

CENTRAL AMERICA & MEXICO POLICY INITIATIVE

THE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY ALONG THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER

FALL 2025 – SPRING 2026



Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs

Policy Research Project Report

Number 232

The Department of Public Safety Along the Texas-Mexico Border

Project Directed by

Stephanie Leutert

A report by the Policy Research Project

on State Level Enforcement Along the Texas-Mexico Border

April 2026

The LBJ School of Public Affairs publishes a wide range of public policy issue titles.

ISBN-10: 978-1-951006-27-3

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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 enforcement efforts along the Texas-Mexico border. The students conducted their analysis on two specific actors—the Texas National Guard and the Texas Department of Public Safety—and produced corresponding policy reports. The reports were prepared for the class client: the Texas Immigration Law Council (TxILC), which is a nonpartisan center that coordinates public policy work on immigration and creates resources for legal service providers.

The PRP 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 border enforcement, migration dynamics, and migrant risk along the border. This includes through phone interviews and in-person meetings.

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List of Acronyms

ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
BSOC	Border Security Operations Center
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CLE	Criminal Law Enforcement
DPS	Texas Department of Public Safety
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
INM	National Migration Institute (<i>Instituto Nacional de Migración</i>)
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
MHPU	Mounted Horse Patrol Unit
SWAT	Special Weapons and Tactics
TMU	Tactical Marine Unit
USCIS	U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

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

Border enforcement in the United States has historically been treated as an exclusively federal responsibility. For more than a century, the federal government has exercised primary authority over immigration, foreign affairs, and international borders, and organized itself to carry out these responsibilities. Today, the federal agencies in charge of border enforcement involve the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) under the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and its components of the U.S. Border Patrol and the Office of Field Operations. These agencies seek to regulate the entry of people and goods into the United States and to enforce immigration law along U.S. borders.

However, over the past three decades, various states have launched state-led border security efforts. In particular, Texas has transformed its borders by deploying state agencies to conduct a wide range of border enforcement, criminal prosecution, and immigration-related activities. These efforts began in 2005—as Texas launched its state operations at the border—and continue through today. Over the past five years, Texas leaders have launched Operation Lone Star to address cross-border movements and transformed state-led border security efforts throughout the state and beyond.

This report focuses on the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS). DPS' earliest origins in the Texas Rangers mean that it has a long history of guarding Texas' frontiers. Yet, its contemporary role in border enforcement began only two decades ago. During this time, DPS has gradually expanded from its traditional statewide policing role into a more sustained presence along the Texas-Mexico border, which combines patrol operations, intelligence gathering, and interagency coordination. These activities have shifted how DPS conducts border enforcement and have also produced significant operational, fiscal, and political effects across not only Texas but also the federal government.

This policy report seeks to answer three specific research questions: 1) how has DPS historically engaged with border security and migration enforcement in Texas? 2) what role does DPS currently play in border security and migration enforcement, particularly as part of Operation Lone Star? And 3) what have been the outcomes and effects of these enforcement efforts? To answer these three questions, we used a mixed methods approach. Specifically, we reviewed and analyzed publicly available news articles, press releases, and social media posts, requested data and internal materials from DPS, and conducted interviews with DPS troopers, members of civil-society organizations and public policy organizations, immigration attorneys, and journalists. Taken together, this approach allowed us to gain a varied perspective on DPS' involvement in border enforcement.

The report has various findings. First, it finds that DPS—in its origins in the Texas Rangers—has played a role in securing the Texas frontier and borders since the 1800s. Secondly, it finds that DPS currently plays a wide-ranging role in Texas border security, including engaging in highway patrols, river patrols, deployments on the banks of the Rio Grande and in ranchland brush teams, and through surveillance. Third, and finally, the report finds that DPS' current engagement in border enforcement has created a range of effects, including for DPS troopers and agency

dynamics, throughout Texas border and interior counties, nationwide as a driver of national political agendas, and as a source of international friction.

This policy report is structured into three chapters. Chapter One examines DPS' historical role in border security, including the agency's origins within the state and its border enforcement activities before Operation Lone Star. Chapter Two examines DPS' current role in border enforcement as part of Operation Lone Star. Finally, Chapter Three delves into DPS' enforcement efforts' effects and outcomes, including on DPS itself, migrant safety, and across Texas and the United States.

Chapter 1: The Texas Department of Public Safety's Origins and Border Activities

1810s-1820s: The First Call for Texas Rangers

The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) traces its origins 200 years back in history to the beginning of the fabled Texas Rangers frontier militia. Its story begins soon after 1821, when Mexico achieved independence from Spain after an 11-year armed struggle. The country's new Constitution combined the Mexican province of Tejas (modern-day Texas) with the more heavily populated Coahuila region to form the new province of *Coahuila y Tejas*.ⁱ At the time, the Texas-based settlements were isolated and largely under-populated, prompting the Mexican government to continue the Spanish tradition of offering *empresario* grants to individuals who agreed to develop settlements that could act as a buffer against Indian tribes and the expanding American republic.ⁱⁱ

