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MIGRANT DEATHS AND SEARCH AND RESCUE EFFORTS IN BROOKS COUNTY

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**Migrant Deaths and Search and Rescue Efforts
in Brooks County**

Project Directed by

Stephanie Leutert

A report by the Policy Research Project

on Migrant Safety and Mortality in South Texas

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Partnerships and Acknowledgments

The following report is the result of a year-long investigation by graduate students at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. These students were part of a Policy Research Project (PRP) that examined migrant deaths along the U.S.-Mexico border and the policy and enforcement structures that have made them increasingly common.

This report's research was conducted in collaboration with the Brooks County Sheriff's Office in Brooks County, Texas. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office is the law enforcement body that oversees the geographic area around the Border Patrol's Falfurrias checkpoint. This agency is charged with documenting each migrant death within its jurisdiction and is the only South Texas law enforcement agency to have a deputy that focuses on search and rescue for missing migrants.

The PRP and corresponding travel and field research was made possible by the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas at Austin. The authors would also like to thank the many people who spoke with them about migrant deaths in South Texas and search and rescue efforts. This includes through phone interviews and in-person meetings during trips to Brooks County and the Rio Grande Valley.

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List of Acronyms

BORSTAR	Border Patrol Search Trauma and Rescue Unit
BSITS	Border Safety Initiative Tracking System
DHS	U.S. Department of Homeland Security
DPS	Texas Department of Public Safety
IIRIRA	Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
IRCA	Immigration Reform and Control Act

Foreword

The Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs has established interdisciplinary research on policy problems as the core of its educational program. A major element of this program is the nine-month Policy Research Project, during which one or more faculty members direct the research of ten to twenty graduate students of diverse disciplines and academic backgrounds on a policy issue of concern to a government or nonprofit agency. This “client orientation” brings students face-to-face with administrators, legislators, and other officials active in the policy process and demonstrates that research in a policy environment demands special knowledge and skill sets. It exposes students to challenges they will face in relating academic research and complex data to those responsible for the development and implementation of policy, and teaches them how to overcome those challenges.

The curriculum of the LBJ School is intended not only to develop effective public servants, but also to produce research that will enlighten and inform those already engaged in the policy process. The project that resulted in this report has helped to accomplish the first task; it is our hope that the report itself will contribute to the second. Neither the LBJ School nor The University of Texas at Austin necessarily endorses the views or findings of this report.

JR DeShazo
Dean

Executive Summary

For more than 140 years, migrants have died along the United States and Mexico's nearly 2,000-mile-long border.¹ Currently, the state of Texas—which makes up two-thirds of the border—is the deadliest stretch for migrants in transit.¹ While migrants may die from various causes within Texas, the state's interior, composed of vast and rugged Texas brush, is particularly deadly. Every year, thousands of migrants trek through this challenging landscape as they attempt to circumvent Border Patrol checkpoints that are located on north-bound highways. However, many individuals never make it through.²

Within the Texas interior, more migrants die in Brooks County—which begins more than 50 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border—than anywhere else. The county is home to the Border Patrol's Falfurrias checkpoint, and migrants who attempt to circumvent it by walking through private ranchland face life-threatening risks, such as dehydration and exposure to the heat and cold. Since 2009, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office has recovered nearly 1,000 migrant remains in this terrain. Yet these are only the discovered remains, with officials estimating that only one in five migrant decedents are ever found.³

The Brooks County Sheriff's Office is the primary law enforcement agency in the county. Sheriff's Office personnel undertake standard law enforcement duties and are also responsible for engaging in migrant search and rescue efforts and recovering remains. Yet the Sheriff's Office faces significant constraints, including limited funding, equipment, and personnel. As of March 2024, the Sheriff's Office had just five paid patrol officers and one volunteer deputy to cover the county's nearly 950 square miles.

This report was prepared for the Brooks County Sheriff's Office, and is divided into four chapters. The first chapter reviews the history of migrant deaths in South Texas, beginning in the late nineteenth century. The second chapter maps out current migrant death dynamics in Brooks County. The third chapter discusses the various actors in Brooks County who engage in migrant search and rescue efforts and recover migrant remains, and how the Sheriff's Office fits into these broader efforts. Finally, the fourth chapter offers recommendations for how the Brooks County Sheriff's Office could build out their migrant search and rescue initiatives.

¹ Migrants travel to the United States for many reasons, such as to find better economic opportunities, reunite with family members, and seek safety.

Chapter 1: History of Migrant Deaths in South Texas

For more than a century, migrant deaths in South Texas have been intertwined with the United States' restrictive immigration policy and border enforcement efforts. This chapter starts by exploring historical U.S. immigration policies and their impact on migration dynamics. It then highlights U.S. immigration enforcement's evolution, including the Border Patrol's emergence and the agency's various enforcement strategies across South Texas. Finally, the chapter concludes with a focus on the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints, and this tactic's effects for migration, migrant smuggling, and migrant deaths within the region.

History of Unauthorized Crossings in South Texas

1848 to 1924: The Creation of the U.S.-Mexico Border and Restrictive Immigration Policies

The current U.S.-Mexico border is a relatively new development. Until 1836, the U.S.-Mexico border ran north of Texas and the state was fully part of Mexico. However, in that year, Texas proclaimed its independence and set the Rio Grande as its southernmost boundary. Mexico disputed this proclamation, naming the Nueces River—which runs through Corpus Christi—as the state's official border. In 1845, this dispute boiled over, as the United States annexed Texas and set off the Mexican-American War. Three years later, the United States and Mexico ended the war and signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, establishing the Rio Grande as the official U.S.-Mexico border.⁴ⁱⁱ

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo did not significantly change border community dynamics on either side of the Rio Grande. These communities shared a common history, culture, and population, and had long-established social and economic ties. While cross-border immigration was not a policy issue at the time—given the lack of restrictive immigration laws—U.S. authorities in South Texas focused their attention on customs enforcement.⁵ From 1853 to 1856, the U.S. Customs Service assigned 16 mounted officers for the 200 mile stretch from Laredo to Brownsville, Texas. These officers were tasked with catching individuals trying to smuggle goods into the United States without paying the appropriate tariffs.⁶

However, openly xenophobic and racist sentiments were gaining traction across the United States. As early as the 1780s, states such as New York and Massachusetts had barred specific categories of migrants.⁷ⁱⁱⁱ During the mid-1800s, California and other Western territories focused on limiting the rights of Chinese laborers.⁸ By the late 1800s, the U.S. Supreme Court, which had previously viewed immigration as a state issue, began to consistently rule that it was within the federal policy domain. As a result, the U.S. federal government faced increasing pressure to play a larger role in establishing country-wide immigration policies.

ⁱⁱ As part of this treaty, Mexico received US\$15 million in exchange for ceding vast territories to the United States. These territories included present-day California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and parts of Colorado, Wyoming, Kansas, and Oklahoma.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1788, New York passed its first restrictive immigration law to block certain categories of migrants, and, in 1794, Massachusetts followed suit with its own legislation.

In May 1882, the U.S. Congress passed its first significant piece of restrictive immigration legislation: the Chinese Exclusion Act. This legislation prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the United States for ten years and prevented Chinese nationals who were already in the country from becoming U.S. citizens. Chinese migrants were no longer allowed to freely travel in and out of the United States between jobs or visit their family abroad.⁹ In the following years, the U.S. Congress widened this ban to include Chinese merchants and, in 1902, it extended the policy indefinitely.

Following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the United States began restricting other “undesirable” populations. The Immigration Acts of 1882, 1891, and 1907 banned immigrants deemed to be paupers, mentally unfit, convicts, sick with contagious diseases, engaged in immoral professions, or “likely to become public charges.”¹⁰ In 1885, the U.S. Congress also passed the Alien Contract Labor Law, or the Foran Act, to ban migrant laborers with pre-arranged contracts that labor unions viewed as a threat.¹¹ These restrictive policies also imposed a head tax on each arriving immigrant, starting at 50 cents in 1882 and then increasing to \$4 in 1885. Individuals crossing into the United States from Canada or Mexico were initially exempt from this tax.

These restrictive immigration policies not only ushered in a new era of federal U.S. immigration control, but also marked the beginning of unauthorized migration.¹² In response to the new laws, some Chinese nationals and other banned migrants did not stop migrating to the United States, but rather sought to enter the country undetected. In particular, migrants began switching their transit routes from coastal ports of entry to the less staffed and more difficult-to-monitor U.S.-Canada and U.S.-Mexico borders.^{iv}

U.S. officials responded to this unauthorized migration by attempting to strengthen their enforcement capabilities. The Immigration Act of 1891 consolidated federal immigration powers, established the Bureau of Immigration within the U.S. Department of the Treasury, and directed federal officials to enforce the new immigration policies.¹³ Soon after, the U.S. government increased enforcement efforts between ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border. In 1904, the U.S. Immigration Service established the Mounted Guard with 75 patrolmen for the entire southern border.¹⁴ The Texas Rangers also provided support as a “Frontier Battalion.”¹⁵

In 1917, U.S. immigration policy further transformed border dynamics. In 1917, the U.S. Congress passed a new Immigration Act that established a literacy test for prospective immigrants, banned migrants from a large portion of Asia, added new immigration restrictions on “radicals” and anarchists, and began to enforce the head tax—which was increased to \$8—on individuals along the U.S.-Canada and U.S.-Mexico borders.¹⁶ This legislation had its most profound effect on Mexican nationals, who had long enjoyed free, easy, and frequent passage into the United States. As immigration officials began to enforce these new policies, Mexican migrants increasingly entered the United States between ports of entry.¹⁷

Following World War I, U.S. policymakers feared that large numbers of people from southern and eastern Europe would migrate to the United States. They viewed European migrants as labor competition, and these fears were compounded by high U.S. unemployment rates. As a result, in

^{iv} These dynamics gave rise to a robust market for migrant smuggling.

