to enter the United States without authorization? The other two questions focus on the deaths themselves, asking: Where are migrants dying in South Texas and who are these individuals? The answers to these three questions are intertwined, as understanding county-level processes provides insights regarding the data available for identifying death locations and the deceased's demographic information.

To answer the first question—regarding how local agencies process and document migrant deaths—the report's researchers relied on Texas statute, existing literature, and semi-structured interviews. In particular, the researchers conducted interviews with sheriffs' offices in 15 counties, and interviews with justices of the peace, city police departments, fire departments, funeral homes, medical examiners, and forensic anthropologists, among others. These interviews clarified each county's specific processes for addressing migrant deaths within their jurisdiction. They also helped to identify each agency's form of migrant death documentation.

To answer this report's second and third questions on death locations and demographics, the researchers created an original dataset. The primary data sources were sheriffs' office incident reports and justice of the peace inquest forms, which were obtained through records requests and site visits.^g The researchers filed public and judicial records requests with authorities in 19 South Texas counties.^h In response to these requests, officials from seven counties returned data of varying detail.ⁱ

To supplement this data, researchers traveled to nine South Texas counties to meet with local officials and review available files.^j Researchers input information from the files into a spreadsheet containing 58 variables, which documented the geographic location of the human remains, the discovering party, belongings, and demographic information. Through these data collection methods, the report's researchers documented 1,696 cases of migrant deaths in South Texas from 1990 to 2020. See Appendix B for the records' sources and Appendix C for the numbers of records obtained by county.

Eventually, this dataset was pared down into a spreadsheet with 21 variables and supplemented with other data sources. These additional sources included Texas Vital Statistics data for unidentified bodies (January 1990 to March 2019), Texas Transnational Intelligence Center data (January 2017 to September 2019) for deaths linked to transnational criminal groups, Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations data (2000 to 2008 and 2004 to 2019) on Mexican citizens who died while attempting to enter the United States, and the International Organization for Migration's

^g Researchers sought autopsy records from medical examiners' offices and incident report narratives from sheriffs' offices, both of which are public record under the Texas Public Information Act. Researchers also sought justice of the peace inquest records, which are open to the public per the Texas Rules of Judicial Administration.

^h Researchers requested records from authorities in Cameron, Dimmit, Duval, Edwards, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Kinney, Kleberg, La Salle, Maverick, Starr, Uvalde, Val Verde, Webb, Willacy, Zapata, and Zavala counties. Researchers did not submit a public records request to Brooks County because the sheriff had already provided researchers with the county data.

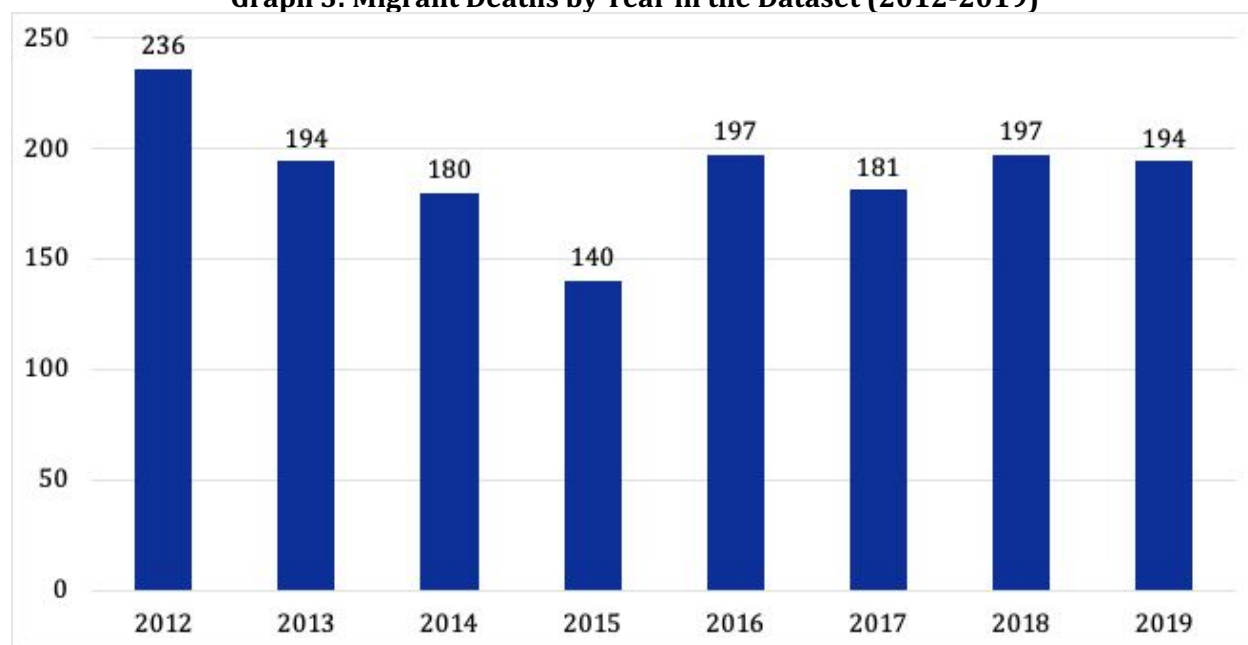
ⁱ Sheriffs' offices from Hidalgo, Kleberg, Starr, Webb, Cameron, La Salle, and Zapata counties provided records through mail or email. For more information, see Appendix C.

^j Researchers reviewed files in-person in Brooks, Duval, Edwards, Jim Hogg, Kenedy, Kinney, Maverick, Val Verde, and Uvalde counties. The onset of COVID-19 in early March 2020 meant that the researchers could not complete their site visits to officials in Cameron County, Dimmit County, Maverick County, and Webb County.

(IOM) Missing Migrants Project data (2014 to 2020).^k The researchers added this supplemental data to the county-level dataset only if it was clear that it did not duplicate any existing records.^l With these additional sources, the total dataset increased to 2,655 migrant deaths cases in South Texas from 1990 to 2020.

While the data collected spanned 30 years, the following sections of this report will only examine migrant deaths from 2012 to 2019, given sporadic data availability before this time period. For these eight years, the dataset includes 1,519 migrant deaths in South Texas. The dataset contains more than 100 cases for each year from 16 counties.^m While the quality of the data varied by source, it was possible to determine the decedent's county of death in every case, the decedent's sex in 59 percent of the cases, the individual's nationality in 40 percent of the cases, and the exact age in 23 percent of the cases.

Graph 3: Migrant Deaths by Year in the Dataset (2012-2019)



Source: Report Dataset

However, the dataset is incomplete. It is missing information from Zavala and Willacy counties and has incomplete information from Hidalgo, Starr, Val Verde, and La Salle counties. There are also additional reasons to suspect the data is incomplete, which are detailed in the following section. Yet, even this incomplete dataset comprises 93 percent of the deaths reported by the Border Patrol

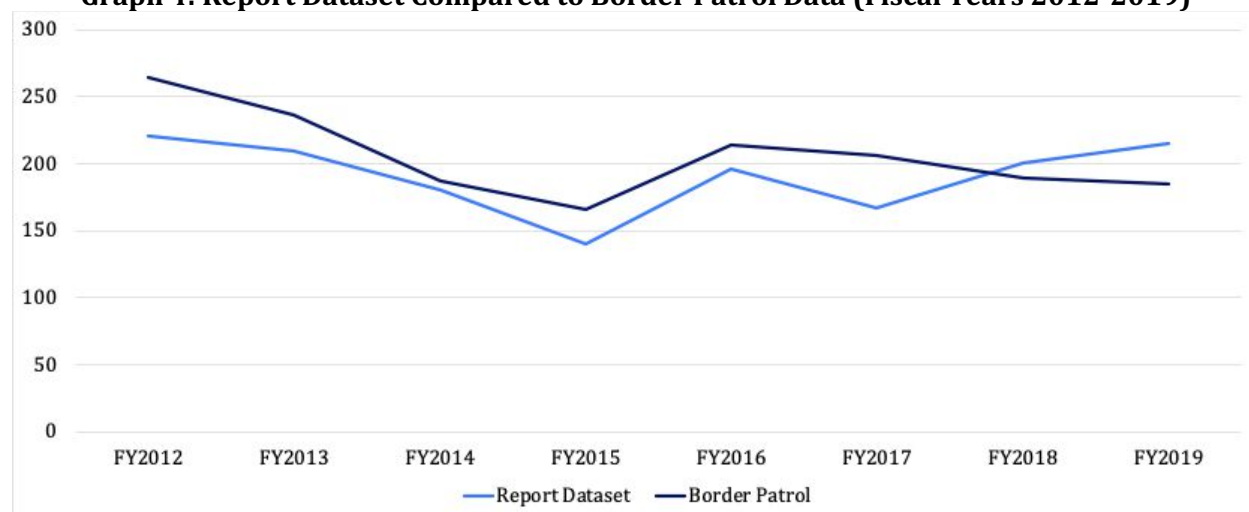
^k The Texas Vital Statistics Unit declined to provide more data for the project because death certificates do not contain information about decedent's legal status in the United States. The Border Patrol provided only aggregate migrant death counts by sector in response to a Freedom of Information Act request. In its January 2020 response, the agency stated it does not collect "much of" the demographic information requested by researchers, including nationality, because migrants may carry false identification. Border Patrol also stated that it does not record the GPS or address location of migrant deaths.

^l For records that lacked a specific date, the researchers did not include the supplemental data if the year, month, and cause of death were the same. This methodology may have resulted in an undercount.

^m Edwards and Willacy County did not report any migrant deaths for these years, nor were they recorded in any other data set. Zavala County did not respond to the records request, but no migrant deaths were recorded in the county via other sources.

in its Del Rio, Laredo, and Rio Grande Valley sectors for these years.ⁿ It also records 12 and 30 more migrant deaths than the Border Patrol for fiscal years 2018 and 2019, respectively.

Graph 4: Report Dataset Compared to Border Patrol Data (Fiscal Years 2012-2019)



Webb County data was only reported by calendar year and is included in its corresponding year.

Source: Report Dataset and Border Patrol Data

While this report focused on South Texas, the researchers also created a dataset on migrant drowning deaths when bodies washed up on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. This dataset included records requests received from Tamaulipas' Public Ministry (*Procuraduría General de Tamaulipas*); Coahuila's Public Ministry (*Fiscalía General del Estado de Coahuila*); the municipal government of Reynosa, Tamaulipas; Civil Protection (*Protección Civil*) in Matamoros, Tamaulipas; Civil Protection in Jiménez, Coahuila; and Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations. When not duplicative, the dataset was supplemented with cases from IOM's Missing Migrant Project. In total, the researchers collected 615 cases of drowning deaths in Mexico, with 378 cases from 2012 to 2019. The Border Patrol does not count these deaths in its official numbers.

ⁿ The Border Patrol reported 1,647 deaths during these years.

Data Limitations

The most fundamental challenge for this report's dataset was determining who fit into the target population: unauthorized migrants in transit through South Texas. While some deaths appeared to be a clear fit, others did not. To ensure that non-migrants were not included in the count, the researchers designed a four-pronged approach to answering this question: 1) a decedent had to be found along known migration routes; 2) the place of birth and residency was not in the United States; 3) the decedent had to lack a U.S. social security number on their death certificate; and 4) the decedent's cause of death had to be consistent with transit migration and uncommon for individuals not in transit (such as dehydration, heat stroke, or hypothermia). For unidentified remains, the researchers relied more heavily on meeting the first and fourth criteria.

In drawing these distinctions, it is possible that this report's dataset is an undercount of migrant deaths in South Texas. For example, this report did not include individuals retrieved from the Rio Grande whose bodies showed signs of foul play (e.g. gunshot wounds), given that organized criminal groups may throw their victims' bodies into the river. However, it is possible that some of these individuals may have in fact been in the target population, since criminal groups in Mexico also victimize migrants. Additionally, the report does not include individuals who died in hospitals, unless the case had a police report stating that the decedent was a migrant in transit through South Texas. This was because it was often impossible to determine if the deceased was in transit or someone in the community without legal status.