Stephen F. Austin was the first Anglo-American settler to receive an *empresario* grant and subsequently colonize Texas' central and eastern regions.ⁱⁱⁱ The *empresario* grants required settlers to learn Spanish, practice Catholicism, and emancipate their slaves.^{iv} In practice, Anglo-American settlers continued to arrive in the area as groups of sanctioned and unsanctioned migrants, and frequently disregarded the Mexican government's requirements.^v The influx of settlers into Texas' eastern plains created violent conflicts with the numerous Native-American tribes who lived in the region. These groups—including the Tonkawa, Tawakoni, Wichita, Lipan Apache, and the Comanche—responded to the changes by raiding the new Anglo-American settlements.^{vi}

In August 1823, Austin called for a force of ten Rangers to defend the frontier and protect settlements from hostile attacks.^{vii} This call emerged from concerns over the new colonies' viability and the lack of a regular army for protection. The Ranger corps disbanded shortly after its conception, but Austin soon issued a new call for a Ranger company.^{viii} In 1826, Austin and the six other district leaders agreed that they would maintain a force of 20 to 30 Rangers to protect the settlements.^{ix} They required that every Texan landowner, or a hired substitute, serve in this new Rangers corps for at least a month for every half league of land that they owned.^x This new militia engaged in various activities, including confronting Tonkawa horse thieves, forcing the Karankawa to remain west of the San Antonio river, and defeating Tawakoni horse raids.^{xi}

1830s-1840s: The Texas Rangers and the Republic of Texas

The Texas Revolution marked the Texas Rangers' emergence as an established law enforcement entity. By 1834, more than 30,000 Anglo-Americans—both sanctioned and unsanctioned—inhabited Texas, far outnumbering the Texas-Mexican community (*Tejanos*).^{xii} This imbalance was noticeable, as the American settlers stuck to their own traditions, and rejected Mexico's official religion of Catholicism and the Spanish language.^{xiii} Further, these settlers espoused racism against the Texas-Mexican community and supported U.S. southerners' enslavement of Black people. Even though, in 1823, Mexico had abolished slavery by federal decree, thereby outlawing it across the province of Texas.^{xiv}

Over time, the tensions between Texas and Mexico City began to build. Mexican authorities responded to the growing number of Anglo-Americans in Texas by restricting immigration into the state, which further inflamed tensions with the settlers.^{xv} As central authority tightened, Anglo settlers and *Tejano* federalists, who supported greater local autonomy, began forming alliances in preparation for conflict.^{xvi} Yet, at the same time, Mexico was grappling with its own national-level political turmoil. In 1834, General Antonio López de Santa Anna dissolved Congress and, by 1835, he had suspended the federalist Constitution and consolidated power, thus deepening instability in Mexico City.^{xvii} Soon after, in October 1835, pressures with Texas erupted in the town of Gonzales, with the first armed skirmish between the Mexican military and Texan militias.^{xviii}

These battles kicked off the Texas Revolution, and Texas military leaders quickly recognized the need for civilian protection. On November 20, 1835, Texas' Permanent Council (the first provisional government) called for three Ranger companies, which would act as mounted horsemen independent from both the Texas volunteer army and the state's militias.^{xix} This date generally marks the Texas Ranger's official beginning. The newly minted force was charged with protecting civilian populations in Texas from Mexico's invading army and marauding Indians.

The Texas Rangers ultimately played only a minor part in the Texas Revolution. However, during the following years, they took on a larger role in violent conflicts with Native American groups.^{xx} During the Texas Revolution, the Texas Permanent Council had successfully sought friendship and trade with the tribes throughout the region, but this approach dissolved after Texas' independence.^{xxi} During the subsequent Republic period, the Rangers began engaging in brutal campaigns against the Native tribes, including the Apache, Keechi, Tawakoni, Waco, and the Comanche.^{xxii} Of these groups, the Anglo settlers saw the Comanche as the greatest threat to their territorial expansion, fueling escalating levels of violence.^{xxiii} Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the Rangers served as the Republic's primary frontier force, and these fights with the Comanche and others lasted well into the following decades.

1845-1876: Texas Becomes a U.S. State and The Texas Rangers' Early Days

On December 29, 1845, the United States annexed Texas as the country's 28th state.^{xxiv} Mexico refused to recognize Texas's annexation and rejected the state's claims that its southern border was the Rio Grande river. Instead, Mexico continued to consider the more inland Nueces river as the Texas-Mexico border, creating tension between the two nations.^{xxv} When President James Polk unsuccessfully attempted to purchase California and New Mexico from Mexico, he moved troops into the disputed zone between the Rio Grande and Nueces River, causing a skirmish with Mexican troops.^{xxvi} On April 26, 1846, the United States invaded Mexico as a result of the skirmish, marking the start of the Mexican-American War. A little more than two weeks later, on May 13, 1846, Congress formally declared war.^{xxvii}

During the Mexican-American War, the Texas Rangers primarily played a supporting role. The Rangers were tasked with patrolling the Texas frontier to prevent attacks. They had some success in locating Mexican army camps and guerrilla fighters, providing scouting services, and carrying out slave hunts.^{xxviii} Throughout the conflict, the Rangers gained a controversial reputation for their often violent tactics, such as burning down houses and murdering civilians.^{xxix} While many

Americans and politicians referred to the Ranger's role in the war as heroic, many Mexicans nicknamed them the Texas devils (*los diablos Tejanos*).^{xxx}