1921, the U.S. Congress enacted its first nationality-based immigration quotas through the Emergency Quota Act. This bill limited the number of migrants from each country to 3 percent of their population in the 1910 U.S. Census, which skewed migration toward northern and western Europe. Amid pressure from southwest agricultural businesses, this allotment system did not include any limits for individuals from Mexico or other Western Hemisphere countries.¹⁸

Over the following years, the U.S. Congress solidified these nationality-based quotas and lowered their caps. The Immigration Act of 1924 shrunk quotas from 3 to 2 percent of a country's population in the 1890 Census and excluded all immigrants from Asia.¹⁹ It also reaffirmed the United States' new visa system, which required immigrants to obtain a \$9 visa before arriving at a U.S. port of entry.²⁰ Although Western Hemisphere countries remained exempt from these quota restrictions, the increased fees served as a barrier to entry.²¹

1924 to 1941: The U.S. Border Patrol's Early Days

As more unauthorized migrants began crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, the U.S. Congress started paying more attention to border enforcement. In 1924, policymakers earmarked \$1 million in funding for additional land patrol and officially established the U.S. Border Patrol. With a mere 450 officers, the Border Patrol was tasked with securing all U.S. borders between ports of entry.²² These agents worked on foot and horseback and initially focused on turning back European and Asian migrants and disrupting alcohol smuggling during Prohibition. By the late 1920s, the Border Patrol had deployed between 50 to 80 agents in Texas to cover its nearly 1,300 mile border with Mexico.²³

In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, the Border Patrol began its first major enforcement campaign. As labor demand plummeted and unemployment soared—eventually peaking at 25 percent in 1933—politicians blamed migrant workers for stealing U.S. citizens' jobs.²⁴ The U.S. government responded by enlisting the Border Patrol to help deport Mexican nationals from around the country. Throughout the 1930s, U.S. authorities ultimately forced between 400,000 and one million Mexican nationals to return to Mexico, including individuals who were U.S. citizens.²⁵

During this time, the Border Patrol also started transforming from a ragtag group of cowboys, ranchers, and border-town locals to a more established federal law enforcement agency. In 1933, the Department of Labor's Immigration Bureau merged with the Naturalization Bureau, and the Border Patrol became a part of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). Then, in December 1934, the agency also opened its first training academy at Camp Chigas in El Paso. The agency also began upgrading its equipment. For example, in 1935, the Border Patrol began using motorized vehicles that were equipped with radios.²⁶

1942 to 1965: The Bracero Program

In 1941, the United States entered World War II and agricultural employers began reporting widespread labor shortages. In response, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order in 1942, called the "Mexican Farm Labor Program," now commonly known as the "Bracero Program."²⁷ The Bracero Program awarded temporary work visas to Mexican nationals to work in

the United States. Initially, Mexican politicians refused to include Texas farmers in the Bracero Program due to their “racist and discriminatory treatment of Mexicans.”²⁸ However, Texas farmers continued to hire unauthorized Mexican laborers outside of the program, and Mexico began to gradually remove restrictions for Bracero workers in Texas.²⁹ By 1949, more than 137,000 laborers, or half of the program’s workforce, were employed in Texas.³⁰

As hundreds of thousands of laborers came to the United States through the Bracero Program, there was a simultaneous increase in unauthorized border crossings. There were several factors behind this trend. First, as Bracero laborers sent money home to their families in Mexico, an increasing number of Mexicans became interested in making a similar journey to the United States. However, the Bracero Program’s application fees and selective hiring process made it difficult for some Mexican laborers to secure work authorization as part of the program. This led some of these laborers to circumvent the formal recruitment process and cross the Rio Grande into Texas, where they easily found work despite their unauthorized status. By the 1950s, scholars estimate that unauthorized Mexican laborers outnumbered Bracero laborers by four to one.³¹

In 1954, amid U.S. and Mexican pressure to address the uptick in unauthorized migration, the U.S. Border Patrol launched Operation Wetback.³² This military-style campaign used raids, aircrafts, and roadblocks to apprehend unauthorized workers on ranches along the U.S.-Mexico border. As a result of these enforcement efforts, the Border Patrol apprehended and deported more than 1 million Mexican nationals.³³ Yet, there were no consequences for U.S. employers. In fact, the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 included a so-called “Texas Proviso,” which differentiated between “employing” and “harboring” unauthorized workers.^{34v} This distinction allowed Texas agricultural employers to avoid penalties for hiring unauthorized laborers.³⁵

In 1964, the U.S. Congress voted to end the Bracero Program.^{vi} The program had grown unpopular due to its exploitative labor practices, with workers often living in deplorable conditions and receiving less than promised wages.³⁶ The U.S. public also had a negative perception of foreign workers, and viewed them as taking Americans’ jobs. As a result, U.S. policymakers moved to dissolve the Bracero Program.³⁷ Without alternative legal channels, Mexican laborers continued to cross the U.S.-Mexico border to work in South Texas, but now as unauthorized migrants.

1965 to 1996: Increased Border Enforcement and Shifting Migration Dynamics

During the 1960s, unauthorized migration was not a primary policy issue. However, some of the central policy topics of the era, such as civil rights, seeped into the immigration space. In 1965, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, which aimed to rid the U.S. immigration system of racial discrimination and inequities. In particular, it repealed the earlier nationality-based quotas and focused U.S. immigration law on family reunification and labor market demands.³⁸ It also created an annual global cap of 290,000 visas, and limited Western Hemisphere migration to 120,000 visas. Between the Bracero Program’s termination and the new

^v The McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 also removed the remaining restrictions on immigration from Asiatic countries and introduced visa preferences for skilled workers and family reunification.

^{vi} Throughout the Bracero Program, the U.S. government granted more than 4.5 million temporary labor contracts to Mexican workers.

Western Hemisphere visa cap, the number of unauthorized migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border soared.^{39vii}

The U.S. Congress responded to increasing unauthorized migration by funneling resources to the Border Patrol. From 1966 to 1979, the agency's budget jumped from \$41 million to \$239 million, and it eventually climbed to \$350 million in 1993.⁴⁰ The number of Border Patrol agents also nearly tripled, rising from 1,491 agents in 1965 to 3,965 agents in 1993.⁴¹ The funding also helped to improve the agency's equipment and technology. For example, in 1980, only one Border Patrol sector reported having helicopters, but by 1992, all nine sectors were equipped with a total of 58 helicopters.

In line with this focus on border enforcement, the U.S. Congress passed additional immigration legislation to address unauthorized migration. In 1986, the U.S. Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). This legislation had three main components: 1) to prohibit U.S. employers from hiring individuals without valid work authorization, 2) to increase funding for the INS and Border Patrol, and 3) to provide a path to citizenship for more than 2 million unauthorized migrants who were living in the United States. While the new legislation pumped more money into the Border Patrol, scholars found that greater enforcement efforts did not affect migrants' border-crossing decisions.⁴²

In the mid-1990s, the Border Patrol also shifted its enforcement strategy amid accusations that its agents were harassing El Paso's Latino residents.^{43viii} This change took effect on September 19, 1993, when the El Paso Border Patrol sector, led by then-Border Patrol Chief Silvestre Reyes, launched "Operation Hold the Line." With reluctant approval from INS headquarters and a budget of \$300,000 for a two-week operation, Reyes deployed 400 agents along a 20-mile border segment in downtown El Paso.⁴⁴ Federal agents were stationed every 100 yards to prevent migrants from crossing the Rio Grande, rather than apprehending them after they had entered the city.⁴⁵

The strategy immediately shifted cross-border migration dynamics. First, it decreased unauthorized migration in downtown El Paso, with migrants initially remaining stuck on the Mexican side of the border. Second, it reduced Border Patrol agents' interactions with El Paso's residents, leading to a reduction in harassment claims.⁴⁶ As a result, local news outlets and residents heralded the operation as a success. In 1994, the Border Patrol published its "Prevention through Deterrence" strategy, which called for replicating "Operation Hold the Line" along the entire border. As the Border Patrol began implementing this new strategy, migrants started shifting their transit routes from urban centers to more challenging border areas, such as the Arizona desert and South Texas.

In the following years, the U.S. Congress continued to focus on increasing border enforcement. In 1996, policymakers passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), which provided additional resources for the Border Patrol, expanded immigration

^{vii} From 1965 to 1979, the number of Border Patrol apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border surged from 40,000 to nearly 800,000.

^{viii} In 1992, Bowie High School students brought a lawsuit against the Border Patrol. In response, a federal district court ordered that Border Patrol agents needed to stop targeting the Latino community in El Paso.

detention and non-citizen deportations, and tightened penalties for unauthorized re-entry into the United States.⁴⁷ After the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the Border Patrol became part of the newly established U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), with subsequent increases in its budget and personnel.⁴⁸

History of Border Patrol Checkpoints and Migrant Deaths in South Texas

For the past 80 years, the Border Patrol has used highway checkpoints as one of its key border enforcement tactics. These checkpoints are typically located along highways and secondary roads, between 25 to 100 miles away from the physical border. They serve as the agency's final layer of border enforcement before migrants reach the U.S. interior.⁴⁹ The checkpoints can be either permanent or tactical. Permanent checkpoints are brick and mortar structures along highways or major thoroughfares, and tactical checkpoints are generally temporary structures on secondary roads.⁵⁰ At these checkpoints, Border Patrol agents have the discretion to inspect any passing vehicle.⁵¹

In the Border Patrol's early years, its checkpoints were typically temporary and involved mobile patrols that stopped migrants on Texas' highways. However, in the 1940s, the Border Patrol established its first permanent checkpoints in South Texas. These included the Sarita checkpoint in Kenedy County on U.S. Highway 77 and the Falfurrias checkpoint in Brooks County on U.S. Highway 281.⁵² Yet, despite the new buildings, the Border Patrol was unable to keep these checkpoints open 24 hours a day, given resource and personnel constraints.

By the mid-1940s, Border Patrol agents began reporting cases of migrants attempting to pass through the checkpoints undetected.⁵³ At this time, smugglers sought to conceal migrants in vehicles or time their crossings for when Border Patrol agents were not actively inspecting vehicles.⁵⁴ As early as 1948, news articles also began documenting that migrants were circumventing the Border Patrol's South Texas checkpoints on foot. An *Austin American-Statesman* news article described how migrants would travel "by truck, stop a mile or two before the checkstation, get off the truck and sneak through the brush to a designated meeting place a short distance beyond the station. There the truck driver picks them up again."⁵⁵

Even during these early years, migrants faced numerous risks as they walked through South Texas' private ranchland.⁵⁶ In 1971, sociologist Julian Samora published the earliest reports of migrants dying in the South Texas brush while circumventing Border Patrol checkpoints.⁵⁷ In this account, one of Samora's graduate students, Jorge Bustamante, attempted to enter the United States undetected alongside other migrants to provide a firsthand account of the experience. While trekking through Brooks County's ranchland, Bustamante recounts a companion's story about encountering migrant remains during a previous trip.^{ix} He states:

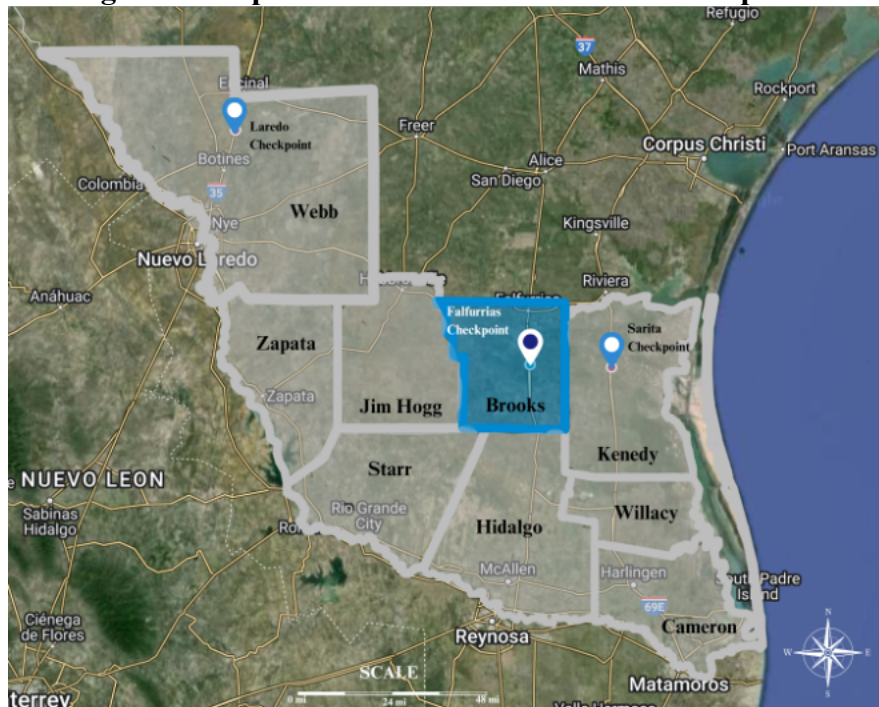
“(they) found a corpse with part of the skeleton showing, which made them believe that he had died perhaps a month before. The corpse still had some clothes on, but they couldn't ascertain either his age or any physical features for identification.