A second fundamental challenge was obtaining the death records from county authorities. Many sheriffs' offices and justices of the peace fulfilled records requests or prepared records for visits. However, others were unwilling to fill the requests. Their cited reasons generally stemmed from the amount of work that it would take to pull suspected migrant death records from the files. Some sheriffs' office record clerks also stated that their computer software systems would not allow them to search for digital records without the exact date of an incident or the name of a decedent.^o Finally, other sheriffs' offices and justices of the peace also reported that their files were inaccessible in off-site storage facilities.

However, even when the researchers were able to obtain the records, their quantity and quality varied widely. Each county provided data for a different set of years, and some counties had large gaps in their records. Some records included comprehensive information with detailed reports, autopsy records, GPS coordinates, and photos of the scene. Others included only the date and cause of death. This disparity in available data limited the researchers' ability to determine exactly where individuals were dying in South Texas, their demographic information, and trends over time. Due to these challenges, the report's data is incomplete and unstandardized across time and space. The following sections' findings should be interpreted in light of these limitations.

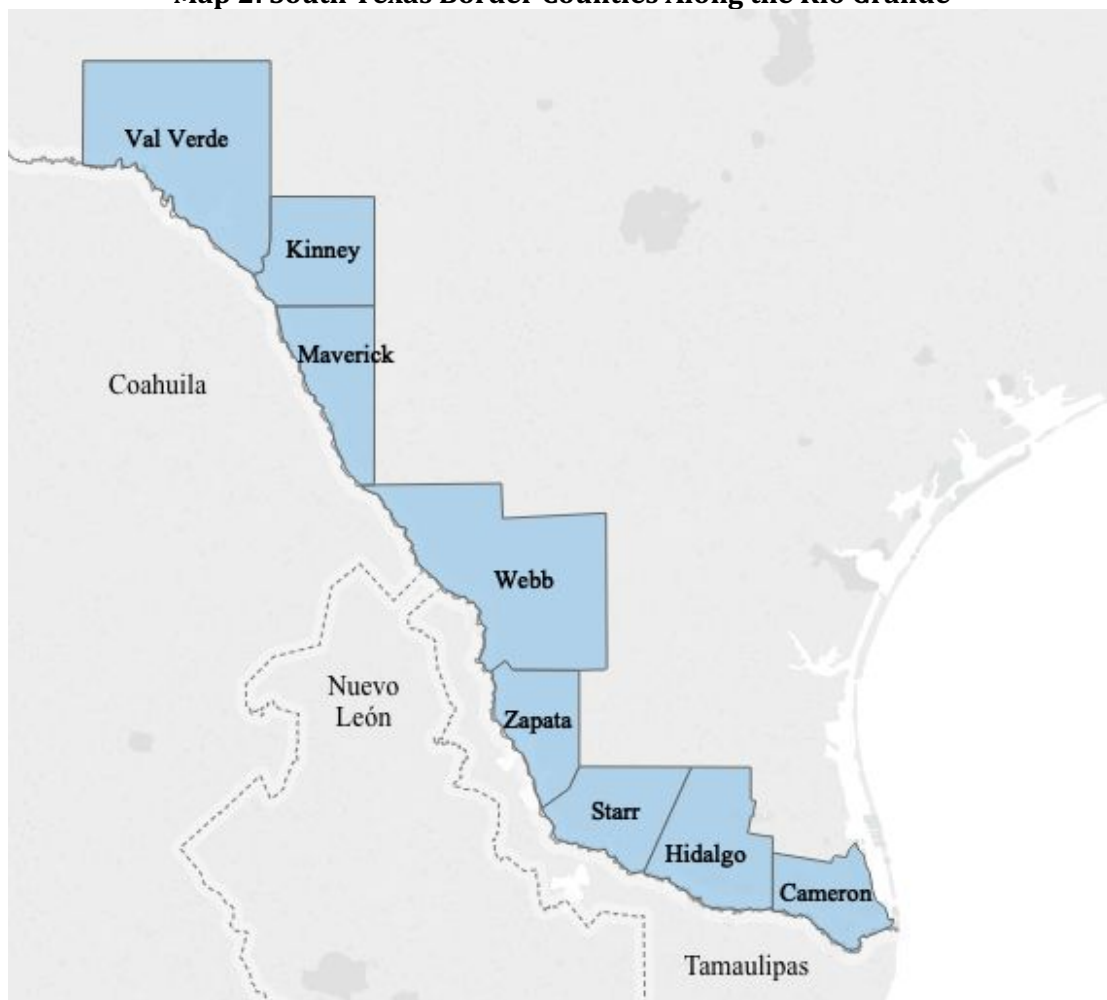
^o Some sheriffs' offices reported having lost access to earlier digital records after transitioning to new data management systems, which were often necessary additions in light of new state crime reporting requirements. Private companies digitally stored these earlier files and would charge sheriffs' offices to access these records—a cost they could not afford.

Migrant Death Causes

Migrants attempting to enter the United States face various risks at different parts of the journey. These risks include swimming across the Rio Grande, exposure to South Texas temperatures, suffocation risks inside vehicle trunks or crowded trailers, and car crashes as smugglers attempt to evade the Border Patrol or local law enforcement. Each county has a unique risk profile for migrants entering the United States, depending on the geographic terrain, distance from the border, and nearby Border Patrol checkpoints. Similarly, each unauthorized migration method also has its own risk profile, including for people walking in groups through the brush, packing into vehicles, or attempting to cross into the United States' interior without a smuggler.

Drowning (United States). To enter South Texas between ports of entry, migrants must cross the Rio Grande. The Rio Grande's headwaters begin in the Colorado Rocky Mountains, but the river flows south from there, crossing New Mexico to reach El Paso and then forming the U.S.-Mexico border to the Gulf of Mexico. In its winding path through South Texas, the Rio Grande passes eight South Texas counties—Val Verde, Kinney, Maverick, Webb, Zapata, Starr, Hidalgo, and Cameron—and borders the Mexican states of Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. At some points the river is shallow enough to easily wade or walk across. In other areas, the river rushes by, with undercurrents moving below the surface at more than 25 miles an hour. The latter scenario is frequently the case during rainy seasons or after water is released from a nearby dam.

Map 2: South Texas Border Counties Along the Rio Grande



Source: Author Elaboration

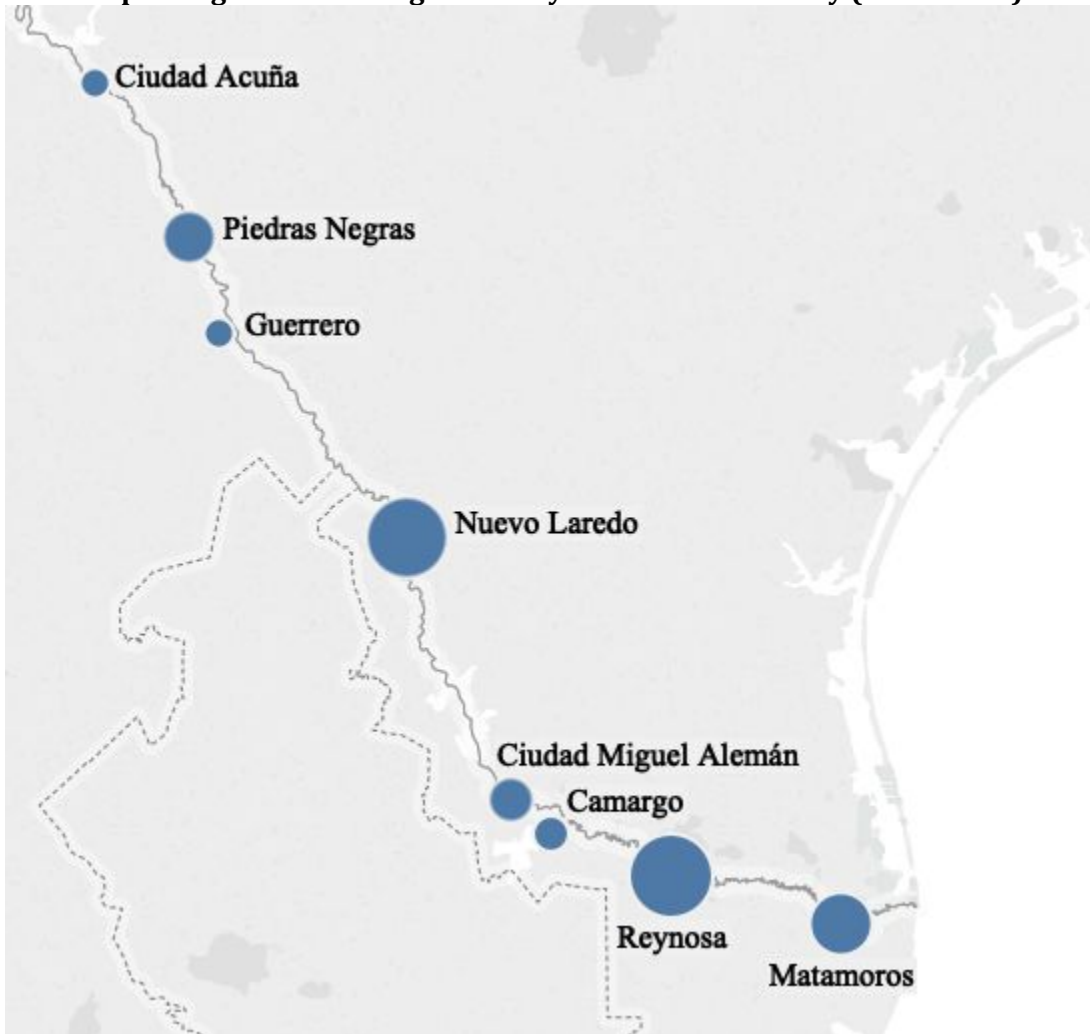
Mexican-based criminal groups smuggle drugs, people, and other contraband into the United States across the Rio Grande. These groups control swaths of the border, especially in the areas from Matamoros to Piedras Negras. In these zones, migrants must obtain permission to cross the river and pay a required fee. The smugglers generally manage this payment logistics for migrants they are guiding, but migrants traveling without guides also need to pay. To cross the river, people may wade or swim across or float over on inner tubes or rafts. After crossing the river, asylum-seeking migrants will seek out the Border Patrol to request humanitarian protection. While individuals looking to evade the Border Patrol will head to nearby safehouses before continuing their journeys.

Crossing the Rio Grande river is dangerous, and thousands of men, women, and children have died in its deceptive currents. This report's dataset lists 246 drowning cases from 2012 to 2019, which is an undercount since Webb and Starr county data did not list migrants' cause of death and Cameron county data was incomplete. Yet, from the available data, 138 individuals drowned in Hidalgo County and 72 in Maverick County. There were lower numbers of drowning deaths in Cameron County, Zapata County, Val Verde County, and Kinney County. Additionally, one Honduran man drowned while crossing a creek in Kleberg County after heavy rains raised the water level.

Drowning (Mexico). While this report focused on deaths in South Texas, several of the data sources documented Rio Grande drowning deaths where the bodies washed up on the Mexican shore.^p Using these data sources and additional records requests, the researchers documented 378 cases from 2012 to 2019, where an individual drowned in the river but drifted into Mexican territory. These deaths occurred along the length of the Texas-Mexico border, with the largest numbers of bodies recovered in Reynosa (102), Nuevo Laredo (96), Matamoros (55), and Piedras Negras (38).

^p These deaths were included in the IOM Missing Migrant data and Mexico's Ministry Foreign Relations data.