After the Mexican-American War, the Texas Rangers shifted their focus back to fighting the region's Indian tribes.¹ While the Rangers initially defended against and responded to attacks, they also began to actively track the Native American tribes and preemptively attack them.^{xxxi} In 1858, Texas Ranger John Salmon "Rip" Ford led 100 Rangers in a six-month campaign against the Comanches, crossing into Native American territory and attacking 600 Comanches in their camp on Little Robe Creek.^{xxxii} In Texas authorities' eyes, the battle's success confirmed that Texas Rangers were more proactive than the U.S. army in defending Texas from Native American tribes, boosting the state's reliance on the Rangers for protection. Eventually, Native Americans tribes' power weakened from violence and disease, and battles with the Texas Rangers pushed them northward.

With fewer large-scale conflicts along the Texas frontier, the Texas Rangers began turning their attention to other issues. Following Texas's secession from the Union in 1861—which was motivated by the state's economic dependency on slavery and a belief that the Union had failed to protect Texans from Mexican bandits and Native American tribes—the Texas Rangers began supporting Confederate War efforts.^{xxxiii} During the Civil War, former Texas Rangers went on to serve in numerous Confederate units, and played a role in the battles of Antietam, Gaines' Mill and Gettysburg. Several also rose to high-ranking leadership positions in the Confederate Army.

After the Civil War, in 1865, the U.S. federal government refused to allow any state "to possess any force of armed men" and the Texas Rangers were temporarily disbanded.^{xxxiv} However, with federal troops withdrawn from the area, Native tribes became emboldened in their raids and frontier settlements were increasingly vulnerable. In May 1874, the Texas legislature approved a new force of Texas Rangers.^{xxxv} Governor Richard Coke justified the return of the Texas Rangers by citing concerns over the frontier, such as an increase in "horse theft, scalping, murder and kidnapping...along the line of settlement."^{xxxvi} The newly formalized force consisted of six companies of 25 Rangers, led by one captain and two lieutenants.^{xxxvii} The Rangers' main focus was once again frontier defense.

From 1874 to 1876, the Rangers participated in 21 frontier battles against Native American tribes in the Texas panhandle.^{xxxviii} Eventually, the U.S. military joined the Texas Rangers to fight against the tribes, particularly the Comanche, and take back control of the frontier. By the late 1870s, most Comanche and Kiowa bands had been forced into reservations, further pushed by the near extinction of the buffalo.^{xxxix} In 1880, the U.S. Congress passed a bill "prohibiting military or Indian Bureau officials from granting passes to any reservation Indian who wished to enter the Lone Star State."^{xl} The measure symbolically closed Texas to Native Americans, formalizing a reality already imposed through military defeat and forced relocation.^{xli}

¹ In September 1849, the U.S. Army federalized three Ranger companies. In March 1850, it also added a fourth Ranger company. These units guarded the frontier and provided supplemental support to the U.S. army.

1880s-1920s: The Texas Rangers' Dark Days

Throughout the late nineteenth century, the Rangers' role shifted yet again. As the frontier disappeared, the Rangers reorganized, and increasingly functioned as “peace officers”—protecting public order, life, and property—as opposed to their previous function as more of a frontier militia.^{xlii} In 1901, the Texas Legislature authorized the formation of four companies of 20 Rangers stationed throughout West Texas and along the Mexican border. These companies had responsibilities that fell somewhere between those of an army and a police force.^{xliii} Specifically, their work was often concentrated on “detective” work, such as investigating and suppressing “fence cutters.” These fence cutters were landless cattlemen who opposed the spread of barbed-wire enclosed permanent ranches in an effort to preserve the open range.^{xliv} The Rangers also investigated cases of horse and cattle theft.^{xlv}

In 1910, the Mexican Revolution broke out and, within a few years, brought a strong uptick in violence to the Texas-Mexico border. In the midst of this 10-year war, Basilio Ramos—a Mexican citizen who had spent many years in the United States—was arrested after crossing the Rio Grande with a copy of the San Diego Plan (*Plan de San Diego*). This document was a manifesto that called for Mexicans to reclaim Texas land, along with other former Mexican states, and execute all prisoners and Anglo men over the age of 16 years old.^{xlvi} Ramos's arrest sparked Texan fears of a potential race war. At the time, several sympathetic Tejano and Mexican raiders also responded by plundering Anglo-American farms and ranches in South Texas.^{xlvii}

In response, Texas mobilized the Rangers to “clean up” the border.^{xlviii} However, the campaign quickly transformed into indiscriminate, violent repression against *Tejano* communities.^{xlix} Ultimately, South Texas historians estimate that the Texas Rangers killed hundreds, if not thousands, of *Tejanos* during this time.¹ This violence displaced entire *Tejano* communities and relocated them across the border. Even after the *Tejano* and Mexican raiders' attacks ended, the Rangers continued to “evaporate” potential bandits and conduct mass lynchings.^{li}