^{ix} The publication, *Los Mojados: The Wetback Story*, does not list specific dates, but these deaths likely occurred in the late 1960s.

They made a cross and put it over him. Later in the same day they found another body. This one apparently had died more recently, judging from the state of the clothes.”⁵⁸

From the 1960s onward, Border Patrol agents continued to inspect vehicles at highway checkpoints.^{59x} Simultaneously, migrants continued to die in the brush. In 1998, *The Monitor*, a McAllen-based newspaper, interviewed the Kenedy County sheriff about the Border Patrol’s Sarita checkpoint. (See Figure 1 for a map of current Border Patrol checkpoints.) In this interview, the sheriff reported that he had recovered at least one set of migrant remains a year during the previous three decades.⁶⁰

Figure 1: Map of South Texas Border and Checkpoints



Source: Authors' elaboration

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Border Patrol increased staffing and resources for its highway checkpoints.⁶¹ During this decade, most checkpoints, including the Border Patrol’s Falfurrias checkpoint, began to operate 24 hours a day.⁶² Simultaneously, Border Patrol agents, ranch owners, and community members reported a growing number of migrant deaths in the surrounding areas. In July 1998, the *Austin American-Statesman* reported that 30 migrants had died from exposure to the elements or dehydration in South Texas during the preceding six months, including seven deaths in Kenedy County and one death in Brooks County.⁶³ From January to July 2005, *The Monitor* reported that Border Patrol agents had discovered 11 bodies in Brooks County alone.⁶⁴

^x As late as 1982, the Falfurrias, Texas, checkpoint was still left “unattended [for] as much as 24 hours at a time.” (See Millar in Endnote 58.)

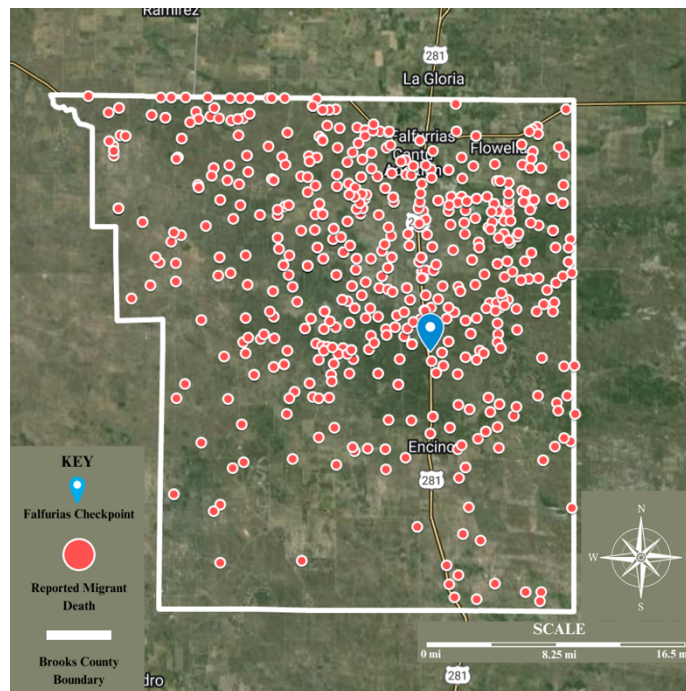
Over the past 80 years, various lawsuits have challenged the Border Patrol's checkpoints. In 1975, Juan Luis Ortiz appealed his migrant smuggling conviction on the grounds that Border Patrol agents at the San Clemente checkpoint in California had searched his vehicle without reasonable suspicion. The case—*United States v. Ortiz*—reached the Supreme Court, where justices ruled in the driver's favor and required that agents have probable cause before conducting vehicle searches.⁶⁵ However, another case—*United States v. Martinez-Fuerte*—tempered this ruling. This 1976 case affirmed that the Border Patrol had the constitutional authority to conduct limited secondary inspections at checkpoints, stating “the government and public interest outweighed the constitutional rights of the individuals.”^{66xi} During checkpoint inspections, Border Patrol agents are allowed to ask questions to verify the occupants' citizenship, and visually inspect the vehicle's exterior. Agents are not permitted to ask unrelated questions or detain individuals for an extended period of time without probable cause.⁶⁷

^{xi} The Supreme Court's 1973 decision for *Almeida-Sanchez v. United States* is also relevant for Border Patrol inspections. It held that Border Patrol agents need reasonable suspicion or probable cause to conduct any roving stops and searches away from the border.

Chapter 2: Current Migrant Death Dynamics in Brooks County

Over the past three decades, Brooks County has recorded more migrant deaths than any other county in Texas' interior.⁶⁸ The county is situated 50 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border and encompasses 944 square miles of mostly private ranchland. The north-south running Highway 281 cuts through the ranchland, and the Border Patrol's Falfurrias checkpoint is located almost directly in the middle of the county. Smugglers often drop off migrants in the southern part of Brooks County, near the town of Encino. These migrant groups then spend multiple days walking to a pick-up location that is north of the checkpoint.

Figure 2: Map of Recovered Migrant Remains in Brooks County (2009-2023)



Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

Migrant deaths in Brooks County are almost exclusively due to the harsh environmental conditions during the treks and migrants' lack of water. These conditions can cause heat exhaustion, dehydration, injury, and, in cold weather, hypothermia. They can also worsen pre-existing health conditions. Additionally, within the county, there are few groundwater sources—such as rivers or lakes—and migrants often drink water from cattle troughs. This water can be contaminated with bacteria and parasites, such as *E. coli*, *Listeria*, and *Giardia*, which can all cause vomiting and diarrhea.⁶⁹

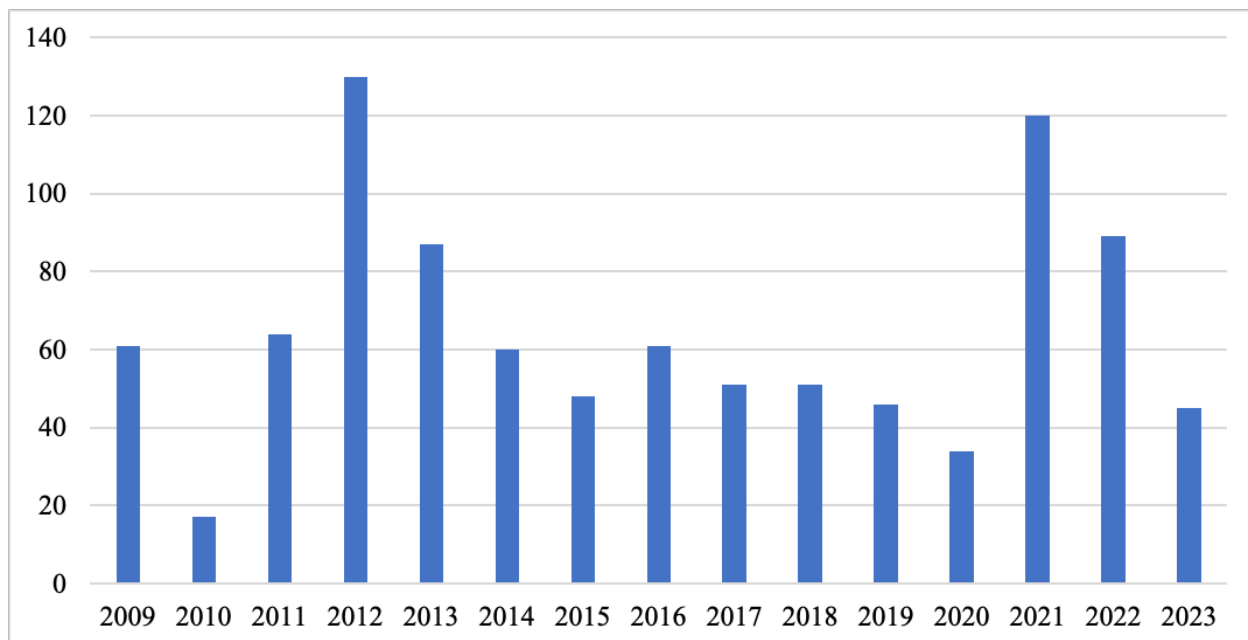
This chapter analyzes the Brooks County Sheriff's Office's incident reports for recovered human remains. The data spans fourteen years—from January 2009 to December 2023—and tracks variables such as the date of discovery, decedent demographic information, and recovered

belongings.^{xii} The following sections cover migrant death trends within the county, decedents' demographics, and the prevalence of certain belongings.

Migrant Deaths in Brooks County

From January 2009 through December 2023, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office recorded 964 migrant deaths in the county.⁷⁰ During this time period, the numbers varied significantly by year. In 2010, Sheriff's Office personnel recovered only 17 sets of remains, but, two years later, this number jumped to 130 cases. In the following years, the number of recovered remains hovered between 35 and 90 cases, but spiked upwards again in 2021 and 2022. Overall, these migrant death fluctuations appear to correspond to the number of Border Patrol single adult apprehensions in the area (see Figure 4).^{xiii}

Figure 3: Recovered Migrant Remains by Year (2009-2023)

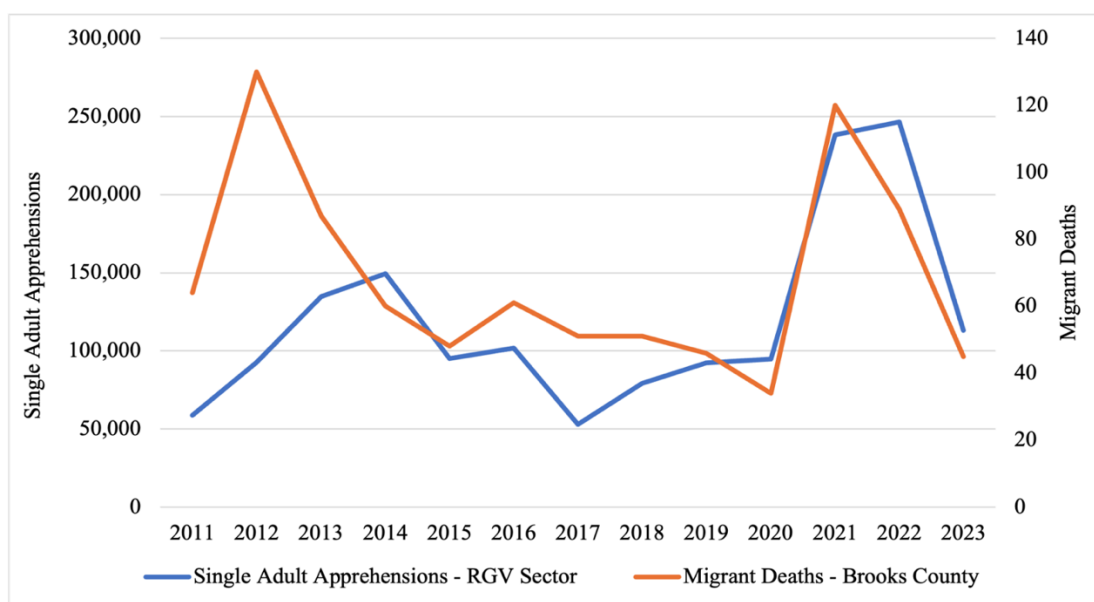


Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

^{xii} UT Austin researchers and graduate students coded the bulk of this data prior to the project's start. In October 2023, a group of UT Austin graduate students updated this dataset in Brooks County. In February 2024, two graduate students returned to the county and finished coding the incident reports for 2023.