Map 3: Migrant Drowning Deaths by Mexican Border City (2012-2019)



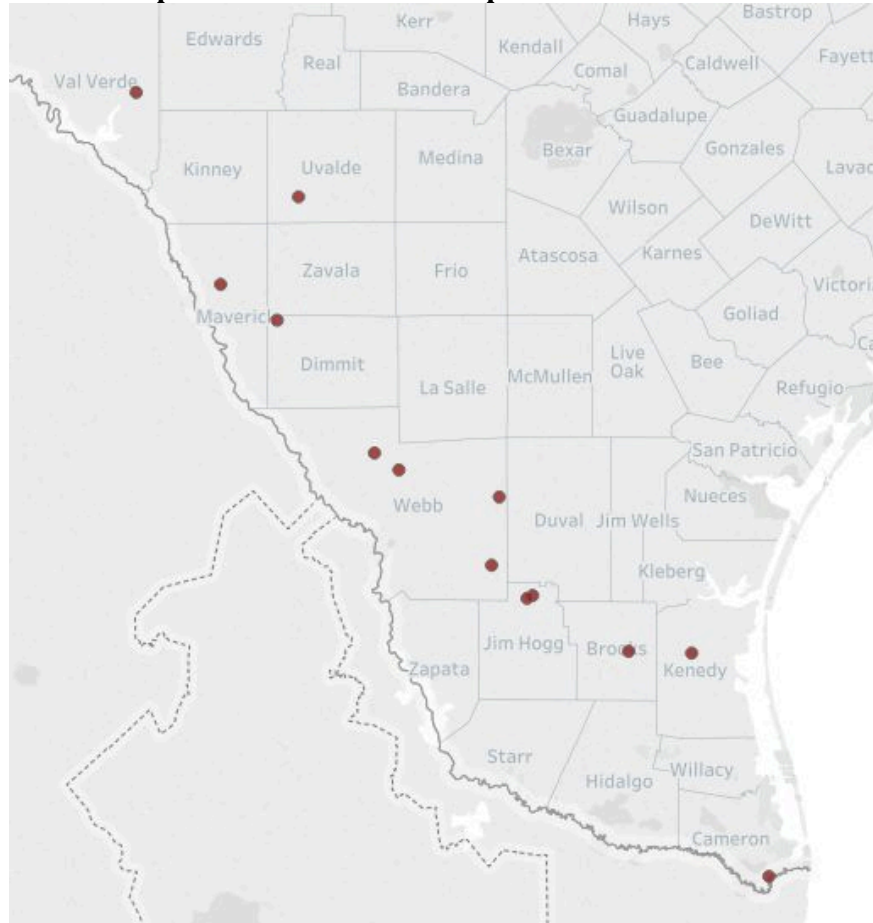
Source: Report Dataset

None of these cases are included in Border Patrol or U.S. county-level datasets. Instead, Mexican authorities process the bodies and Mexican state public ministries keep the tallies of these individuals. These drowning deaths include some of the most high-profile migrant death cases in recent years. In June 2019, for example, the photo of the Salvadoran father and daughter and their intertwined, semi-submerged bodies drew outrage and mourning around the world. Yet, since their bodies washed up on the Matamoros shore of the Rio Grande instead of across the river in Brownsville, Texas, these two individuals are not included in any U.S. dataset on migrant deaths.

Exposure to the Elements. Once migrants enter U.S. territory, they face additional risks. This is especially the case for migrants looking to continue beyond the Border Patrol's 100-mile jurisdiction, since they will then have to pass Border Patrol checkpoints. Since the 1950s, the Border Patrol has set up checkpoints on north-bound highways in Texas. Border Patrol agents stationed at these checkpoints ask passengers if they are U.S. citizens and apprehend individuals who are attempting to enter the United States' interior without the appropriate migratory documents.^q Currently there are 13 permanent Border Patrol checkpoints in South Texas in Val Verde, Uvalde, Maverick, Dimmit, Webb, Jim Hogg, Brooks, Kenedy, and Cameron counties.

^q From October 2018 through August 2019, Border Patrol agents at checkpoints in South Texas detained 5,801 people. This number may include individuals traveling through the checkpoints who are not migrants

Map 4: Border Patrol Checkpoints in South Texas



Source: Author Elaboration

Migrants must pass these checkpoints undetected to reach the U.S. interior. Some migrants attempt to pass through the checkpoints in car trunks or trailers, or circumvent the checkpoints in the surrounding ranchland. In this latter strategy, a car drops off a guide and a group of migrants at a predetermined point before the highway checkpoint. The group then hikes north through the Texas ranchland, sometimes following pipelines or electricity lines to guide their way. The migrants bring backpacks full of food and carry gallons of water. Once the group reaches a predetermined point north of the checkpoint—generally after several days—cars pull over and pick them up. The group then drives north on major highways to San Antonio or Houston.

During this journey migrants may be exposed to extreme temperatures, causing both hyperthermia and hypothermia, or they may run out of water. Some individuals set out into the Texas summer heat with only a gallon of water, which is barely enough for one day, let alone for the entire trip. This means that they must stop and fill their jugs with water that they find along the way. If they cannot obtain enough water from livestock water tanks or other sources, some migrants can become dehydrated and die. There is also the potential for exhaustion, injury, and contact with wild animals such as rattlesnakes. Migrants who become lost or separated from their group run an even higher risk of death or injury.

in transit, including undocumented immigrants living in the region or people with expired immigration documents.

Various factors may worsen a migrant's ability to survive this journey. One factor is clothing. Many individuals prefer to use dark-colored shirts, sweaters, and jeans since they believe it allows them to better avoid Border Patrol detection. However, the dark colors also absorb the South Texas sun and may contribute to overheating. Additionally, many migrants wear clothing that is ill suited for long walks in rough terrain, including stretchy, non-breathable pants, dress shoes, and flimsy boots. A second factor that can worsen a migrant's ability to survive is the terrain itself. In Brooks County—which has reported the most migrant deaths in South Texas from 2012 to 2019—the land is sandy and there may even be sand dunes in the brush. This type of terrain is more challenging for individuals who are walking for days and may quickly lead to exhaustion. By comparison, other counties have flatter, harder land that is more conducive to long treks.

Vehicle Dangers. Migrants also face a range of dangers associated with being smuggled in vehicles or ending up in their path. First, individuals who are smuggled in the U.S. interior within trailers, car trunks, or other small spaces, face the risk of suffocation or intense heat exposure, especially if there is insufficient ventilation or if they are left for long periods of time. In December 2017, a 24-year-old man from Mexico attempted to enter the United States' interior in a trailer. Before arriving at the Falfurrias Border Patrol checkpoint, he slipped into a small enclosed space under the driver's sleeping compartment. When the driver and another passenger were pulled out of the truck for questioning, the man remained in the space, ultimately suffocating to death. In this case, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office was the actor responsible for removing the man's body from the compartment. However, if an individual dies in a car trunk while being smuggled north, the driver may leave the body alongside the road.

Vehicle accidents pose an additional danger. When law enforcement or Border Patrol agents suspect that a vehicle is engaged in some form of drug or human smuggling, they will first attempt to pull the car over. If the car does not pull to the side of the road, the situation can escalate into a high-speed chase, at times through backcountry ranchland. Fleeing vehicles have crashed through fences, rolled into ditches, or flipped over, severely hurting or killing the migrants inside. In Duval County—north of the Falfurrias Border Patrol checkpoint—members of the local sheriff's office have engaged in several recent high-speed chases that ended in migrant fatalities.

Migrants may also be hit by vehicles. This is especially true for individuals who hike through ranchland to avoid Border Patrol checkpoints and cross highways or roads. These migrants may be wearing dark clothes, traveling at night, and running across highways where cars and trucks are traveling at high speeds. In April 2016, a 25-year old Guatemalan woman attempted to run across Highway 77 in Kenedy County and was struck by a truck. The driver reported that he saw the woman at the last minute and tried to slow down, but it was too late. There are also cases of migrants being hit by vehicles in Kleberg and Duval counties.

Additional Risks. Within multiple South Texas counties, migrants were also killed in train accidents. In these cases, the individuals appeared to be following the train tracks as a way of guiding themselves north or attempting to stow away between wagon cars. It is also possible that in some cases migrants were sleeping on the train tracks when the train approached, in a misguided belief that it protects them from rattlesnakes.¹⁵ Even if the train conductors had seen the individuals on the tracks, it is unlikely that they could have stopped, given the time needed to slow a speeding train.

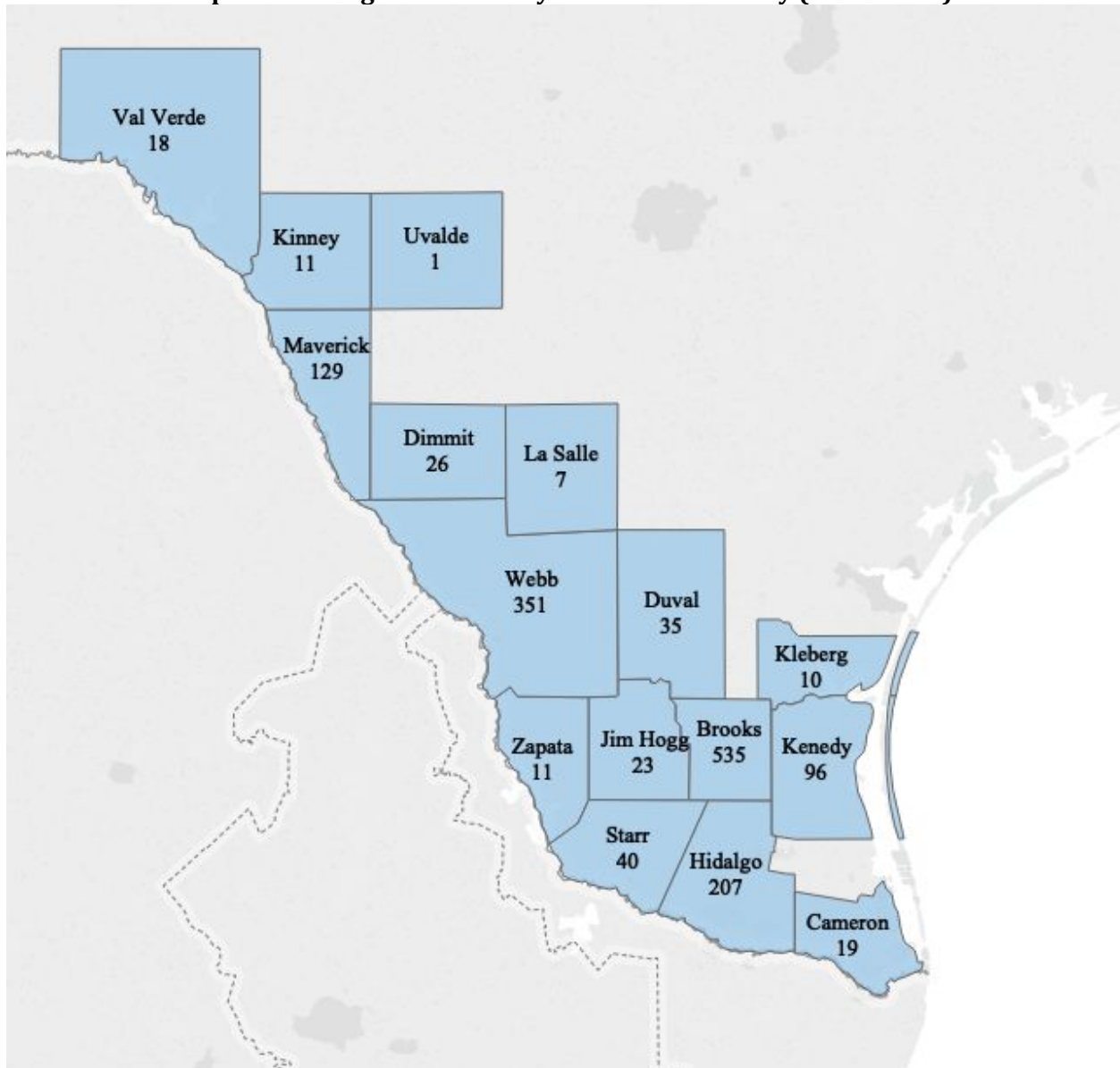
Several women also appeared to have been murdered as they transited through South Texas. For example, in December 2013, hunters found a 31-year-old woman from Guatemala in a hunting blind in Brooks County. The woman's clothing was in disarray as if she had been sexually assaulted and there was a bloody wound on the back of her head where it appeared that she had been hit with a blunt object. Anecdotes from local officials suggest that female migrants may commonly face

harassment or even assault and sexual violence during their journey through South Texas. However, the data revealed only a few instances where the women appeared to have been murdered.