This so-called “bandit war” constituted a particularly dark period in the Texas Ranger's history. It was marked by numerous atrocities that tainted the Rangers' image for years. In January 1919, a Texas-Mexican state congressman responded to the reports of Texas Ranger brutalities by calling for an investigation. The resulting hearing investigated 19 charges against the Texas Rangers, and subsequently damaged the corps' standing and credibility.^{lii} In March 1919, the Texas Legislature reduced the Rangers to a force of 76 officers and removed their function as the state's primary police force.^{liii} Additionally, the Legislature put in place more stringent criteria for recruiting Rangers and a citizen complaint process.^{liv}

1935-1950: The Department of Public Safety's Creation

Over the following years, the diminished Texas Rangers continued to handle various state-level issues. However, the Texas government soon realized that this force was insufficient to address the state's changing needs. In 1930, the Texas legislature created the first Texas Highway Patrol to focus primarily on road and traffic safety. This force included 50 men to oversee the entire state, which proved to be too small a number and resulted in little regulation and enforcement. The following year, in 1931, the legislature increased the Texas Highway Patrol to 120 officers.^{lv}

On January 15, 1935, Governor James V. Allred assumed office.^{lvi} In 1934, during Allred's campaign, he had stressed the importance of establishing a modern professional statewide police force.^{lvii} Then, on January 23, 1935, only a week after taking office, Allred ordered General Carl Nesbitt to dismiss all but three of the Ranger corps, including a Headquarters Company composed of 36 men.^{lviii} In August 1935, Governor Allred signed legislation that created the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS). The law consolidated the Texas Rangers and the Highway Patrol under a single state agency intended to professionalize statewide law enforcement and serve as a centralized hub for state-level policing, training, and crime labs.^{lix}

Over the following decades, DPS developed into an expansive public safety agency. From 1938 to 1968, Chief Homer Garrison Jr. served as the Director of DPS and the Texas Rangers. During this time, he created various training materials and built up the agency's reputation. Specifically, Garrison expanded DPS' programs to include police traffic supervision, driver licensing, vehicle inspection, safety education, and disaster response.^{lx}

From the 1960s through the 1990s, DPS also expanded its role in border and drug enforcement operations. In 1937, DPS created a dedicated Narcotics Section.^{lxi} However, in 1968, DPS created the Criminal Law Enforcement Division (CLE), which merged this Narcotics Section with the Intelligence Section and the Texas Rangers.^{lxii} Around this time, Texas Rangers and the Highway Patrol were participating in statewide drug investigations as trafficking groups moved marijuana across the state.^{lxiii} By the 1980s, smugglers shifted cocaine trafficking routes from Florida to El Paso, which led DPS to engage more directly in these narcotics operations.

2005-2020: Recent Border Activities

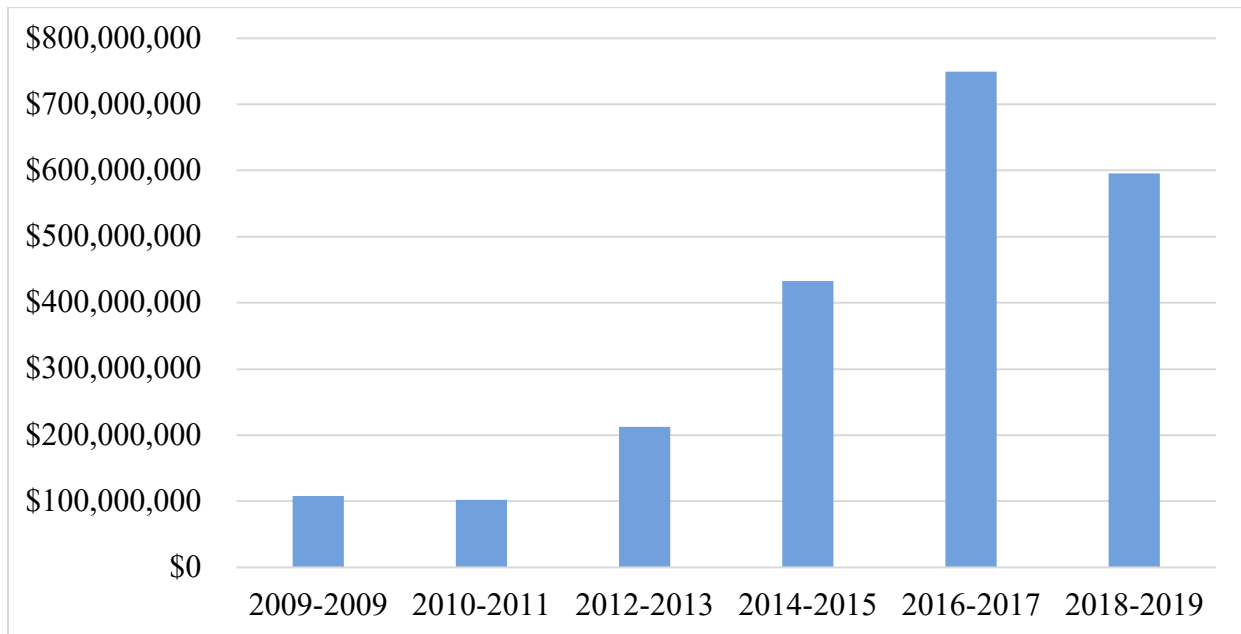
The 9/11 terrorist attacks marked a new era for border enforcement. This period focused on protecting U.S. territory and preventing any new attacks. In 2002, Congress passed the Homeland Security Act, which restructured federal immigration enforcement around the goal of "border security and removing criminal aliens to protect the nation from terrorist attacks."^{lxiv} This sentiment was echoed across Texas, where officials voiced their concerns about potential terrorists crossing the border.^{lxv}