^{xiii} Since 2013, migrant families and unaccompanied minors have generally turned themselves in at the physical U.S.-Mexico border to seek asylum. To accurately capture migration numbers in the Texas interior, Figure 4 uses only single adult apprehensions.

Figure 4: Border Patrol's Apprehensions and Migrant Deaths in Brooks County (2009-2023)



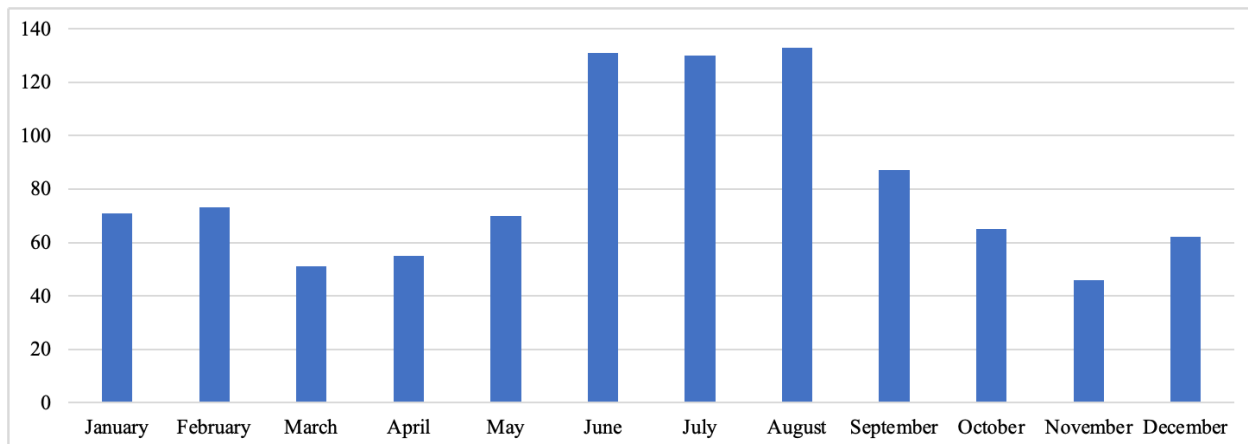
Data source: U.S. Border Patrol and Brooks County Sheriff's Office

Seasonal weather changes appear to impact both the frequency of migrant deaths in Brooks County and the type of discovered remains. From 2009 through 2023, the Sheriff's Office recovered 41 percent of all migrant remains during the summer months of June, July, and August. This is likely due to the county's extreme summer heat, with temperatures routinely topping 100 degrees Fahrenheit. In the winter months, from November to February, the Sheriff's Office recovered another 26 percent of the total remains.^{xiv} However, nearly 71 percent of these winter-month cases were skeletal remains, and may have belonged to individuals who died during the preceding summers.^{xv} By comparison, only 18 percent of the summer-month cases involved skeletal remains.

^{xiv} These winter months constitute prime hunting season in Brooks County. During this time, ranch staff and hunters often travel to remote ranch areas and may discover migrant remains.

^{xv} Skeletal remains consist of only bone and no soft tissue.

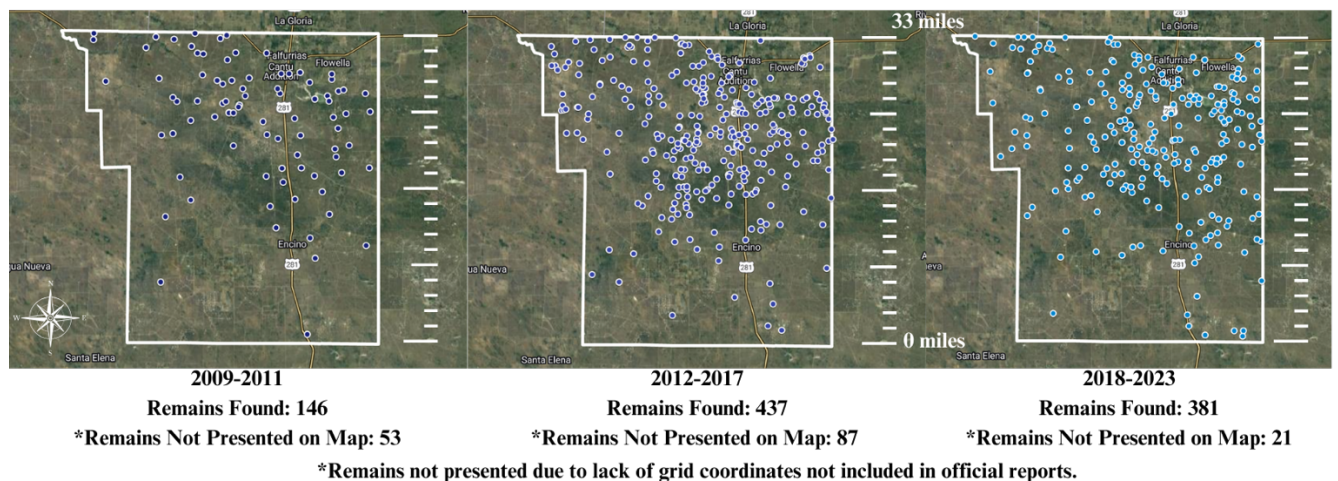
Figure 5: Recovered Migrant Remains by Month (2009-2023)



Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

Brooks County Sheriff's Office personnel have recovered migrant remains throughout much of the county's territory. Traditionally, migrants used power lines and gas pipelines to orient themselves while traveling north through private ranchland. Some smugglers and migrants continue to follow these markers, with groups staying inside the brush line to avoid detection. However, in recent years, Sheriff's Office personnel and other actors have discovered migrant remains in areas that are far beyond these traditional routes.

Figure 6: Maps of Recovered Migrant Remains in Brooks County (2009-2023)

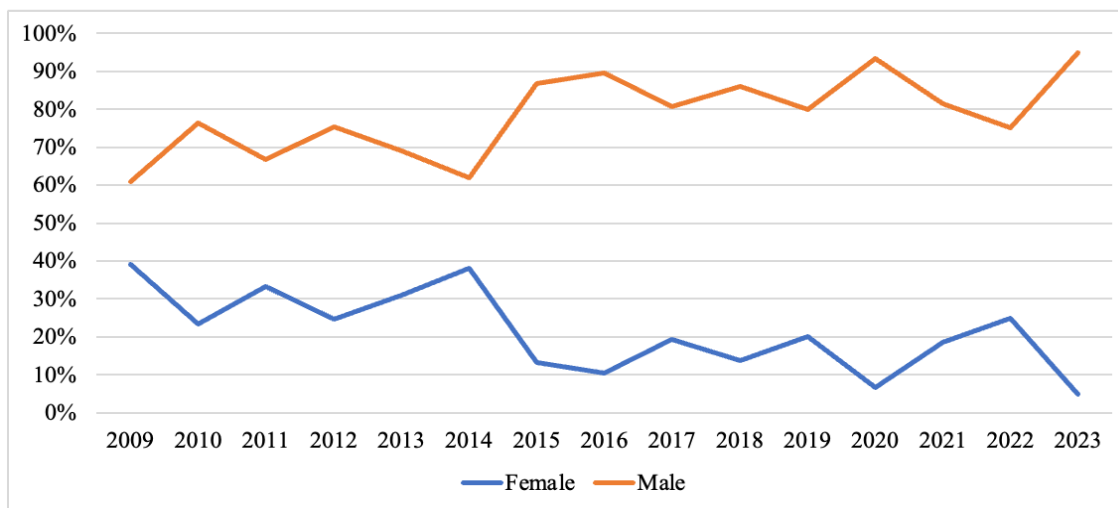


Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

Decedents' Demographics

There is no single demographic profile of a migrant who died while circumventing the Border Patrol's Falfurrias checkpoint.^{xvi} Within the dataset, 691 cases included the migrant's sex. For these cases, males constituted 76 percent of recovered remains and females made up the remaining 24 percent. These percentages shifted over time. From 2009 to 2014, females made up around 30 percent of recovered remains that had an identifiable sex. While, from 2015 to 2023, the percent of females decreased to 16 percent of total recovered remains.

Figure 7: Percent of Recovered Migrant Remains by Sex (2009-2023)

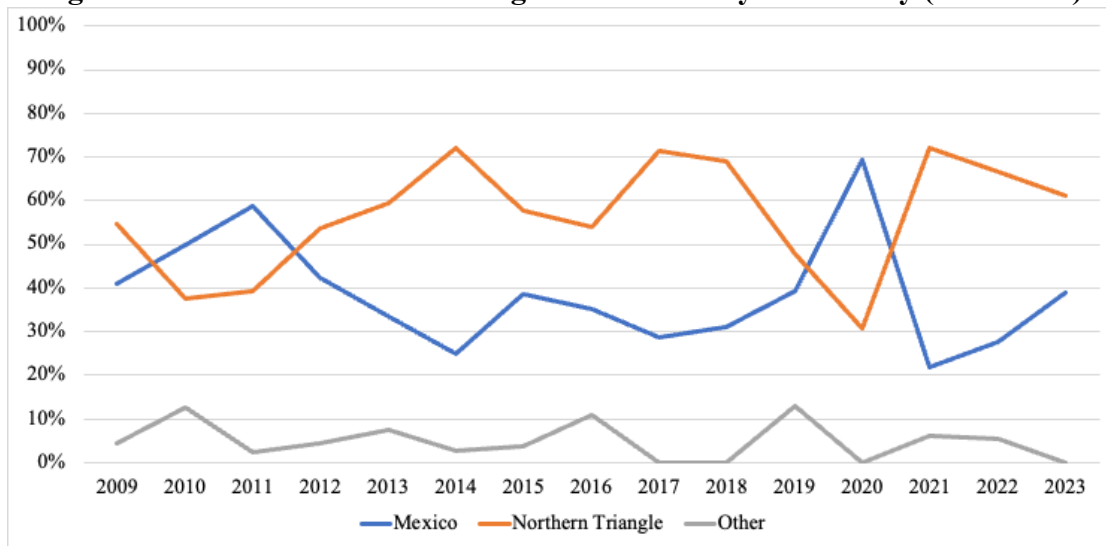


Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

The deceased migrants are mostly from Mexico and Central America, but also include individuals from other countries. Within the dataset, 542 cases (56 percent) had a listed nationality. Of these cases, Mexican nationals comprised approximately 36 percent of all recovered remains. The other most common countries of origin were El Salvador (23 percent), Honduras (20 percent), and Guatemala (16 percent), which this report groups together as the Northern Triangle countries. The remaining 5 percent were individuals from a range of countries, including Peru, Brazil, and Colombia. Over time, the percent of Mexican nationals has decreased, dropping from nearly 60 percent in 2011 to generally less than 40 percent in the following years.