Migrant Death Locations and Demographics in South Texas

From 2012 to 2019, migrants died in almost every South Texas county. During this time period, roughly half of the deaths occurred in counties directly along the U.S.-Mexico border; the other half took place in interior counties. However, there is a trend toward the border becoming the riskier area. From 2012 to 2016, there were an equal number of deaths in border and interior counties. But over the past four years, the number of deaths along the Texas-Mexico border steadily rose as a percent of total numbers. In 2019, 61 percent of migrant deaths in South Texas occurred in a border county.

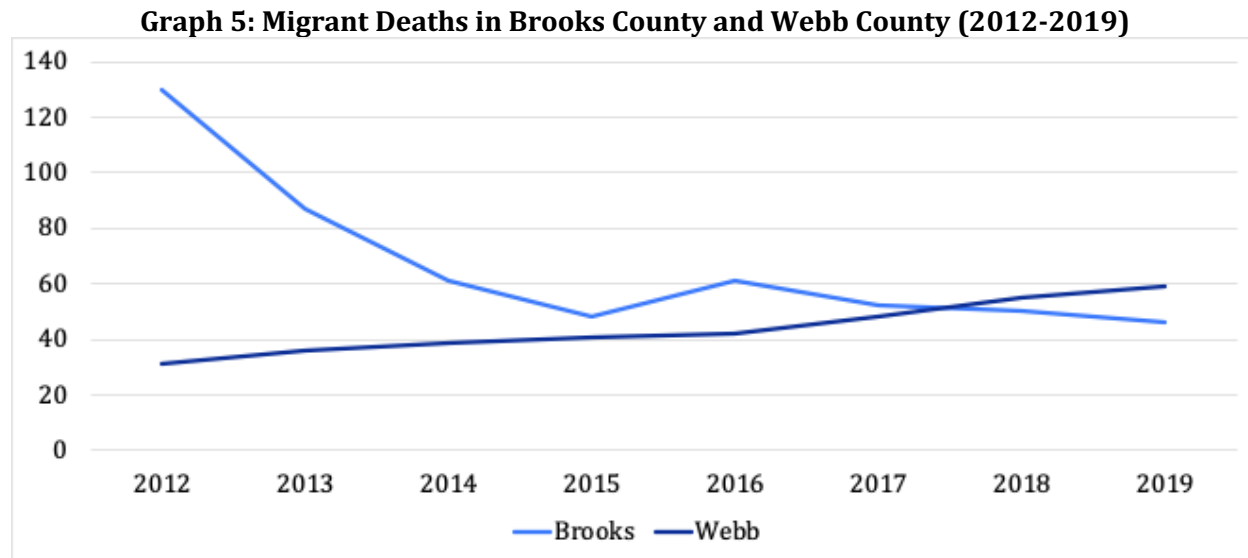
Map 5: Total Migrant Deaths by South Texas County (2012-2019)



Source: Report Dataset

During the time period covered in this report, Brooks County reported the most deaths. Brooks County has a Border Patrol checkpoint about 70 miles north from the border on Highway 281 and has become the most notorious county for migrant deaths in South Texas. In media stories over the years, Brooks has been called the “Death Valley for migrants” and “the killing fields.”¹⁶ However,

Map 5 shows overall death totals for 2012 to 2019, and Brooks County is no longer the county with the most migrant deaths in the region. In 2018, Webb County surpassed Brooks County, and is now the most dangerous place in South Texas for migrants entering the United States.

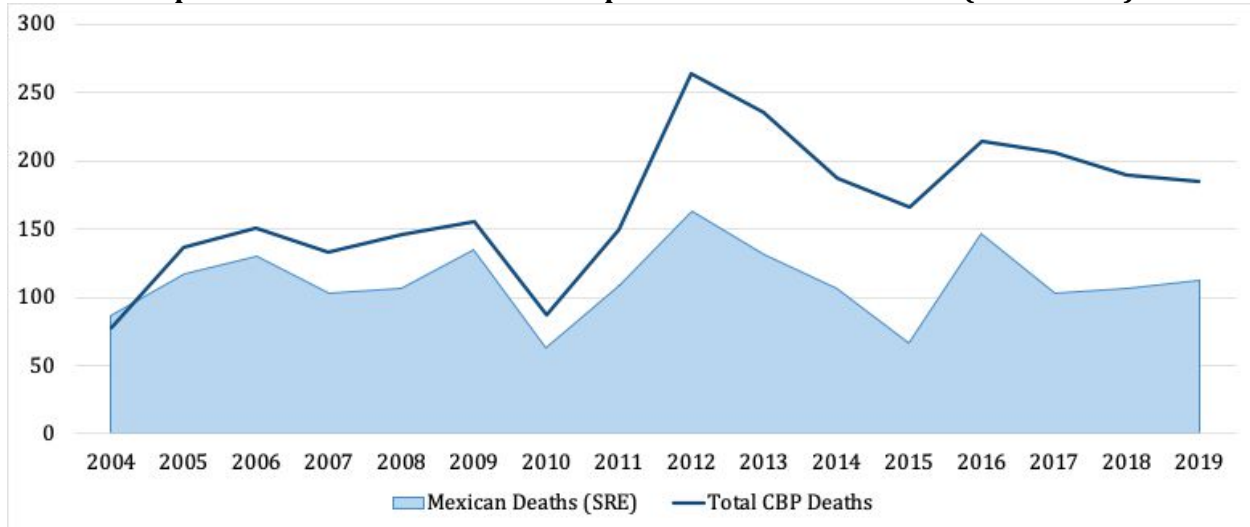


Source: Report Dataset

In Webb County, the rising number of migrant deaths appears to correspond to shifting migration routes for single adults. In other South Texas border counties, such as neighboring Maverick County there were an increasing number of migrant deaths as families attempted to cross the Rio Grande to seek asylum. However, the Border Patrol's Laredo Sector—which includes Webb County—has continuously recorded low numbers of family apprehensions. This means that it is more likely that single adults died in Webb County while attempting to evade the Border Patrol.

Nationality. In the 1990s and mid 2000s, Mexican citizens made up the vast majority of border crossers and subsequently the majority of migrant deaths. These Mexican citizens were part of a century-old migration pattern, whereby Mexican nationals would enter the United States for seasonal agricultural and ranching work and then travel back to their homes in Mexico. From 2004 to 2012, the Mexican government's data on its citizens' deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border mirrors the U.S. Border Patrol's overall migrant death data.

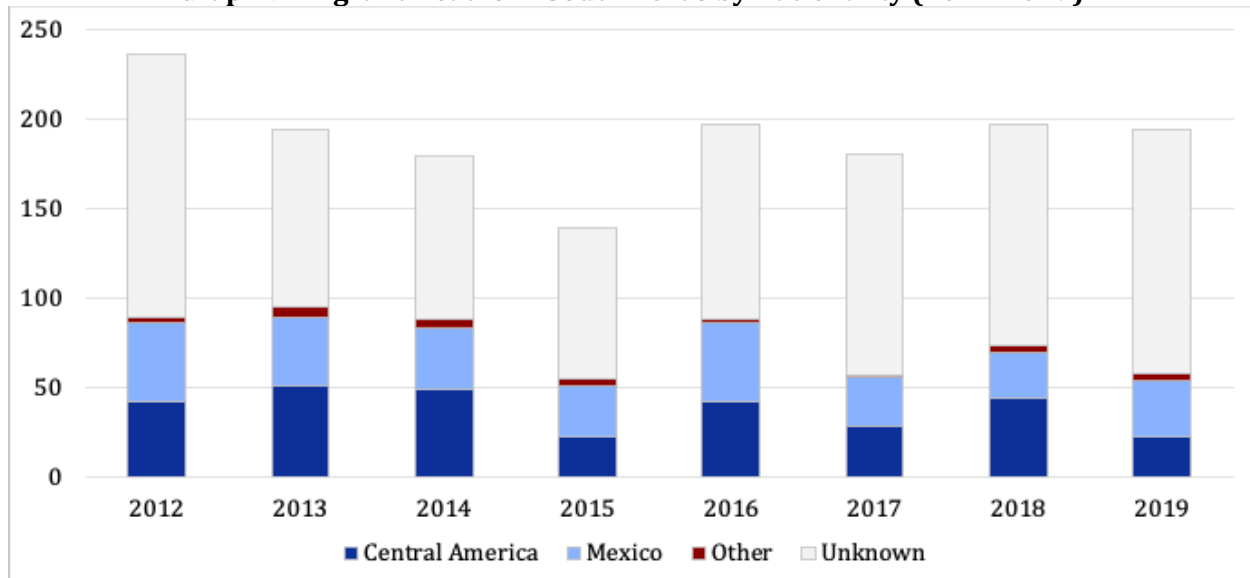
Graph 6: SRE's Mexican Deaths Compared to Total CBP Deaths (2004-2019)



Source: Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Relations and U.S. Customs and Border Protection

From the late 2000s onward, however, an increasing number of Central Americans and individuals from other countries began crossing the Rio Grande and traversing South Texas' back trails. In 2012, the number of non-Mexican apprehensions began to rise, and this number was also reflected in migrant death data. From 2012 to 2019, non-Mexicans generally made up more than half of migrant deaths in South Texas. In total, 306 Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans died in the region during this time period, compared to 273 Mexicans.^r The dataset also reported deaths of people from Ecuador, Nicaragua, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Belize, Costa Rica, and Peru.

Graph 7: Migrant Deaths in South Texas by Nationality (2012-2019)



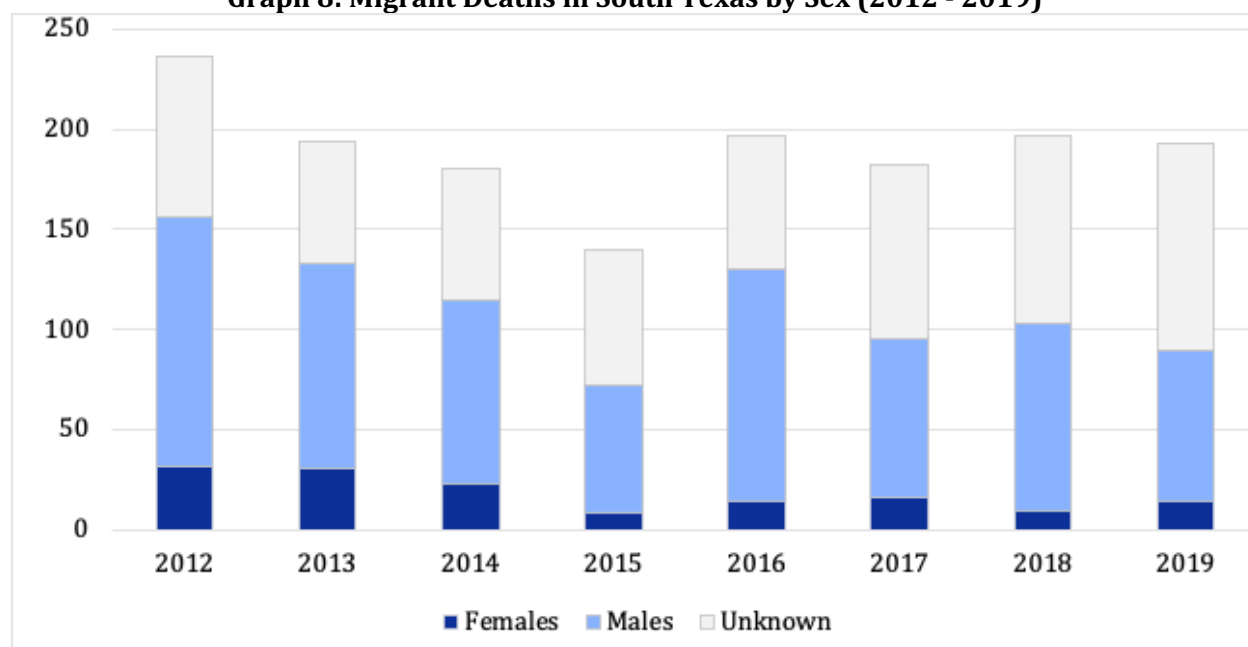
Source: Report Dataset

^r This information on deceased migrants' nationalities comes primarily from two sources. The first source are the identification cards that individuals had in their possession when they passed away. The second source are death certificates added to files after an individual was identified through DNA testing or other means. This report tried not to use identification cards as the sole identifier, since some individuals may use false Mexican identification cards in order to move safely through Mexico.