In response to these perceived threats at the U.S. border, Texas governors undertook a new approach to border security. Beginning in 2005, Governor Rick Perry launched initiatives that sent DPS to the border to "[make] life more difficult for those trying to smuggle drugs, weapons and people into Texas."^{lxvi} These operations often rolled into one another and shifted DPS' activities toward border security and migration enforcement. The operations also coincided with increases in DPS' budget (see Figure 1), which allowed for hiring more DPS troopers and expanding the agency's activities. In January 2015, Greg Abbott took office as the 48th Governor of Texas and immediately put his stamp on border security operations through his own border initiatives.

² In 2011, DPS transferred most of the CLE Division's functions to the Regulatory Services Division and the Intelligence and Counterterrorism Division. The rest of the CLE Division was renamed the Criminal Investigations Division (CID).

³ When the Homeland Security Act took effect on March 1, 2003, it also dismantled the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and divided its functions among Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

Figure 1: Total DPS Appropriations for Border Security (2009-2019)^{lxvii}

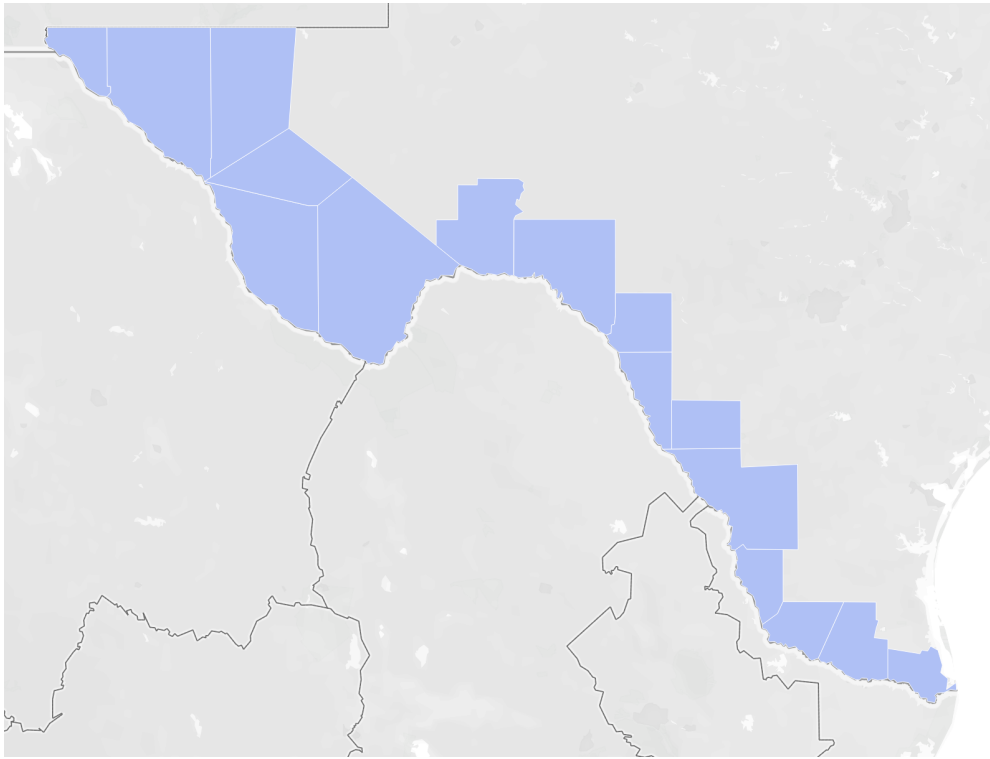


Source: Texas Legislative Budget Board

Operation Linebacker (2005)

On October 12, 2005, Governor Perry announced Operation Linebacker, marking the first time that a Texas governor deployed DPS troopers to the border.^{lxviii} Perry explained the rationale for the operation as addressing terrorism, and suggested that al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations viewed the Texas-Mexico border as an opportunity to infiltrate the United States.^{lxix} Specifically, Texas awarded federal grants to Sheriff's departments along the border to expand local patrol capacity. It focused on 16 Texas counties (Brewster, Cameron, Culberson, Dimmit, El Paso, Hidalgo, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, Kinney, Maverick, Presidio, Starr, Terrell, Val Verde, Webb, and Zapata).