^{xvi} Within the Brooks County Sheriff's Office's 964 cases of recovered migrant remains, 72 percent had at least one demographic indicator.

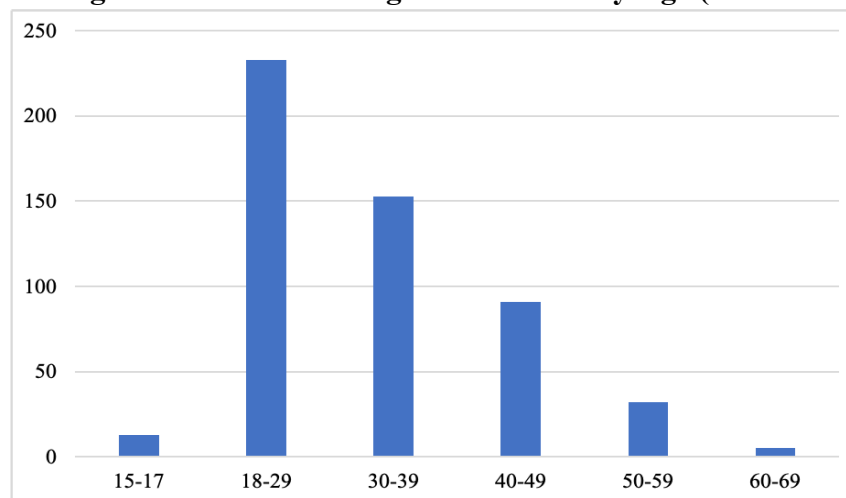
Figure 8: Percent of Recovered Migrant Remains by Nationality (2009-2023)



Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

Within the Brooks County Sheriff's Office incident reports, 527 cases (54 percent) included the decedent's age. Of these cases, 32 percent of the deceased individuals were between the ages of 18 and 39 years old, with a median age of 21 years old. However, the ages ranged from 15 to 69 years old, and included 12 minors. There were also five cases of deceased migrants who were more than 60 years old, including a 65-year-old woman whose remains were reunited with her son in Illinois.

Figure 9: Recovered Migrant Remains by Age (2009-2023)



Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

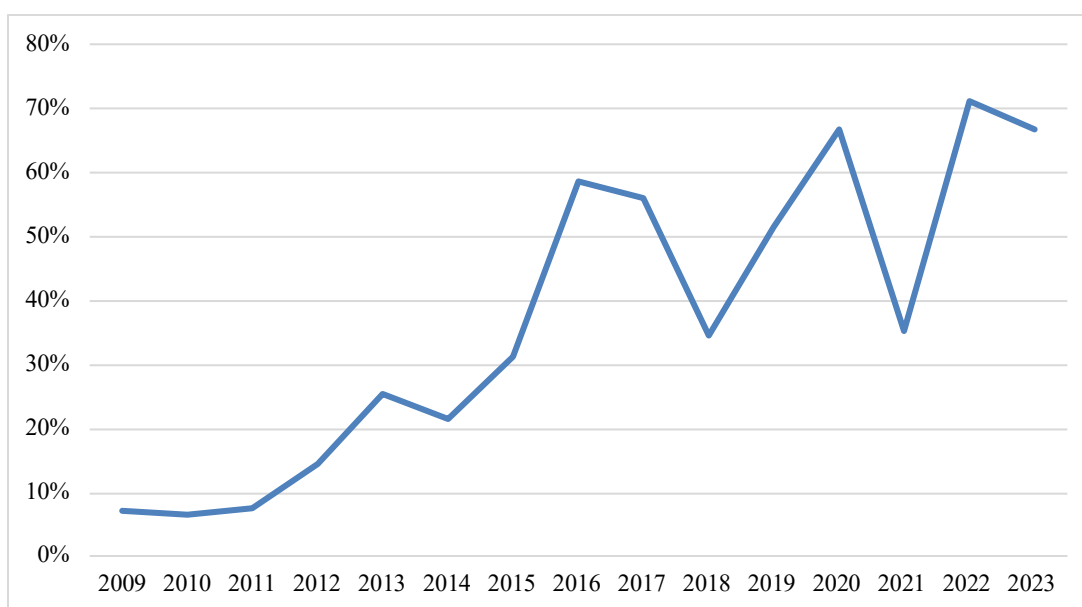
Decedents' Belongings and Clothing

Migrants carry various belongings as they traverse through Brooks County's private ranchland. When the Brooks County Sheriff's Office recovers migrant remains, they often find these items

on or alongside the body or skeletal remains. Some of the most common belongings include backpacks, wallets, money, religious articles, toiletries, and medicine. Migrants may also carry a list of family or friends' phone numbers or photos of their loved ones.

However, migrants' most essential belonging is their cell phone. Cell phones allow migrants to communicate with their families and seek help in case of an emergency. Since 2009, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office dataset shows an increase in the number of cell phones found with migrant remains. Over the last five years, nearly 50 percent of all recovered remains had a cell phone, and this percentage was even higher for non-skeletal remains (see Figure 10). However, not all areas in Brooks County have cell service, which limits cell phones' effectiveness for seeking help.

Figure 10: Recovered Non-Skeletal Migrant Remains Found with Cell Phones (2009-2023)^{xvii}

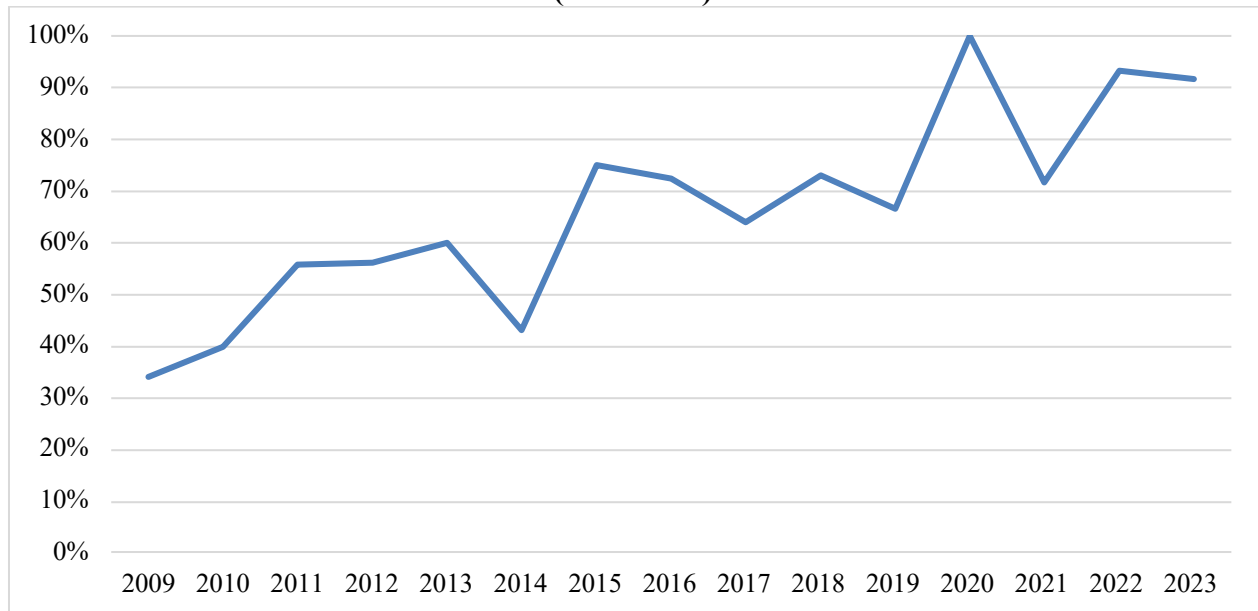


Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

Another important belonging is a form of identification. If a deceased migrant is found with a form of identification, it provides a strong starting point for identifying the remains and getting them repatriated or released to family members in the United States. Migrants may carry various forms of identification, including their passports, voter cards, birth certificates, and driver's licenses. Within the Brooks County Sheriff's Office dataset, nearly 50 percent of recovered remains included an identification, with even higher percentages for non-skeletal remains (see Figure 11).

^{xvii} This information is contingent on Sheriff's Office personnel accurately recording the discovered belongings.

Figure 11: Recovered Non-Skeletal Migrant Remains Found with Identification (2009-2023)



Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

Deceased migrants are also generally discovered wearing their clothing or with these items scattered in the nearby brush. Migrants traveling through Brooks County's ranchland typically wear long sleeves and long pants to help protect themselves from cacti, ticks, and prickly branches, and sneakers or boots for multiple days of walking.⁷¹ Migrants also tend to wear black or other dark-colored clothing in order to avoid detection. However, this dark and heavy clothing can absorb heat and make migrants even more vulnerable to heat exhaustion.

Chapter 3: Brooks County Migrant Search and Rescue, and Remains Recovery

Within Brooks County, various actors engage in search and rescue operations for migrants in distress and seek to recover migrant remains. These include federal and local government agencies—specifically the U.S. Border Patrol and the Brooks County Sheriff’s Office—and the South Texas Human Rights Center, which is a non-governmental organization.^{xviii} Each agency and organization has a specific mission, but these actors often work together to address migrant-related cases. The following chapter outlines how these actors respond to both a migrant in acute distress and a migrant who is presumed to be deceased. The sections focus on both the involved agencies and organizations and then highlight several primary challenges.