The deceased migrants came from various cities and towns within their countries. The Mexicans who died while attempting to enter the United States came from 24 different states. The most individuals hailed from Michoacán (16 cases), followed by Mexico State (12 cases), and then the border states of Tamaulipas and Coahuila (8 cases each). In Guatemala and Honduras, the migrants also came from a wide range of departments around the country. Only in El Salvador did the largest numbers of people come from just a few big cities: San Salvador (16 cases) and San Miguel (8 cases).

Sex. While the stereotypes of migrants crossing the Rio Grande or hiking through Texas ranchland generally focus on men, women also make up a significant portion of border crossers and border crossing deaths. Within the dataset, more than half of migrant deaths cases (59 percent) identified the individual's sex.^s From 2012 to 2014, the percent of women among the dead hit its peak, consistently making up around 20 percent of the total. However, after 2014, these numbers decreased to between 9 and 17 percent. In 2019, females made up 16 percent of migrant deaths along the border.

Graph 8: Migrant Deaths in South Texas by Sex (2012 - 2019)



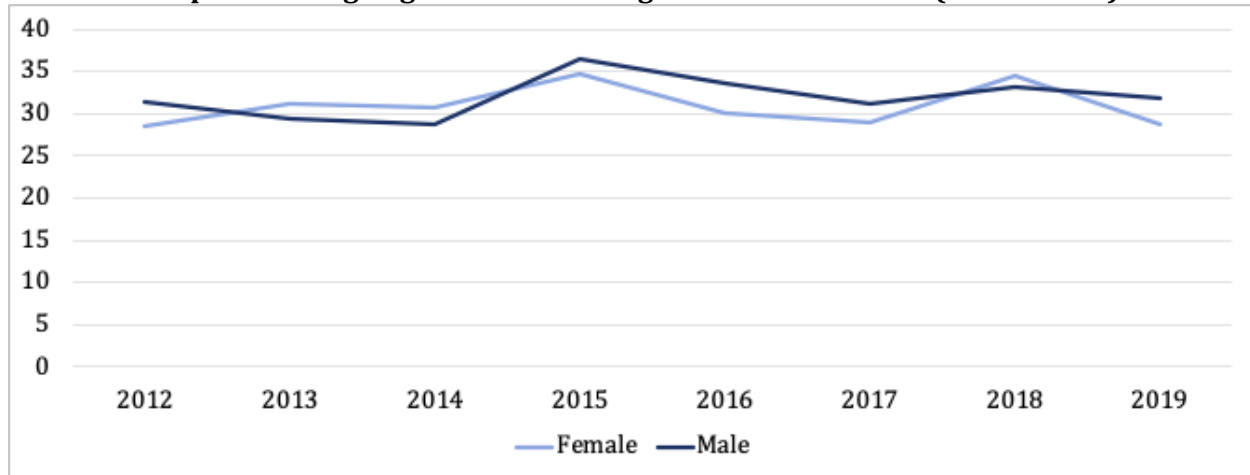
Source: Report Dataset

Migrant nationality trends varied by sex. From 2012 to 2019, 45 percent of identified men were Mexican, 19 percent were Salvadoran, 18.5 percent were Guatemalan, and 12 percent were Honduran. Among women, these trends differed slightly. Mexican women also made up the highest amount of female migrant deaths with 37 percent of the total. Yet, Salvadoran women accounted for 30 percent of identified individuals. Guatemalan women made up 17 percent of the deaths and Honduran women made up 10 percent.

Age. From 2012 to 2019, the average age of deceased individuals in South Texas consistently hovered around 30 years old. There was little difference in the average ages of deceased men and women, or among nationalities.

^s Sometimes the individual's sex was not able to be ascertained, especially when the only recovered remains were unidentifiable bones.

Graph 9: Average Age of Deceased Migrants in South Texas (2012 - 2019)



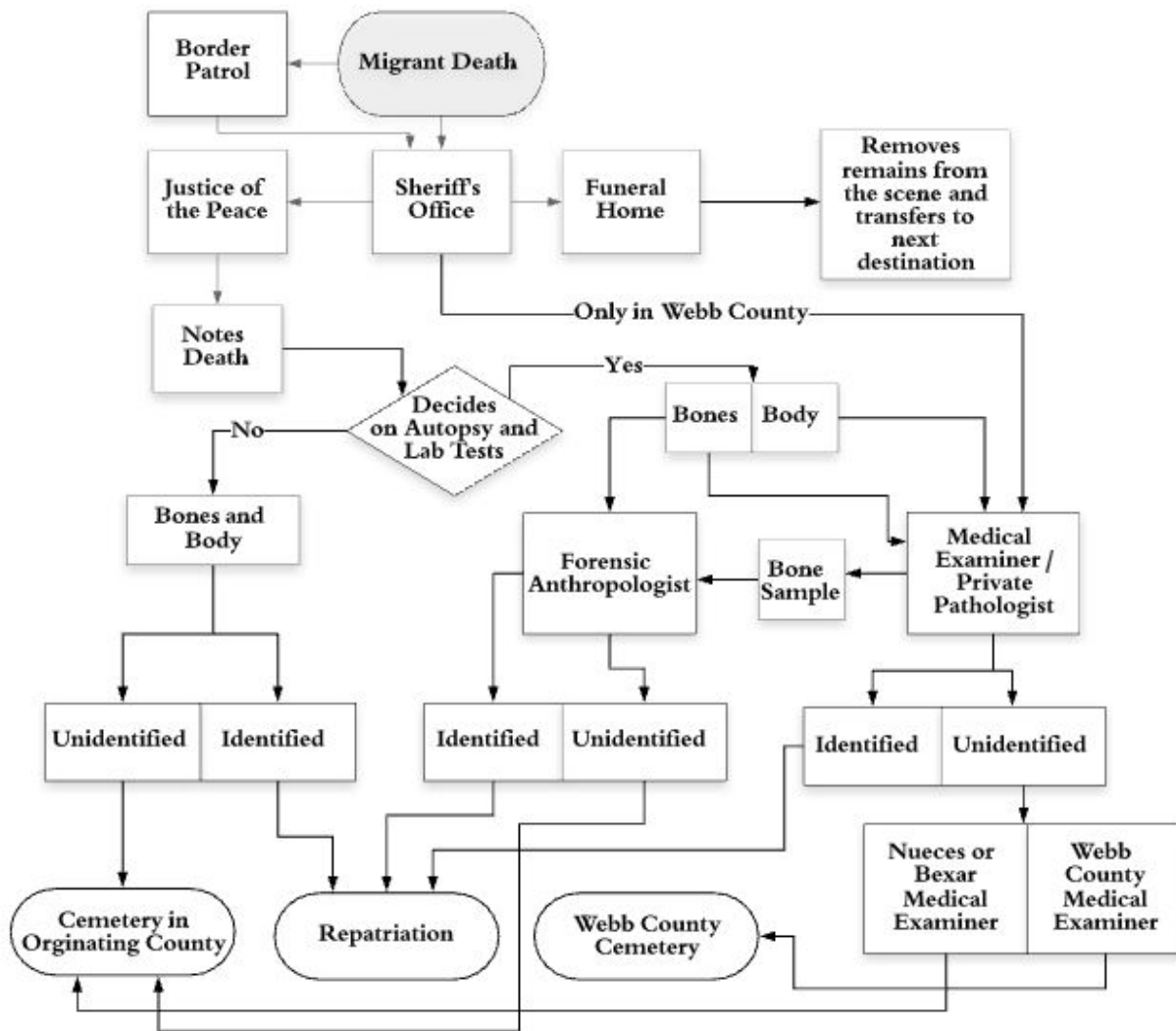
Source: Report Dataset

However, there was a wide range in ages, particularly for individuals who drowned while attempting to cross the Rio Grande. From 2012 to 2019, the dataset included 17 cases of minors who drowned. This included a ten-month-old baby who was separated from his family near Piedras Negras as they crossed the Rio Grande. Additionally, in September 2019, a Honduran mother and her 21-month-old son drowned while attempting to cross the Rio Grande in Val Verde County. The family had sought asylum in the United States and been returned to Mexico as part of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). After a report of a possible drowning, the Border Patrol found the mother and son's bodies floating in the river.

Migrant Death Processing

In South Texas, a range of actors process migrant deaths, including federal, state, county, and non-governmental entities. Their responsibilities are outlined in federal and Texas state law, with statute guiding the actions that each actor is supposed to take. However, within the 19 counties that this report covered, these practices were not always standardized. The following section will outline various entities' legal responsibilities in migrant death processing, including what this role is supposed to look like and where counties may diverge in their practices.

Graphic 1: Migrant Death Processing in South Texas



Source: Author Elaboration

Border Patrol. The U.S. Border Patrol is the federal agency tasked with apprehending migrants within the border region and is frequently the responding agency for migrants in distress. These agents often discover deceased migrants as they track individuals and groups through ranchland or fly over remote areas in helicopters. In counties with high levels of migration and interaction with Border Patrol agents, locals may directly call the Border Patrol when they discover human remains. Between 2012 and 2019, the Border Patrol located one third of the 417 cases in the dataset that recorded the discovering party. However, while the Border Patrol is the federal agency charged

with addressing unauthorized migration in the border regions, Texas' counties are responsible for processing migrant deaths.

When Border Patrol agents locate human remains, they contact the corresponding sheriff's office. While this step is mandatory, the relationship between the Border Patrol and sheriffs' offices may vary by county, depending on the county's location, the frequency of migrant deaths, the sheriff's office's personnel numbers, and personal relationships. For example, in Brooks County, the sheriff's office routes 9-11 calls from migrants in distress to the Border Patrol, given that the agency has more resources and personnel to respond. However, there is no standard procedure for cooperation and some sheriffs' offices in counties with low numbers of migrant deaths rarely collaborate with the Border Patrol.

Border Patrol agents record migrant deaths in the Border Safety Initiative Tracking System, which includes information on migrant death location and the deceased's demographics.¹⁷ This database is used to analyze trends in migrant deaths and to allocate budgeting for the coming year. If agents can determine a decedent's nationality, the Border Patrol may also contact the relevant consular office. However, the Border Patrol does not appear to be collecting detailed information on location or demographics. According to a January 30, 2020 Freedom of Information Act response regarding deceased migrants' nationality, sex, and age, the chief of the FOIA Appeals, Policy, and Litigation branch wrote: "the USBP [U.S. Border Patrol] reported that it simply does not collect much of the data that you requested." Additionally, it noted that "the agency does not collect GPS data or other address information about the deceased migrants it encounters."

Sheriff's Office. In South Texas, sheriffs' offices play a central role in processing and documenting migrant deaths. Outside of municipalities—incorporated settlements that include cities, towns, and villages—law enforcement authority falls to county sheriffs. For the sprawling counties that characterize South Texas, this makes for a large jurisdiction. Sheriffs' offices must respond to reports of the discovery of human remains within their territory.

When sheriffs' offices are alerted to the discovery of migrant remains, whether by the Border Patrol or local residents, they typically send one to four deputies to photograph and document the remains, just as they would a crime scene. The sheriff's office is responsible for notifying other county officials to travel to the scene of the death. These include a justice of the peace to aid in the death investigation and a funeral home to remove the remains from the scene. In Webb County, the sheriff's office contacts the Webb County's Medical Examiner's Office to remove the remains.