Figure 2: Map of Operation Linebacker Counties



Data source: Office of the Governor

The Texas Border Sheriff's Coalition led the operation and DPS played a supporting role. For DPS, the operation meant deploying 200 troopers to the border (divided into four groups of 50 people), along with 54 DPS investigators.^{lxx} These troopers worked with local law enforcement agencies in the 16 targeted counties to patrol the southern border, with a particular focus on areas between ports of entry. During these patrols, DPS and local law enforcement would refer apprehended migrants to the Border Patrol and arrest anyone suspected of engaging in criminal activity.^{lxxi}

Texas lawmakers measured Operation Linebacker's success through various metrics. According to a January 2015 Texas Legislative Budget Board report, the operation led to seizures of \$3 million in cash, \$77 million in drugs, and \$36,000 in weapons.^{lxxii} However, despite the operation's initial justification of stopping terrorism, in November 2006, the *El Paso Times* obtained state reports that did not show any terrorism-related arrests during a six month period.^{lxxiii}

In total, Operation Linebacker cost approximately \$9.7 million.^{lxxiv} In December 2005 alone, each of the 16 participating counties received \$376,500, along with an additional \$223,000 in February 2006.^{lxxv} A January 2015 Texas Legislative Budget Board report shows that 63 percent of the money given directly to counties went toward staff costs, such as hiring more personnel, 29 percent was used to purchase equipment, and 8 percent was used for travel expenses, equipment installation costs, and general supplies.^{lxxvi} In this same report, analysts noted that a lack of consistent reporting made it difficult to determine if funds had been properly allocated and if the operation achieved its expected objectives.^{lxxvii}

Operation Rio Grande (2006)

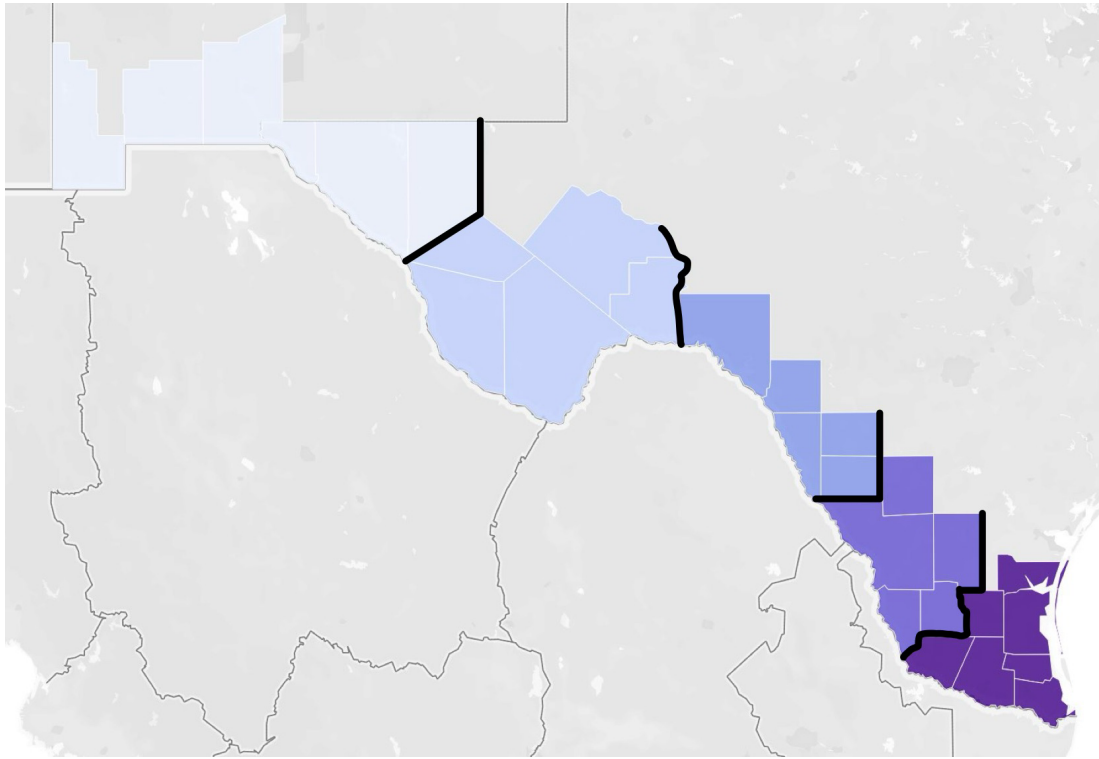
On February 9, 2006, Governor Perry launched the follow-up security initiative: Operation Rio Grande. This second operation was “a state-led initiative to address escalating violence, increase border security, and ensure Texans’ safety.”^{lxxviii} At the time, Governor Perry also noted terrorist actors exploiting a ‘porous’ border and pointed to the March 2005 arrest of four Iraqi men—reportedly heading to the United States from Mexico—to justify the operation.^{lxxix} By invoking the Iraqi men as justification for the operation, Governor Perry linked migration at the southern border to broader fears about Middle Eastern terrorism.

Overall, Operation Rio Grande aimed to coordinate state and local law enforcement, with Sheriff’s Offices as the lead agency and DPS playing a supporting role. As part of the operation, Governor Perry ordered the deployment of DPS rapid response teams and investigators involved in narcotics, motor vehicle theft, and criminal intelligence, along with airplanes and helicopters, and a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Team.^{lxxx4} These assets’ deployment had a dual purpose: addressing high drug-smuggling areas along the border and conducting covert surveillance operations on the border. They were also used to train SWAT teams on the border.