Response to a Migrant in Distress^{xix}

In Brooks County, the Border Patrol is the main agency that is responsible for responding to migrants in distress and conducting search and rescue operations.⁷² Brooks County is part of the Border Patrol’s Rio Grande Valley sector, and the agency operates a station in Falfurrias, which is the county’s largest town. Agents at the Falfurrias station are responsible for approximately 1,105 square miles of territory, including Brooks County and portions of neighboring Jim Wells County.⁷³ As of 2018, there were 310 Border Patrol agents assigned to the Falfurrias station, with most of these agents engaged in manning the nearby checkpoint.⁷⁴

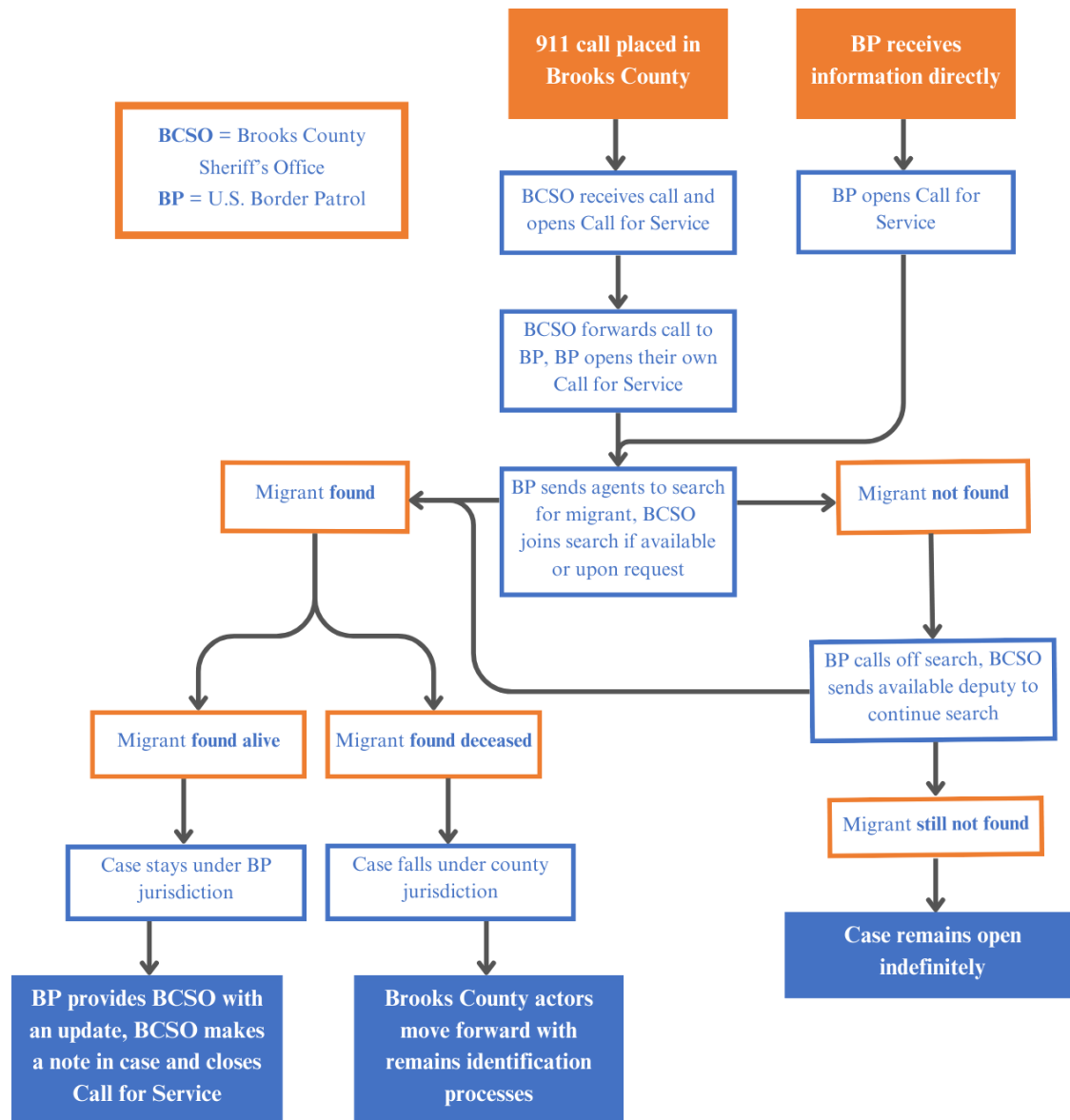
If a migrant is suffering from exposure to the elements in Brooks County’s ranchland and calls 911, it initiates a response process. First, the 911 call is automatically routed to the Brooks County Sheriff’s Office dispatcher. The Brooks County dispatcher opens an official ‘Call for Service’ and asks the migrant a series of predetermined questions to identify their location, physical state, and available resources, such as food, water, and remaining phone battery.⁷⁵ All incoming 911 calls in Brooks County are automatically triangulated between local cell towers in an attempt to pinpoint the caller’s location.^{76xx} If the caller only speaks Spanish and the responding 911 dispatcher does not, the call may be automatically transferred to Border Patrol agents or a bilingual Brooks County Sheriff’s Office deputy.

^{xviii} The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) responds to migrant deaths on the county’s highways. However, this chapter focuses on migrant deaths in ranchlands, which puts DPS’ work outside its scope.

^{xix} The term “migrant in distress” implies that the individual is likely still alive.

^{xx} Triangulation is a technique that aims to determine an object’s location by analyzing its position relative to three or more landmarks in close proximity. In the context of 911 calls, authorities use triangulation to locate the caller by analyzing the signals from multiple cell phone towers.

Figure 12: Response Pathways for a Migrant in Distress in Brooks County



Source: Authors' elaboration

Once the dispatcher collects this basic information, they transfer the caller to the Border Patrol's Falfurrias Station. The dispatcher remains on the line while the Border Patrol opens their own 'Call for Service' and asks additional questions to understand the caller's location and physical state. If the Border Patrol can determine the caller's location—either through exact GPS coordinates or

cell tower triangulation—the agency sends at least one agent to search for the migrant.^{xxi} The Border Patrol may also receive requests for immediate assistance from other channels, such as from family members, civil society organizations, or from a rescue beacon activation within the county.^{77xxii}

In particular, the South Texas Human Rights Center also helps channel missing migrant information to the responding authorities. The South Texas Human Rights Center is the only humanitarian organization operating in Brooks County.^{xxiii} Missing migrants’ family members can call the organization and provide a staff member with the migrant’s last known location and other relevant information. The South Texas Human Rights Center’s personnel then passes this information to the Border Patrol and advises the caller to contact their country’s consular office in Texas and file a missing person’s report.

Generally, Border Patrol agents undertake missing migrant searches on their own. Brooks County Sheriff’s Office personnel only participate if an available deputy is already near the search location or upon direct request.^{xxiv} The Brooks County Sheriff’s Office’s limited role in missing migrant searches is primarily due to staffing constraints.^{78xxv} The Sheriff’s Office only has one deputy on duty per shift, and this individual is tasked with overseeing the entire county. If the deputy engages in a missing migrant search on remote rangeland, then they may not be able to quickly respond to another emergency or complete their routine responsibilities.

The biggest search and rescue challenge is obtaining precise location information for the migrant in distress. At times, Border Patrol agents may have exact coordinates, such as when a migrant activates a rescue beacon, references a geo-located 911 placard, or shares their location through WhatsApp.^{79xxvi} However, many times, the location information is imprecise, with cell tower triangulation providing large search areas or migrants naming vague landmarks (i.e. a gate). In cases without specific location information, authorities may not even initiate a search.

^{xxi} Several factors may influence this response, such as Border Patrol agents’ confidence in the location information, a migrant’s perceived physical state, and Border Patrol agents’ availability, including both non-specialized agents and those from the Border Search Trauma and Rescue (BORSTAR) unit.

^{xxii} The Border Patrol has deployed nine rescue beacons within Brooks County. These rescue beacons have a red button that migrants can push to request assistance.

^{xxiii} In July 2013, the South Texas Human Rights Center began setting up water stations throughout Brooks County and the surrounding areas to provide humanitarian aid to migrants walking through the brush. These water stations consist of large blue plastic barrels that are filled with water jugs labeled “water” in both English and Spanish. The plastic barrels are marked with a flag on top of a 30-foot-tall flagpole. The organization currently maintains 120 water stations in Brooks County that can hold up to six large water jugs.

^{xxiv} The Brooks County Sheriff’s Office’s volunteer deputy may occasionally accompany the Border Patrol during their initial search.

^{xxv} As of March 2024, the Brooks County Sheriff’s Office was headed by Sheriff Urbino “Benny” Martinez and employed a small team of command staff, five patrol officers, three investigators, 911 dispatchers, and a volunteer deputy. The volunteer deputy, Don White, joined the Brooks County Sheriff’s Office in 2014, and has focused his efforts on migrant search and rescue and remains recovery. Deputy White also runs the Remote Wildlands Search and Recovery organization, which is an independent non-profit.

^{xxvi} The Rio Grande Valley sector’s Missing Migrant Program encompasses Brooks County and deploys “911 placards” to assist migrants in distress. These “911 placards” are signs posted on various landmarks and fences that are linked to GPS coordinates. They aim to improve the location accuracy for finding migrants in distress.

Additionally, the caller needs to remain in their original location. If the migrant changes locations, it may be impossible for Border Patrol agents to find the individual.⁸⁰

Once Border Patrol agents undertake a search, the outcome determines the next steps. For example, if Border Patrol agents find the individual, the responding agents generally offer basic medical care and take the migrant into federal custody.^{81xxvii} However, if Border Patrol agents discover a deceased individual, the responding agents contact the Brooks County Sheriff's Office and the case switches over to county level authorities. Finally, if Border Patrol agents do not find the migrant or the search is deemed to be incomplete (e.g. agents did not find all of the missing migrants), then the agents will generally update the Brooks County Sheriff's Office. In these cases, the Sheriff's Office may send the volunteer deputy to continue the search.^{xxviii}