At the scene of the death, a sheriff's office investigator or deputy gathers and documents evidence. This process may include interviewing the individual that discovered the body, taking photos of the remains, and searching the surrounding area. Some sheriffs' offices may request the assistance of Texas Game Wardens, Texas Rangers, or local fire departments to help retrieve drowned bodies with search and rescue boats. Once back in the station, the sheriff's office personnel complete an incident report, which generally contains standard information such as names, date, and location, as well as a narrative of the relevant facts. More detailed incident reports include GPS coordinates of the body's location and transcripts of dispatch calls.

Only three of the 15 sheriffs' offices interviewed for this report—Brooks County, Kenedy County, and Hidalgo County—proactively group files relating to deceased migrants and separate them from other records. Brooks County organizes the files in binders by year, while Kenedy County keeps them in filing cabinets in chronological order. Hidalgo County's response to a public record request also indicates that it tracks migrant deaths electronically. In contrast, sheriffs' office staff in other counties may occasionally note a decedent's suspected or confirmed migration status in an incident report but lack a standardized method for tracking these cases.

County Justice of the Peace. Justices of the peace are elected judges that hold various duties within a county, such as presiding over small claims courts, conducting marriage ceremonies, and carrying out inquests.¹⁸ They are not required to have a medical background or medical knowledge, and may have another full-time job while serving in the position. The justice of the peace's inquest is an investigation into the cause and circumstances of a death in order to determine if an unlawful act was committed.¹⁹ In the case of migrant deaths, Texas statute mandates an inquest.[†]

When called to the scene of a death, the justice of the peace plays several roles. First, he or she records the time of death to be listed on the death certificate. This is sometimes interpreted as “pronouncing the person dead,” but justices of the peace do not perform this role. Instead, they note the time of death.²⁰ Second, justices of the peace must decide whether to order a full or partial autopsy from a forensic pathologist to determine the nature of the death.²¹

However, if the justice of the peace believes that the cause and manner of death are evident beyond a reasonable doubt—as may be the case with migrant drownings—he or she has the discretion to forego an autopsy and send the body directly to a funeral home. The county commissioners court pays for the autopsy, which can range from roughly \$1,200 to \$3,000, depending on the complexity of the case and the state of a body's decomposition.²² For counties in South Texas, financial considerations may serve as deterrence to ordering an autopsy.²³

If the deceased individual is unidentified, the justice of the peace may take additional steps. If there is no means of making a positive identification, or if officials doubt the authenticity of an identification they find at the scene, the justice of the peace has the discretion to order laboratory tests from a forensic pathologist to help determine the deceased person's identity.²⁴ For cases in which the body has fully decomposed and only skeletal remains are available, the justice of the peace may seek the help of a forensic anthropologist.²⁵

Texas law requires that justices of the peace keep detailed records of the inquests they conduct.²⁶ According to the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure, the inquest record “must include a report of the events, proceedings, findings, and conclusions of the inquest. The record must also include any autopsy prepared in the case and all other papers of the case. All papers of the inquest record must be marked with the case number and be clearly indexed and be maintained in the office of the justice of the peace and be made available to the appropriate officials upon request.”²⁷ The public has the right to inspect these records.²⁸

Funeral Homes. Funeral homes provide support to county officials in processing migrant remains. Funeral homes are privately operated, for-profit companies that compete for the counties' business, either through an open bid process that awards a contract to the cheapest provider or by means of alternating among various funeral homes. While more populous counties use the bid or rotation systems, smaller counties in South Texas may rely on one funeral home to service the entire county

[†] According to the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure § 49.04, there are 8 instances in which justices of the peace are required to carry out inquests, 4 of which apply to the circumstances in which migrants are commonly discovered:

- (2) the person dies an unnatural death from a cause other than legal execution;
- (3) the body or a body part of a person is found, and the cause or circumstances of death are unknown, including instances in which the person is unidentified;
- (4) the circumstances of the death indicate that the death may have been caused by unlawful means;
- (6) the person dies without having been attended by a physician.

or even multiple counties. The funeral home's initial role is to remove the body from the scene and transport it to its next destination.^u

The migrant remains' next destination depends on whether a justice of the peace decides to order an autopsy or additional tests. If this is the case, funeral home staff transport the remains to a medical examiner's office or a forensic anthropologist. However, if the decedent is identified and the cause and manner of death have been established, justices of the peace may send the remains directly to the funeral home. In these cases, funeral home staff work with consular authorities—and in some cases the deceased's family directly—to facilitate repatriation of the body, skeletal remains, or cremation ashes, depending on the family's wishes.

If the decedent is unidentified, but the justice of the peace opts not to order an autopsy or laboratory tests, the remains also go to the funeral home. Texas law requires that the staff then store the body in refrigeration for at least ten days before burying it.²⁹ Funeral homes do not have the legal authority to identify bodies.^v Instead, some funeral homes post death notices in local papers to notify the public of the person's passing and to help locate the person's family.³⁰

If nobody claims the body during the ten day period, the funeral home arranges for an indigent burial, which is charged to the county commissioner.³¹ In counties that do not have indigent cemeteries, funeral homes may negotiate with privately owned cemeteries for burial lots. Some funeral homes report that the total cost of the burial may exceed what the county pays them.^{w 32}

There are conflicting statutes regarding cremation of unidentified remains. The Texas Code of Criminal Procedure explicitly states that it is illegal to cremate unidentified bodies. The code states that "If the body of a deceased person is unidentified, a person may not cremate or direct the cremation of the body under this article."³³ However, in the absence of next of kin or legal executors, the Texas Health & Safety Code grants justices of the peace the right to control disposition of the body, including the right to cremate.³⁴ The Texas Health & Human Safety code also permits crematoriums to accept unidentified remains if commissioners courts or other county officials—namely justices of the peace—authorize the cremation.³⁵

After an autopsy or laboratory tests, the funeral home may also transport the remains back to its facility to prepare for repatriation or burial. However, this is not the case with the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office, where remains do not return to the county of discovery. Instead, the medical examiner sends identified remains that will be repatriated to the South Texas Mortuary & Cremation Services funeral home in Webb County. Remains that are not identified are buried in a cemetery in Webb County.

Medical Examiners. Medical examiners are physicians that have training in forensic pathology and toxicology, and work to determine causes of death by carrying out post-mortem examinations on corpses. Texas statute requires that counties with more than 2 million residents appoint a medical examiner, while other counties may do so voluntarily based on need and resources.³⁶ Of the 254 counties in Texas, only 12 employ medical examiners.^{x 37} In those 12 counties, justices of the peace relinquish their inquest duties to the medical examiners.³⁸

^u In Webb County, the Office of the Medical Examiner removes the body from the scene.

^v Under Texas law, only medical examiners, justices of the peace, or other medical legal authorities such as death investigators may identify a body.

^w Texas law requires both the funeral home and the justice of the peace to keep a record of the burial.

^x Counties with medical examiners include Bexar, Collin, Dallas, Ector, El Paso, Galveston, Harris, Lubbock, Nueces, Tarrant, Travis, and Webb.

Of the 19 counties included in this report, only Webb County has established its own medical examiner's office, which, in addition to Webb County, also serves ten of the surrounding counties.^y This makes the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office an important entity for processing migrant deaths in South Texas. Other counties in the region use private pathologists or send their bodies to a medical examiner in another county, such as Nueces or Bexar. In some cases, this requires the funeral home to transport the body up to 390 miles round-trip.

Table 1: Medical Examiner by County for Identified or Unidentified Suspected Migrants

County	Entity Performing Autopsy and Laboratory Tests on Bodies	Distance from County to Medical Examiner
Brooks	Webb County Medical Examiner	90 miles
Cameron	Valley Baptist Medical Center	26 miles
Dimmit	Webb County Medical Examiner	84 miles
Duval	Webb County Medical Examiner	55 miles
Edwards	Central Texas Autopsy	195 miles
Hidalgo	Valley Forensics	10 miles
Jim Hogg	Webb County Medical Examiner	55 miles
Kenedy	Nueces County Medical Examiner	60 miles
Kinney	Bexar County Medical Examiner	125 miles
Kleberg	Nueces Medical Examiner	42 miles
La Salle	Webb County Medical Examiner	70 miles
Maverick	Webb County Medical Examiner	127 miles
	Bexar County Medical Examiner	148 miles
Starr	Webb County Medical Examiner	92 miles
Uvalde	Bexar County Medical Examiner	82 miles
Val Verde	Webb County Medical Examiner	182 miles
Webb	Webb County Medical Examiner	--
Willacy	Valley Forensics	39 miles
Zapata	Webb County Medical Examiner	52 miles
Zavala	Webb County Medical Examiner	95 miles
	Bexar County Medical Examiner	120 miles

Source: Interviews with county officials

^y The Webb County Medical Examiner's Office serves Brooks, Dimmit, Duval, Frio, Jim Hogg, La Salle, Maverick, Starr, Webb, Zapata, and Zavala counties.

Through autopsies and laboratory tests, medical examiners can help increase the chances of positively identifying deceased migrants. The medical examiner's process includes taking fingerprints, recording dental records, noting unique tattoos, and taking x-rays in search of identifying fractures. This data is checked against CBP's biometrics database.³⁹ If migrants have previously entered the United States and been in contact with U.S. officials, their biometric information will create a match.

Some medical examiners and pathologists also upload information to the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System (NamUs), which is housed at the University of North Texas' Center for Human Identification (UNTCHI) and funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) at the U.S. Department of Justice. NamUs operates as a centralized clearinghouse that families and other organizations can access to help locate their loved ones. Databases in NamUs include information regarding the remains' geographic location, photographs of personal belongings found at the scene, demographic information, and other details that may aid in identifying the decedent.⁴⁰ When there is a new entry, NamUs automatically cross-checks it with the existing entries to see if there is a potential match. However, not all medical examiners and justices of the peace use NamUs, and there is no law requiring them to do so.

If the individual is not identified through laboratory tests, the medical examiner may elect to take a DNA sample from the body. For some medical examiners, taking DNA from an unidentified body is standard operating procedure. For example, the Webb County Medical Examiner takes DNA samples from almost every decedent that passes through the office, except those who have already been identified through other means such as fingerprints.⁴¹ As an added precaution, the Webb County Medical Examiner also takes DNA from remains that were discovered with identification. By comparison, other medical examiners may not always have such rigorous practices. Instead, they may view their primary responsibility as determining the cause and manner of death and not performing identity investigations.

Forensic Anthropologists. Forensic anthropologists generally carry out any DNA analysis or other in-depth laboratory tests. If the remains have fully skeletonized, the justice of the peace may choose to send them directly to a forensic anthropologist. For counties in South Texas, there are three forensic anthropology actors that assist with processing of migrant remains: the UNTCHI, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (*Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense*, EAAF), and the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University (FACTS).

In addition to housing NamUs, the UNTCHI provides free forensic anthropology services and is one of the few U.S. laboratories that is accredited to upload DNA samples to the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS).⁴² CODIS is a series of databases funded and managed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which contains DNA from missing and unidentified people and criminal investigations. Other forensic labs within the state—such as FACTS—send their DNA samples to the UNTCHI to upload into CODIS. The processing times for DNA analysis and profile matches are typically six to eight months.

CODIS has strict rules for its DNA samples. To include a relative's DNA reference sample, the family member must sign a consent form and provide the sample in the presence of a law enforcement officer or approved criminal justice agency representative, such as a medical examiner or consular officer. CODIS policy states that DNA in its missing and unidentified persons database is never compared against its criminal database and that people can ask for their profiles to be removed from the database after the system makes a match.⁴³ However, some families are still uncomfortable with CODIS' rules. To mitigate this anxiety and increase participation, the UNTCHI has collaborated with county and city officials to host events that allow family members to provide reference samples in more trusted environments.