Operation Rio Grande involved five border regions: El Paso, Big Bend, Del Rio, Laredo, and the Rio Grande Valley, representing 27 Texas counties.^{lxxxi} Notably, the El Paso regional operation involved counties in New Mexico, where county sheriff offices were the main law enforcement actors. Operation Rio Grande became the umbrella operation for individual operations across each of these sections. The specific operations began in June 2006, and each lasted 8 to 24 days. In these smaller operations, DPS centralized intelligence via the newly created Border Security Operations Center (BSOC), interdicted drug smuggling, and increased the police presence throughout the regions.^{lxxxii}

⁴ They also deployed Texas Department of Criminal Justice canine search teams, Texas Parks and Wildlife game wardens, and Texas Department of Transportation road barriers.

Figure 3: Map of Operation Rio Grande Counties



Source: Office of the Governor

The Governor's Office pointed to migrant apprehensions and crime reduction—with a focus on crime deterrence rather than arrests—as measures of Operation Rio Grande's success.^{lxxxiii} Using this metric, an October 2006 press release, Governor Perry pointed toward a border-wide decrease in crime.^{lxxxiv} The Governor stated, "Border-wide, we experienced an average crime reduction of 60 percent because of intensive operations under Operation Rio Grande."^{lxxxv} In the same press release, the Governor's Office announced a \$10 million increase in funding to Harris County (home to the city of Houston) and the surrounding counties in an attempt to replicate Operation Rio Grande's strategy of decreasing crime rates.^{lxxxvi}

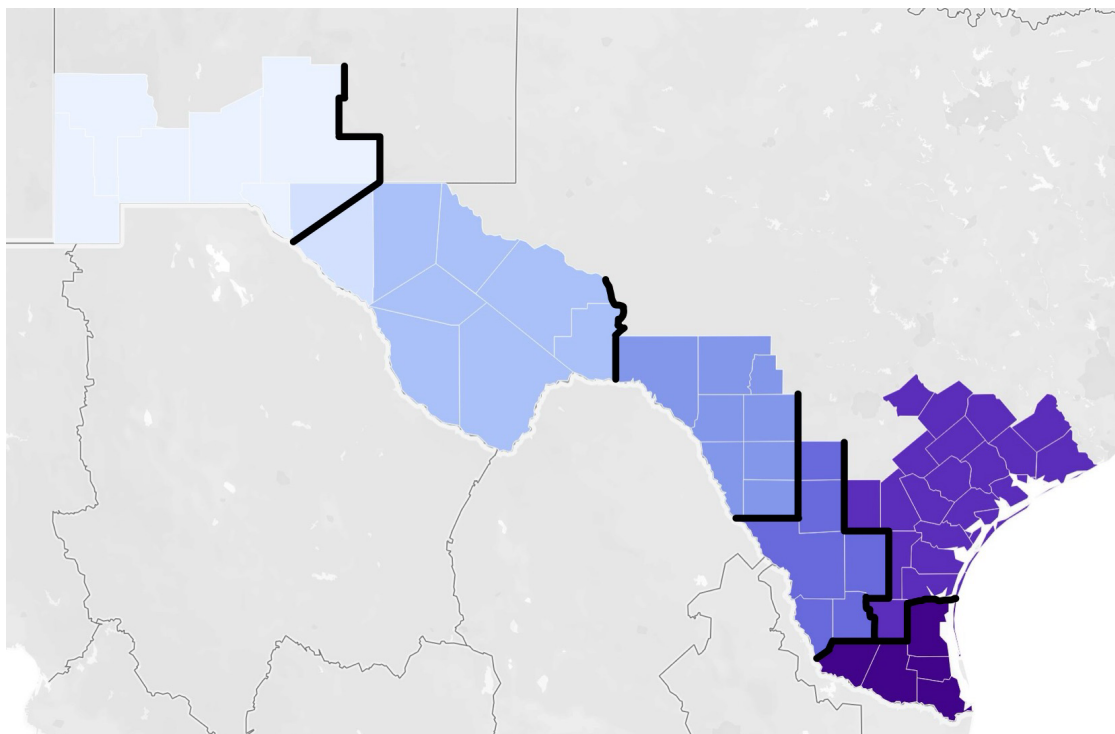
Operation Rio Grande's exact cost remains unclear. In September 2006, a spokesperson for Governor Perry reported that, from October 2005 to September 2006, Texas sent almost \$25 million to local law enforcement agencies.^{lxxxvii} However, the spokesperson did not distinguish between funds designated for Operation Linebacker and Operation Rio Grande.^{lxxxviii} Similarly, a June 2006 press release from the Governor's Office noted that approximately \$20 million in Operation Rio Grande's funding came from available state funds.^{lxxxix} In the same press release, Governor Perry asked the Texas legislature for a \$100 million increase in funding to sustain Operation Rio Grande and other border security activities until the federal government could secure the border.^{xc}

Operation Border Star (2007-2025)

In September 2007, Governor Perry launched Operation Border Star as a culmination of Operations Linebacker, Rio Grande, and Wrangler (the latter being a 2007 National Guard surge at the Texas-Mexico border). Perry justified the operation by pointing to crime along the border.^{xcv} Specifically, in a January 2008 editorial by the Texas Governor’s Office, Governor Perry claimed that cartels were using gangs—such as MS-13—to torture, murder, and kidnap U.S. and Mexican citizens on both sides of the border.^{xcvii}