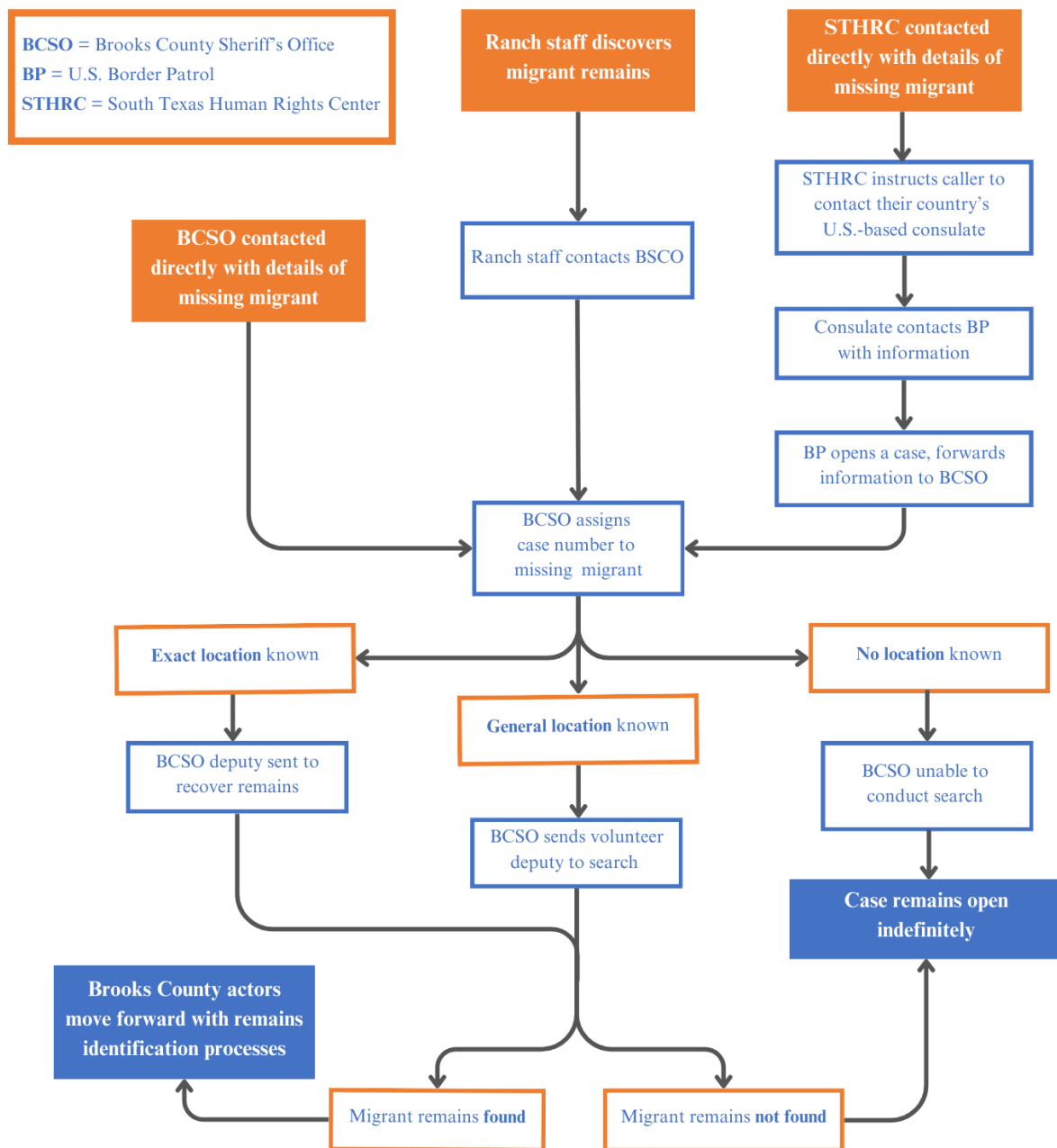
Response to a Deceased Migrant

The Brooks County Sheriff's Office is the primary agency in charge of responding to cases where the migrant is presumed or found to be deceased. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office may receive information or search requests through a range of channels. As previously mentioned, the Border Patrol may request assistance during an active search or contact the Sheriff's Office to continue a search that was unsuccessful or incomplete. Additionally, Brooks County Sheriff's Office personnel may also receive calls from migrants' family members or local ranch staff who discover migrant remains on their property.

^{xxvii} If the case originated with a 911 call, Border Patrol agents update the Brooks County Sheriff's Office on the case outcome. This allows the 911 dispatchers to close their original Call for Service. If the case originated outside of a 911 call, Border Patrol agents do not necessarily notify the Brooks County Brooks County Sheriff's Office regarding the case outcome.

^{xxviii} Brooks County Sheriff's Office deputies need ranch owner permission to continue an unsuccessful Border Patrol search.

Figure 13: Response Pathways for a Presumed Deceased Migrant in Brooks County^{xxix}



Source: Authors' elaboration

When the Sheriff's Office receives a report of migrant remains at a specific location, a deputy travels to the scene. The deputy typically meets with ranch staff where the remains were discovered and often meets with Border Patrol agents who may have been involved in the discovery.⁸² The

^{xxix} "Presumed deceased" refers to situations when a migrant has been missing for an extended period of time.

Brooks County Justice of the Peace may also be present, in order to declare the time of death and begin an inquest.^{83xxx} The deputy documents the scene through photographs, notes the GPS coordinates, and searches for any personal belongings in the surrounding areas. After returning to the Sheriff's Office, the deputy writes a detailed incident report that records the relevant information.^{xxx}

Brooks County authorities are responsible for storing and processing migrant remains. Falfurrias' funeral homes generally reserve two to three spaces for migrants. However, this low number means that the county stores non-skeletal migrant remains in the county morgue—which is a refrigerated mobile trailer next to the Brooks County jail—and skeletal remains in the Brooks County Sheriff's Office evidence room.^{xxxii} To identify remains, members of the Border Patrol's Missing Migrant Program currently fingerprint non-skeletal remains and attempt to match them to an individual in the agency's databases. If the remains require an autopsy, Brooks County officials arrange for the remains to be sent to the Medical Examiner's Office in Corpus Christi. For skeletal remains, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office's volunteer deputy transfers the remains to Texas State University for DNA testing.^{xxxiii}

Primary Challenges for Search and Rescue Operations

Within Brooks County, responding agencies and organizations face a range of challenges when attempting to assist migrants in distress and locate migrant remains. The following sections highlight three central challenges. The first challenge involves migrants' hesitation to seek help, since they are aware that the Border Patrol apprehends and generally deports any individual who calls 911 or activates a rescue beacon. The second challenge centers on access to private ranchland, as landowners decide if and when law enforcement and other actors can conduct non-urgent searches and humanitarian activities on their property. While the third challenge centers on Brooks County's limited personnel and resources for engaging in migrant search and rescue and recovering migrant remains.

Migrant Hesitation and Rescue Response Times

By the time that migrants reach Brooks County, they are in the last stage of their clandestine migration journey. These individuals are often aware that the Border Patrol's highway checkpoints are the final enforcement barrier before they reach the U.S. interior. Migrants are also aware that any contact with U.S. authorities will result in their apprehension and likely deportation. As a result, migrants may delay seeking medical assistance until they can no longer continue walking.

^{xxx} The Brooks County Justice of the Peace has a standing agreement with the Brooks County Sheriff's Office that they do not have to be present for each remains retrieval. However, the Justice of the Peace prefers to be present when the remains are in a state of decomposition (i.e. non-skeletal).

^{xxx} These incident reports serve as the basis for Chapter Two's data analysis.

^{xxxii} The morgue can hold up to forty bodies and is more cost effective than a funeral home. Funeral homes charge a daily set amount for each set of migrant remains, but the morgue's only cost is the electricity bill.

^{xxxiii} Texas State University's Forensic Anthropology Center runs Operation Identification, which aims to identify human remains within South Texas.

At this point, the individual may be weak from dehydration and exposure to the heat or cold, and may not survive the time it takes for medical assistance to arrive.^{xxxiv}

Further, various factors may block migrants from even being able to seek medical assistance. First, these individuals must have a cell phone to be able to call 911 for help. While most migrants appear to carry a cell phone, as detailed in Chapter Two, there are always exceptions.^{xxxv} Second, migrants must have sufficient cell phone battery to place a call, which can be a challenge after spending multiple days in the brush. Third, the individuals must be able to connect to a cell tower and receive sufficient service to place the phone call. However, portions of Brooks County do not have cell service, and migrants in these areas are unable to call 911.

Private Land Access

Brooks County is predominantly private ranchland, with ranch owners controlling access to their property. Border Patrol agents and Brooks County Sheriff's Office personnel can always enter private ranches when actively pursuing individuals, following up on specific information about a migrant in distress, or traveling to recover migrant remains. However, landowners can decide whether to allow authorities onto their property for non-urgent searches. These landowners also decide if the Border Patrol can place rescue beacons or 911 placards on their land or if the South Texas Human Rights Center can set up water stations.^{xxxvi}

Some ranch owners have reservations about allowing authorities and organizations access to their property. First, many ranchers generate income through hunting activities, especially from November to February, and seek to avoid additional actors on their property during this time. Second, many ranchers worry that migrant death prevention activities—such as rescue beacons and water stations—may increase migrant traffic through their land. These ranchers are often particularly concerned about associated costs and damages to their property. For example, smugglers routinely cut fences and gates to gain access to ranches, which can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars to repair.^{xxxvii} In 2014, a rancher in Brooks County told a *Texas Observer* reporter that he spends approximately \$20,000 a year to repair migration-related damages.⁸⁴ Livestock can also escape through cut fences or get sick after ingesting trash that was left behind by migrant groups.

When authorities enter a ranch—such as Border Patrol agents or Brooks County Sheriff's Office personnel—they are expected to follow “ranch etiquette.” This means understanding and

^{xxxiv} The Border Patrol and Brooks County Sheriff's Office's response times vary by case, and depend on the location information's accuracy and available personnel and resources.

^{xxxv} The Brooks County Sheriff's Office reports cases where certain migrant smugglers confiscate migrants' phones in a bid to avoid detection.

^{xxxvi} Within Brooks County, relationships with landowners are a significant component of migrant search and rescue and remains recovery. These relationships can take years to build, which makes it difficult for outside individuals and organizations to address migrant deaths in the area.

^{xxxvii} Typically, a 30-to-50-foot fence can cost around \$600 to \$800 to repair. Game fences are even more expensive, with repair costs ranging from \$3,000 to \$5,000 for just 12 feet. A game fence, also known as a wildlife fence, is a tall barrier designed to contain game animals. It's much taller than a standard agricultural or property boundary fence.

respecting the ranch owner's rules and expectations. These rules may include taking care to avoid damaging any fencing, being considerate of the livestock herds, closing gates, preserving waterways, and other similar considerations. Ranch owners reserve the right to revoke property access at any time, which makes following ranch etiquette an important component of search and rescue and the recovery of migrant remains.

Lack of Personnel & Resources

According to the 2022 U.S. Census, Brooks County was one of the poorest counties in Texas. At the time, 28 percent of the county's nearly 7,000 person population lived below the poverty line and the median income was \$30,566.⁸⁵ As a result, Brooks County's tax revenues are also low, which constrains county-level actors' budgets for addressing migrant deaths. This is particularly challenging, since there are a number of costs associated with migrant search and rescue, remains recovery, and post-mortem processing. These costs include personnel time, specialized equipment, gas, remains transport, decedent identification, storage, and burials, which can total between \$1,000 and \$6,000 per person.⁸⁶

Additionally, Brooks County does not have strong emergency medical infrastructure. First and foremost, there is no hospital in the county. Both residents and migrants in distress have to travel more than 50 miles to the nearest hospital in Kingsville, Texas. Second, Brooks County contracts only two ambulances for the entire county's emergency medical services. These two ambulances respond to all emergency calls from both residents and migrants. Overall, Brooks County's lack of resources can make it difficult to attract specialized personnel from outside of the area, especially for extended periods of time.

Chapter 4: Recommendations

There is no one policy step that will address migrant deaths in Brooks County, as these deaths are shaped by decades of restrictive immigration policy and subsequent enforcement efforts. This means that to fully respond to deaths in Brooks County would require federal-level changes to policies and enforcement efforts that are well beyond the scope of this report. However, even without these larger structural changes, this report aims to provide the Brooks County Sheriff's Office with a series of recommendations for building out their rescue and recovery efforts.