The EAAF also manages a database on unidentified and missing migrants. The organization works to collect DNA family reference samples in migrant sending communities in Honduras, El Salvador, the Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, and, since 2009, along the U.S.-Mexico border.⁴⁴ The EAAF uses Bode Cellmark Forensics, a private lab in Virginia, to process and analyze its samples. Unlike the UNTCHI which receives federal funding and provides its services free of charge, Bode Cellmark Forensics charges for its testing, making it cost-prohibitive for some families.^z

Although the EAAF possesses DNA reference samples from the families of missing migrants and CODIS houses DNA profiles on unidentified human remains, U.S. policy restrictions have not allowed for cross-referencing between the two databases, despite years of negotiations.⁴⁵ Forensic experts have suggested that cross-referencing between the EAAF's database and CODIS could result in hundreds, if not thousands, of positive identifications.⁴⁶ Some organizations, such as FACTS at Texas State University and the Pima County Medical Examiner in Tucson, Arizona, have utilized both databases to increase the probability of making a positive identification.

To address the divide between the EAAF's database and CODIS, the UNTCHI recently created the Humanitarian DNA Identification Database, which uses CODIS software. The database includes all of the UNTCHI's previous CODIS entries, which account for over half of CODIS' total entries. Instead of splitting the samples, the UNTCHI is able to duplicate the DNA profile, which allows it to streamline costs. To encourage participation in the Humanitarian DNA Identification Database, the UNTCHI has loosened some of the restrictions pertaining to law enforcement's presence for family members providing DNA reference samples. The database is still in its early stages and, if it proves successful, the UNTCHI hopes to include CODIS entries from partners in California and Arizona.

FACTS at Texas State University provides forensic anthropology services to three counties in Texas: Brewster, Brooks, and Jeff Davis. It relies on the UNTCHI for DNA analysis unless it has an identification hypothesis, in which case it sends the DNA sample to Bode Cellmark Forensics for entry into the EAAF's database. FACTS also carries out exhumations of unmarked graves along the border to assist in identifying migrant remains.

Foreign Consulates. Consular offices assist in identifying and repatriating deceased migrants and often facilitate information exchanges among family members, medical examiners, law enforcement officers, and funeral homes. Families of missing migrants may feel more comfortable working with their government's officials rather than communicating directly with U.S. authorities. This means that in search and rescue situations, consular staff may channel useful information from family members to the Border Patrol, such as a migrant's location. While consular staff may also help obtain a DNA reference sample from a family member to make an identification.

Consular authorities may also assist in repatriating their citizens' remains once a decedent is identified. Some countries offer financial assistance to help offset the costs of death certificate processing, embalming or cremation, and repatriation, either by land or by air. Families generally pay for any remaining repatriation costs, which can differ by funeral home and destination country.

Currently, Mexico's government, through its network of consulates, offers up to US\$1,550 per deceased Mexican national to cover repatriation costs. This assistance is also offered for Mexican

^z In May 2020, the UNTCHI reported that it costs \$885 to process a family DNA reference sample and \$1,492 for an unidentified human remains DNA sample. This estimate includes autosomal STR, Y-STR, and mitochondrial DNA on each sample, and labor. Funding from the National Institute of Justice covers these expenses.

migrants who die while attempting to enter the United States.^{aa} At the same time, the cost of a cremation and repatriation is \$1,095 at the South Texas Mortuary in Webb County, while embalming and repatriation can run much higher depending on the final destination.^{bb} This mismatch between available support and the funeral home prices means that Mexican financial support only covers the full cost of a cremation and not an embalming. If Mexican families prefer to repatriate the embalmed remains for burial, they will have to cover the remaining balance. Some families may choose to pay this additional money, since they oppose cremation on religious grounds or wish to view the remains.

^{aa} In 2016, Mexico's consular services were able to provide \$3,500 per person. In 2017, this amount changed to \$1,850 and in 2018 it dropped to \$1,550.

^{bb} In Mexico, there is no repatriation cost for cremation, since the ashes can be returned to Mexico for free in a diplomatic pouch.

Costs of Migrant Deaths

Border crossing deaths also create costs for South Texas counties, which are some of the most impoverished in the United States. These costs may be direct, through autopsies or burials, or less direct, through lost staff time and diverted resources. Yet they add up and can make it difficult for under-resourced agencies to follow best practices when responding to migrant deaths. Overwhelmed departments may keep poor records, avoid ordering autopsies, and otherwise cut corners to stay within county budgets.

Brooks County is the clearest example of these costs' effects. From 2009 to 2013, more than 350 people died in the county, creating a bill of more than \$628,000. To save costs, Brooks county officials often chose not to order autopsies or DNA testing for deceased migrants, and the local cemetery buried the bodies in unmarked graves without recording the burial locations.⁴⁷ These migrants often had little chance of being identified and repatriated to their countries. In 2013, however, these chances increased slightly, when forensic anthropologists began exhuming the remains in the county cemetery.⁴⁸ Since receiving state funding assistance in 2013, Brooks County now routinely orders autopsies and keeps some of the most detailed migrant death records in the region.

Overall, when traced from discovery to burial, the death of a single migrant costs a county a minimum of \$1,100. This total assumes that county officials do not request an autopsy, pay nothing for a burial plot, and use no specialized equipment to retrieve a drowned individual. However, when factoring in these and other costs, a single migrant death could cost a county upwards of \$13,100. Table 2 outlines the costs for each state and local entity involved in processing migrant deaths.

International, federal, and state authorities, along with universities and civil society organizations, also face costs associated with processing and identifying migrant remains.⁴⁹ The Mexican consulate offers both financial and logistical assistance to families with missing relatives and state-funded universities may exhume decedents at no charge to their families.^{cc} The Border Patrol does not track costs related to search and rescue operations or deceased migrants.⁵⁰

^{cc} See Appendix F for a breakdown of Mexican consulates financial and personnel costs related to migrant deaths.

Table 2: State and County Costs Associated with Border Crossing Deaths (Per Decedent)

Service	Involved Actors	Cost Breakdown	Approximate Cost	Paid By
Respond to and investigate scene	Sheriff's office	Personnel time (3 to 5 hours, 1 to 4 staff), equipment, gas	\$130 to \$410 ⁵¹	County, state ^{dd}
Retrieve drowned body	Sheriff's office, occasionally fire departments, game wardens, or Texas Rangers	Personnel time (3 to 5 hours), search and rescue equipment, gas	\$240 to \$750 ⁵²	County, state ^{ee}
Document incident, collaborate with external agencies	Sheriff's office	Personnel time (3 hours)	\$40	County
Declare time of death, collect incident information	Justice of the peace, medical examiner (Webb County)	Personnel time (1.5 to 3 hours), gas	\$55 to \$160 ⁵³	County
Document incident	Justice of the peace	Personnel time (1 to 3 hours)	\$40 to \$80 ⁵⁴	County
Decedent transportation, storage, casket, indigent burial service	Private funeral home, cemetery		\$800 to \$1,300 ⁵⁵	County, private funeral home
Autopsy	Medical examiner or private pathologist		\$1,250 to \$3,000 ⁵⁶	County
Microscopic slides	Medical examiner		\$20 per slide ⁵⁷	County
Decedent storage	Medical examiner or private pathologist		\$50 to \$100 / day, or \$375 flat rate ^{ff} ⁵⁸	County
Burial plot	Public or private cemetery, private funeral home		No cost (donation) to \$5,000 ^{gg} ⁵⁹	County, private funeral home
Exhumation from burial plot	Decedent's family, NGOs, university anthropology departments, funeral home, cemetery		\$2,000	Decedent's family, NGOs, state, ^{hh} funeral home

^{dd} Brooks County has received state funding through the Office of the Texas Governor's eGrant program.

^{ee} Fire departments, game wardens, and Texas Rangers typically become involved only when sheriff's offices lack the specialized equipment or training necessary to retrieve a body.

^{ff} The Bexar County Medical Examiner charges \$50 to \$100 a day, and the Webb County Medical Examiner charges a flat fee of \$375.

^{gg} In the absence of indigent cemeteries, funeral homes contact private cemeteries and negotiate burial plot rates. Funeral homes pay any costs not covered by counties.

^{hh} The Texas state government provides funding for public university forensic anthropology departments.

Recommendations and Best Practices

While this report and the following recommendations focus on migrant death processing, the most important policies will always be the efforts aimed at preventing these deaths. High numbers of migrant deaths in South Texas and along the border represent failures in U.S. immigration and labor policy, given the mismatch of supply and demand for legal pathways. This means that while streamlining post-mortem processing is critical to identifying remains and keeping a record of deaths, these tasks should not replace nor precede any steps to reduce the numbers of people dying in the Rio Grande and Texas ranchlands.

There is also no need to start policy discussions from scratch. Two years ago, members of Congress from Texas introduced the bipartisan Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act of 2018 to the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.⁶⁰ The proposed legislation would have supported Texas counties and non-government actors by authorizing federal grants for processing migrant remains, requiring that family DNA references be used only for identifying missing persons, constructing 170 additional rescue beacons, and mandating various government reports on migrant deaths. Passing this bill would represent a step forward for migrants, their families, and border communities. However, it has never moved forward.

Beyond federal legislation, there are also smaller scale changes that could have an important effect on migrant death processing. These steps include 1) standardizing and increasing transparency on migrant death record keeping; 2) ensuring that all remains pass through Texas' outlined identification procedures; and 3) increasing state funding for these efforts. While the primary goal should be reducing and eliminating migrant deaths in South Texas, taking the following steps would help streamline migrant death processing, ensure that all deceased migrants are treated equally regardless of where they die and assist with the individual's eventual identification and repatriation.

1. Standardize Record Keeping

When a migrant dies in South Texas, various actors are responsible for documenting the death, including the Border Patrol, the county sheriff's office, a justice of the peace, a funeral home, and potentially a medical examiner. While this information is fundamental for identifying remains, pursuing investigations, and for understanding the scope of migrant deaths in South Texas, deficiencies in these agencies' data collection processes can limit these activities.

Border Patrol. For more than two decades, the Border Patrol has been responsible for creating and managing a centralized database on migrant deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border. However, it is unclear what information the Border Patrol collects regarding migrant deaths or their methods for data collection. The agency has also faced multiple accusations that it does not account for all migrant deaths.⁶¹ In line with these critiques, this report documented more deaths in South Texas than the Border Patrol for fiscal years 2018 and 2019. This also does not include the hundreds of Rio Grande drowning deaths where the bodies washed into Mexican territory and were never counted in Border Patrol numbers. These findings suggest that there is a need for the Border Patrol to prioritize migrant death information collection, outline agreements with county officials, and collect and publish more detailed data.

- **Create Data Sharing Agreements with Texas Sheriffs' Offices.** The Border Patrol should create written agreements with Texas sheriffs' offices to detail migrant death information sharing practices. These agreements should include a publicly available, standardized methodology for identifying migrant deaths in the county, along with the steps that the

Border Patrol and county officials should take to share this information. This could include providing a secured, electronic form for sheriffs' offices to fill out when they discover migrant remains and Border Patrol agents are not present. These steps would allow the Border Patrol to have greater demographic information on deceased individuals.

- **Cross-Border Migrant Death Data Collection.** The numbers of deceased migrants in the Border Patrol's database should not depend on the Rio Grande's currents. Instead, the Border Patrol should form an agreement with Mexico's National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM) to document drowning deaths in the Rio Grande. While INM is not the agency in charge of documenting these deaths in Mexico, it should forge agreements with the state-level agencies to receive the information. The Border Patrol should publish this information with its current numbers of migrant deaths by sector.

Sheriffs' Offices. Sheriffs' offices often gather the most detailed information about deceased migrants through crime or incident reports. However, only three sheriffs' offices in the surveyed South Texas counties have systems in place to track migrant death records. These systems are simple and effective: the Brooks County Sheriff's Office stores migrant death records in binders. The Kennedy County Sheriff's Office notes the top outer portion of case files and stores them in a separate filing cabinet shelf. While Hidalgo County appears to have an electronic system for tracking migrant deaths. After receiving a public records request, the Duval County Sheriff's Office created a new electronic search code to track migrant deaths in its database.