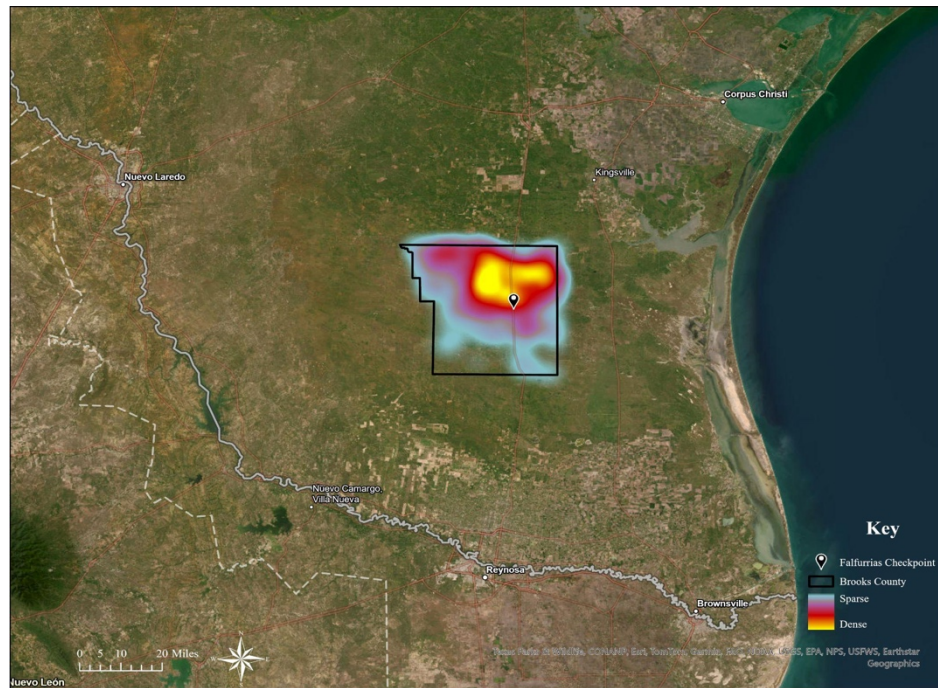
This report's recommendations are divided into four categories. These categories include 1) using data visualizations to spotlight migrant deaths, 2) forming strategic partnerships to bring in more search and rescue personnel, 3) prioritizing the procurement of specialized equipment, and 4) sharing life-saving information with news media and migrant-facing organizations. This section lays out each recommendation's specific details and potential next steps.

1. Use Data Visualizations to Highlight Migrant Death Challenges

Brooks County Sheriff's Office personnel document every migrant death in the county through incident reports. These incident reports are written in narrative form but each report generally contains standard information, such as GPS coordinates, the discovering party, belongings, and any available demographic information. Currently, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office only provides these reports to staff and partners or to other entities upon request. This report recommends that the Sheriff's Office explore ways to use these incident reports to increase awareness about migrant deaths within the county. In particular, the report encourages the Brooks County Sheriff's Office to prioritize using the incident reports to create publicly available maps of recovered migrant remains and to collaborate with outside groups doing similar work.

- ***Create Visuals of Migrant Death Data.*** The Brooks County Sheriff's Office's keeps its migrant death reports in its online data system and in physical binders within its office. While this is standard record keeping, it also keeps the reports' rich information away from a wider audience. This report recommends that the Brooks County Sheriff's Office highlights migrant deaths in the county through publicly available maps. These maps could show each geo-located migrant death or be a heat map that conveys total numbers without sharing exact GPS coordinates (see Figure 14). These maps would convey the scope and frequency of migrant deaths within the county, and potentially influence external decision-making and resource allocation for migrant deaths.

Figure 14: Heat Map of Recovered Migrant Remains in Brooks County (2009-2023)



Data source: Brooks County Sheriff's Office

- ***Prioritize Collaboration with Other Groups that are Mapping Deaths.*** Given the Brooks County Sheriff's Office's limited staffing, this report acknowledges that the Sheriff's Office may not have the capacity to build and maintain its own maps. In response, this report recommends that the Brooks County Sheriff's Office prioritize partnerships with external universities and organizations to create these maps. In these partnerships, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office would send the incident report or the specific GPS coordinates directly to the partner, who would create and maintain the migrant death maps. There are already a range of external groups that maintain these types of maps, such as Humane Borders in Arizona, the International Organization for Migration's Missing Migrant Project, and Texas State University's new efforts to map migrant deaths along the border.

2. Form Strategic Partnerships to Bring in More Search and Rescue Personnel

As of March 2024, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office had only five patrol officers for the entire county and one volunteer deputy focused on migrant search and rescue and remains recovery. However, due to budget constraints, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office has been unable to hire additional personnel. To address this challenge, this report recommends that the Brooks County Sheriff's Office forge partnerships with outside organizations such as established search and rescue teams, cadaver dog teams, and local universities. These types of partnerships would increase the Sheriff's Office's personnel and resources for search and rescue and the recovery of migrant remains without affecting the agency's budget.

- ***Partner with Established Search and Rescue Organizations.*** Across Texas, there are multiple search and rescue organizations that operate in urban and rural contexts. This report recommends that the Brooks County Sheriff's Office explore ways to partner with one or several of these organizations. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office would oversee these partnerships, and the organizations' search and rescue personnel could travel to the county on rotations for urgent and non-urgent searches. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office could also provide a short, standardized training session or training video to help these individuals understand Brooks County's context and search and rescue dynamics.
- ***Partner with Cadaver Dog Teams.*** Currently, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office does not have a fully trained cadaver dog, but periodically receives visits from an outside cadaver dog team. Specialty-trained dogs would be an asset in locating individuals or remains in Brooks County's challenging terrain.⁸⁷ This report recommends that the Brooks County Sheriff's Office explore possible collaborations with dog trainers and cadaver dog organizations for rotations in Brooks County. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office would oversee the partnerships and guide the cadaver dog teams for urgent and non-urgent searches.
- ***Brooks County Sheriff's Office Summer Internship Program.*** Brooks County does not have its own institution of higher education, but the county is surrounded by various colleges and universities. This report recommends that the Brooks County Sheriff's Office explore the possibility of partnering with one or more colleges or universities and establishing a summer internship program focused on migrant search and rescue. An internship program would connect the Brooks County Sheriff's Office with undergraduate and graduate students, who could participate in grid searches, data collection, and data analysis and visualizations. The students would also be able to fulfill school internship requirements and gain practical experience.

3. Prioritize Procurement of Specialized Equipment

The Brooks County Sheriff's Office has the appropriate equipment for routine search and rescue missions, but there are specialized items that could enhance its personnel's work. This report recommends that, when possible, the Sheriff's Office should prioritize the procurement of specialized search and rescue equipment to improve its personnel's capabilities and mobility. To purchase this equipment, this report suggests exploring a wider range of federal, state, and private grants that might cover search and rescue activities.

- ***Prioritize Specialized Search and Rescue Equipment.*** Currently, Brooks County Sheriff's Office personnel utilize a range of tools to search for migrants in distress. These tools include drones with night vision and off-road trucks. However, more specialized equipment could better help to locate and reach an individual during a time-sensitive emergency. In particular, this report recommends prioritizing the procurement of the following equipment:

- **Drones.** The Brooks County Sheriff's Office currently operates one drone with night vision capabilities. This report recommends purchasing drones that have additional advanced imaging technologies and that could carry small items. These capabilities would allow Sheriff's Office personnel to better survey difficult areas, especially in adverse weather or low-light conditions. They would also allow the first responders to quickly deliver critical supplies, such as water, upon finding the individual in distress.
- **Enhanced Mobility Equipment.** The Brooks County Sheriff's Office does not currently operate any all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), utility-task vehicles (UTVs), or specialized trailers. This report recommends prioritizing the procurement of these types of vehicles to enhance Sheriff's Office personnel's mobility in challenging terrains and allow them to carry more supplies to remote areas. In particular, these types of vehicles could transport more equipment and personnel to areas that regular vehicles would not be able to reach.
- **Explore a Diverse Range of Search and Rescue Funding Opportunities.** To finance this equipment, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office would likely need additional funding sources. Currently, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office finances its non-routine migrant search and rescue activities through small grants. However, to expand these activities and ensure their stability over the coming years, this report recommends that the Brooks County Sheriff's Office explores a wider range of funding opportunities. These opportunities include potential federal funding from the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security, and Texas state funding from the Governor's Office and the Department of Public Safety. Finally, private organizations and individuals may also be interested in establishing programs to support search and rescue activities and equipment.

4. Share Life-Saving Information with News Media and Migrant-Facing Organizations

Migrants are often aware that unauthorized migration can be dangerous, but they may not have specific information on how to recognize emergency situations and seek help. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office is uniquely positioned to offer this type of life-saving information. This report recommends that Sheriff's Office personnel share targeted information with media outlets and external organizations that could save migrants' lives and assist with identifying deceased individuals.

- **Collaborate with External Partners to Provide Life-Saving Information.** Brooks County Sheriff's Office personnel have deep expertise regarding South Texas ranchland. This experience uniquely positions them to be able to provide specific pieces of information that could save migrants' lives or allow them to be identified after death. While Sheriff's Office personnel do not communicate with migrants before they begin walking through the county's ranchland, they can convey this information to news media or civil society organizations that work with migrants. This type of information could include:

- ***Warning Signs for Heat Stroke or Dehydration.*** Migrants passing through Brooks County may face extreme temperatures and a lack of clean, drinking water.⁸⁸ However, migrants may not recognize that they are entering a dangerous physical state until it is too late. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office could share tips on how to notice heat exposure and dehydration's initial effects before they become life-threatening, such as ceasing to sweat or becoming cold to the touch and disoriented.
- ***How to Seek Medical Assistance.*** Migrants in distress can call 911 to receive medical assistance. However, some migrants use their last calls to contact family members and other loved ones. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office should constantly reiterate the steps for migrants and their families to seek immediate medical assistance. This includes emphasizing that migrants in the brush should call 911 if they are having a medical emergency. Further, it means noting that family members should immediately contact the Border Patrol, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office, and their country's consular services in Texas to request medical assistance for a migrant in distress.
- ***Ways to Improve Chances of Post-Mortem Identification.*** Brooks County is almost entirely composed of private rangeland, and it can be nearly impossible to find a missing migrant without specific location information. To facilitate search and rescue operations, the Brooks County Sheriff's Office should share tips that could help facilitate search and rescue efforts for a missing migrant. For example, Sheriff's Office personnel could suggest that migrants share their initial GPS coordinates with loved ones, which would help to provide a general search area. Additionally, they could reiterate that migrants should always carry at least one form of identification.
- ***Report Those Left Behind to Local Authorities.*** Migrants travel through Brooks County in groups. If an individual cannot keep up with the rest of the group, the guide may leave that person behind. The Brooks County Sheriff's Office should ask migrants to take specific steps if someone in their group is left behind. These steps include 1) recording the individual's GPS coordinates via a WhatsApp location message or pin drop and 2) contacting the Border Patrol or Brooks County Sheriff's Office with this information as soon as possible. Sheriff's Office personnel should reiterate that this information can be shared anonymously.

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