- **Standardize incident report information.** Across South Texas, sheriffs' offices do not have a standardized incident report. Instead, sheriffs' offices often use various templates that change over time. Sheriffs' offices should encourage deputies to standardize their incident reports in line with best practices. For example, incident reports should always attempt to include GPS coordinates for the body location, the discovering party, a record of the individual's clothing and belongings, any available demographic information, and clear photos of the scene and belongings.
- **Improve tracking systems for electronic and paper files.** Sheriffs' offices should create internal systems for tracking border crossing deaths in both their electronic and paper files. These improvements would facilitate efforts to identify deceased migrants and assist county officials with budgeting purposes and when applying for targeted grants.
- **Increase the Use of NamUs.** Sheriffs' offices should upload profiles of unidentified remains to the NamUs database. Given that sheriffs' office personnel are the individuals documenting the scene and the individuals' belongings, they are well positioned to upload this information into the database.

Justices of the Peace. Texas statute requires that justices of the peace keep their inquest records. The language states that the records must include a report of "the events, proceedings, findings, and conclusions of the inquest."⁶² The report must also contain a copy of the autopsy report, if performed, and any other pertinent papers. Despite these guidelines, not all inquest reports contain the required information.

- **Standardize Inquest Form Information.** Justices of the peace should use a standardized inquest form to improve record keeping. Currently, each county has a different system for recording inquests, and in some counties, the system may vary among justices of the peace. Justices of the peace may even create their own inquest report form upon entering office. Creating a standardized form would improve compliance with Texas statute and streamline record inspections.

2. Ensure All Remains Pass Through Official Body Identification Processes

South Texas' county-level officials—including justices of the peace, medical examiners, and funeral homes—are responsible for processing migrant remains and ensuring that they can all eventually be identified. These officials may follow Texas statute, but there are areas for discretion within this statute. While discretion can build flexibility into the law, it may also hinder migrants' identification.

Justices of the Peace. Justices of the peace have the authority to order investigative and laboratory tests to help determine a deceased person's identity.⁶³ These tests differ from autopsies and include taking fingerprints, recording dental records, noting unique tattoos, and taking x-rays in search of identifying fractures. While these tests increase the likelihood of identifying an individual, Texas statute provides justices of the peace with the discretion to forego them.⁶⁴

- ***Mandate Investigative and Laboratory Tests for Unidentified Remains.*** Lawmakers should amend the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure to require justices of the peace to send unidentified bodies to a forensic pathologist and unidentified skeletal remains to a forensic anthropologist for investigative and laboratory tests. These tests should be mandated regardless of whether an autopsy is necessary to determine the nature and cause of death.

Medical Examiners / Pathologists. Forensic pathologists—either in their roles as appointed medical examiners or as private contractors—are often responsible for taking a DNA sample and sending it to a lab for analysis. DNA analysis may help to identify remains when other examinations prove inadequate. While some pathologists have made DNA collection a standard practice, it is not required. Instead, Texas statute only notes that a justice of the peace can request a physician collect a DNA sample for forensic analysis and inclusion in CODIS.

- ***Mandate DNA Testing for Unidentified Remains.*** Lawmakers should amend Article 63.056 (a) of the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure to remove the justice of the peace's discretionary authority, and to require pathologists to take DNA samples from all unidentified bodies. In cases where the remains have skeletonized, the new language should also allow justices of the peace to submit the bones directly to the UNTCHI in lieu of sending them to a pathologist.

Funeral Homes. State laws are unclear, if not contradictory, on counties' authority to cremate unidentified remains. The Texas Code of Criminal Procedure states that "a person may not cremate or direct the cremation" of unidentified remains.⁶⁵ However, the Texas Health & Human Safety code permits the cremation of unidentified individuals' remains when authorized by a county court.⁶⁶ This discrepancy should be addressed to avoid the cremation of any unidentified individuals.

- ***Prohibit Cremations of Unidentified Remains.*** The Texas Health & Human Safety code should be amended to remove county officials' discretion to cremate unidentified remains and ensure it is not in conflict with the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure. This would preserve the possibility of future identification, even if pathologists did not first collect biological reference samples. It would also grant matched families the ability to view their relatives' remains to provide certainty and closure.⁶⁷ Additionally, religious traditions or cultural practices may also oppose cremation.

3. Support Increased Funding for Counties

Most of the costs of processing migrant deaths fall to South Texas counties. Some of these counties are among the state's most impoverished, and these costs can put a strain on county budgets. According to the Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE) Program Census data for 2018, the poorest eight counties in Texas were among those covered in this report. In total, 13 of this report's 19 counties reported more than 25 percent poverty rates.⁶⁸ Migrant death processing costs can reach thousands of dollars per individual and county officials may not have the resources or personnel to adhere to best practices.

Office of the Texas Governor. The Office of the Texas Governor can provide targeted funding support to counties through its eGrant program. Previously, the Office of the Texas Governor has provided support to the Brooks County Sheriff's Office through the eGrant program to help cover costs associated with processing migrant deaths.

- **Provide eGrants for Counties with Migrant Deaths.** The Office of the Governor should open additional eGrant opportunities for South Texas counties with high migrant death numbers. These grants should target sheriffs' offices and justices of the peace. The funding could be provided as a reimbursement for costs or could be earmarked for specific activities in the future, such as personnel hours, autopsies, and laboratory tests. They could also cover the cost of hiring additional staff or working overtime to digitize or scan records and modernize these counties' record systems. Overall, state grants would provide South Texas counties with an incentive to improve their practices and help reduce the financial strain of processing migrant deaths.

Appendix

Appendix A:

Table 3: South Texas Counties By Border Patrol Enforcement Sector

Rio Grande Valley Sector	Laredo Sector	Del Rio Sector
Brooks County	Jim Hogg County	Dimmit County
Cameron County	LaSalle County	Edwards County
Hidalgo County	Webb County	Kinney County
Kenedy County	Duval County	Maverick County
Kleberg County	Zapata County	Uvalde County
Starr County		Val Verde County
Willacy County		Zavala County

Appendix B:

Table 4: Records Obtained by Source (2012-2019)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Brooks County Sheriff's Office	130	87	61	48	61	52	50	15
Cameron County Sheriff's Office						1		
Dimmit County Sheriff's Office		4	4	2	4	4	1	4
Duval County Sheriff's Office	12	2	7	1	2	1	2	7
Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office	21	29	30	16	28	18	34	16
IOM Data				3	13	18	24	25
Jim Hogg County Sheriff's Office	4		4			1	3	5
Kenedy County Sheriff's Office	4	12	13	9	23	10	13	9
Kinney County Justice of the Peace	3			2	1	3	1	
Kleberg County Sheriff's Office	2		2	1				2
La Salle County Sheriff's Office	1			1	1			
Maverick County Justice of the Peace 1	2		1	1			1	5
Maverick County Justice of the Peace 2		8	5	6	3	6	5	2
Maverick County Justice of the Peace 3-2	8	4	2	1		1		12
Maverick County Justice of the Peace 3.1	1	1		1	2	1	1	2
Maverick County Justice of the Peace 4	2			1	1	1		2
Maverick County Sheriff's Office			1		6	5	2	3
Starr County Sheriff's Office	9	4	3	1	9	9		
Texas Vital Statistics	4	4	4	3	1	1	3	
Texas Transnational Intelligence Center								23
Val Verde County Justice of the Peace 4			3	1			2	3
Val Verde Justice of the Peace 1			1			1		
Webb County Medical Examiner	31	36	39	41	42	48	55	59
Zapata County Sheriff's Office	2	3		1				
Total	236	194	180	140	197	181	197	194

Appendix C:

Table 5: Records Obtained by County (2012-2019)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Brooks	130	87	61	48	61	52	50	46	535
Cameron	2	2	2	4	3	2	3	1	19
Dimmit		4	4	2	4	4	1	7	26
Duval	12	2	7	1	2	1	3	7	35
Edwards									0
Hidalgo	22	31	32	17	29	21	38	17	207
Jim Hogg	5		4			3	6	5	23
Kenedy	4	12	13	9	23	11	15	9	96
Kinney	3			2	1	3	1	1	11
Kleberg	2		2	1	1	1	1	2	10
La Salle	1			1	2	2	1		7
Maverick	13	13	9	11	18	17	16	32	129
Starr	9	4	3	1	10	9	2	2	40
Uvalde						1			1
Val Verde			4	1	1	2	4	6	18
Webb	31	36	39	41	42	48	55	59	351
Willacy									0
Zavala									0
Zapata	2	3		1		4	1		11
Total	236	194	180	140	197	182	197	193	1519

Appendix D:

Table 6: Deaths by Nationality (2012-2019)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Belize		1							1
Brazil			1			1		1	3
Colombia				1			2		3
Costa Rica	1								1
Dominican Republic	1	1	1						3
Ecuador	1	1	2	1	1		1	2	9
El Salvador	22	19	21	14	14	11	10	6	117
Guatemala	9	18	21	7	21	12	21	3	112
Honduras	12	14	7	2	8	6	14	14	77
Mexico	44	39	35	28	44	27	25	31	273
Nicaragua		1	1	2	1		1	1	7
Peru		1							1
Unknown	146	99	91	85	108	124	123	136	912
Total	236	194	180	140	197	182	197	193	1519

Appendix E:

Table 7: Female Deaths by County (2012-2019)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Brooks	23	21	19	4	5	6	5	5	88
Cameron	1	1		1					3
Dimmit									0
Duval	1					1		1	3
Edwards									0
Hidalgo	1	3	1		2	5	1	2	15
Jim Hogg			1			1		2	4
Kenedy		2	1	2	5		3	1	14
Kinney									0
Kleberg	1								1
La Salle									0
Maverick	3	2						2	7
Starr	1	1	1	1	2	2			8
Uvalde									0
Val Verde								2	2
Webb									0
Willacy									0
Zavala									0
Zapata									0
Total	31	30	23	8	14	16	9	14	145

Table 8: Male Deaths by County (2012-2019)

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Brooks	74	48	30	26	43	26	31	10	288
Cameron	1	1	2	3	3	2		1	13
Dimmit							1	4	5
Duval	6	2	4		2		1	6	21
Edwards									0
Hidalgo	19	28	31	17	26	16	34	15	186
Jim Hogg	3		2				3	2	10
Kenedy	2	8	11	5	16	10	10	5	67
Kinney	3			2	1	3	1	1	11
Kleberg			1			1	1	1	4
La Salle	1				1		1		3
Maverick	7	10	7	9	15	13	8	25	94
Starr	7	3	1		8	5	1	2	27
Uvalde						1			1
Val Verde			3	1	1	1	2	4	12
Webb									0
Willacy									0
Zavala									0
Zapata	2	3		1		1			7
Total	125	103	92	64	116	79	94	76	749

Appendix F:

Table 9: Mexican Government Costs Associated with Border Crossing Deaths (Per Decedent)

Service	Involved Actors	Cost Breakdown	Approximate Cost	Paid By
Consular missing persons assistance	Foreign consulate	Personnel time: Communication with families, Border Patrol, and Medical examiner; opening missing persons case; DNA sampling coordination (4 hours) ^{ii 69}	\$60 ^{jj 70}	Foreign government
Cremation	Consulate, private funeral homes, county		\$1,095	Foreign government, decedent's family
Repatriation of remains	Consulate; Transportation agencies (e.g. airlines or trucking company); private funeral homes	Air or land transport, personnel time (10 hours), equipment	\$135 to \$4,635 ⁷¹	Foreign government (Mexican government covers up to \$1,550 per decedent), decedent's family ^{kk 72}

ⁱⁱ This hourly breakdown provides an estimate of time spent filling out forms and communicating with families, among other activities. This reflects the Mexican government's costs and may not reflect the practices of other foreign governments.

^{jj} This reflects the Mexican government's cost estimates and may not reflect the policies of other foreign governments.

^{kk} Although some Central American countries have also set up funds to assist families with repatriation costs, reports suggest that few families receive this assistance. In El Salvador, for example, families reported that public officials visited their homes to determine if they were financially able to shoulder repatriation costs. According to the families, these officials suggested they sell their cars or get home mortgages to pay for the return of their relative's remains.

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