Operation Border Star sought to address crime in targeted regions along the border by providing money to law enforcement agencies and facilitating information-sharing between federal, state and local law enforcement.^{xcviii} Operation Border Star also sent teams of Texas Rangers, DPS troopers, DPS criminal intelligence personnel, National Guard soldiers, Texas Parks and Wildlife game wardens, and officials from local agencies to address crime hot spots in rural border areas.^{xcix}

Figure 4: Map of Operation Border Star Counties



Source: Texas Department of Public Safety

After an initial three-year surge from 2007 to 2010, Operation Border Star was institutionalized as an operation for funding local operations and intelligence sharing. Given this institutionalization, Operation Border Star’s funding lasted for approximately 18 years.^{xcv} Public budget data indicated that Operation Border Star received at least \$452 million in state funding from 2008 to 2013.^{xcvi} However, after 2013, Operation Border Star functions were increasingly embedded inside broader multi-operation border-security appropriations. However, between 2018 and 2024, roughly \$36 million in local border security program grants were explicitly earmarked to “support Operation Border Star.”^{xcvii}

Operation Drawbridge (2012-Ongoing)

In January 2012, DPS, the Border Patrol, and border sheriffs launched Operation Drawbridge. As part of this operation, Border Patrol agents began installing 500 low-cost motion-sensing cameras on participating private farms and ranches.^{xcviii} These cameras detect border crossers and other illicit movement transiting through the region.

There are a series of steps if movement triggers an Operation Drawbridge camera. First, the camera sends the image to DPS' Border Security Operation Center.^{xcix} Next, DPS and Border Patrol use monitoring software to jointly validate the image for potential criminal activity and forward images to the relevant agencies.^c After this, DPS makes a phone call to Border Patrol agents in the nearby area to alert them of any criminal activity. This allows the agents to make any necessary apprehensions or arrests, push the criminal activity back towards the Texas-Mexico border, or in certain cases, to issue a rescue operation.^{ci}

Since January 2012, DPS has increased the number of Operation Drawbridge cameras throughout Texas. By March 2016, DPS reported that there were more than 3,300 cameras across the border region.^{cii} In September 2021, DPS noted that they had approximately 5,500 motion detection cameras deployed.^{ciii} While by March 2026, DPS reported that it operated approximately 9,500 cameras under Operation Drawbridge.^{civ}

As of mid-2026, Operation Drawbridge remains in place. DPS has claimed that the operation has been a success based on various factors. First, it allowed DPS to gain surveillance capabilities throughout a large swath of Texas borderland. Second, DPS also linked the images from Operation Drawbridge's cameras to increased migrant apprehensions and drug seizures. In a 2015 press release, DPS claimed that during the previous year, Operation Drawbridge cameras detected 58,000 individuals traveling throughout Texas without authorization, and were responsible for more than 29,600 migrant apprehensions and more than 88,400 pounds of seized drugs.^{cv}

Operation Drawbridge's total costs center on the installation, maintenance, and running of the cameras. While there is not a specific total, the costs have been in the tens of millions of dollars. In a March 2016 *El Paso Times* article, a DPS spokesman pointed to a \$4.8 million price tag for the then 3,300 cameras.^{cvi} Later, in November 2021, DPS reported that the Texas legislature provided another \$10 million for the Operation Drawbridge surveillance system.^{cvi} In recent years, the Texas Legislature has directed substantial new funding to the Texas Department of Public Safety. In the 2024-2025 biennium, the Legislature allocated \$17 million to expand Operation Drawbridge's camera network along the border, and proposed an additional \$10 million for the 2026-2027 biennium.^{cvi}

Operation Strong Safety (2013)

In June 2013, Governor Perry announced Operation Strong Safety. This operation aimed to address crime and potential terrorism at the border, and specifically to "prevent Mexican cartel[s], their operatives, transnational gangs, criminal aliens, potential terrorists and drugs from entering Texas between the ports of entry."^{cix} On September 15, 2013, the three-week operation officially launched in the Rio Grande Valley (Cameron, Hidalgo, Kenedy, Starr, and Willacy counties).^{cx} It

deployed DPS troopers, Texas National Guard soldiers, and other law enforcement actors along the Rio Grande. These law enforcement entities patrolled the area, with the goal of stopping drug trafficking and unauthorized migration. DPS also implemented highway checkpoints in the region as part of Operation Strong Safety.^{cxii}

Figure 5: Map of Operation Strong Safety Counties



Source: Texas Department of Public Safety

DPS reported various metrics that aimed to measure the operation's success. These metrics included the number of felony pursuits, recovered stolen vehicles, drug seizures, and currency seizures. DPS reported that when comparing the three weeks prior to the operation with the three week operation, there was a 74 percent decrease in felony pursuits, a 49 percent decrease in marijuana seizures, and a 67 percent increase in the recovery of stolen vehicles, and a 185 percent increase in currency seizures across Operation Strong Safety's target area.^{cxiii}

In November 2013, Texas legislators raised concerns over Operation Strong Safety's activities. For example, a Texas state representative reported receiving a wave of constituent complaints asking why there were checkpoints in Hidalgo County's poorest areas and what evidence supported focusing on the Rio Grande Valley instead of larger Texas communities.^{cxiv} However, Texas legislators ultimately deemed the operation to be sufficiently effective and repeated it in Operation Strong Safety II.

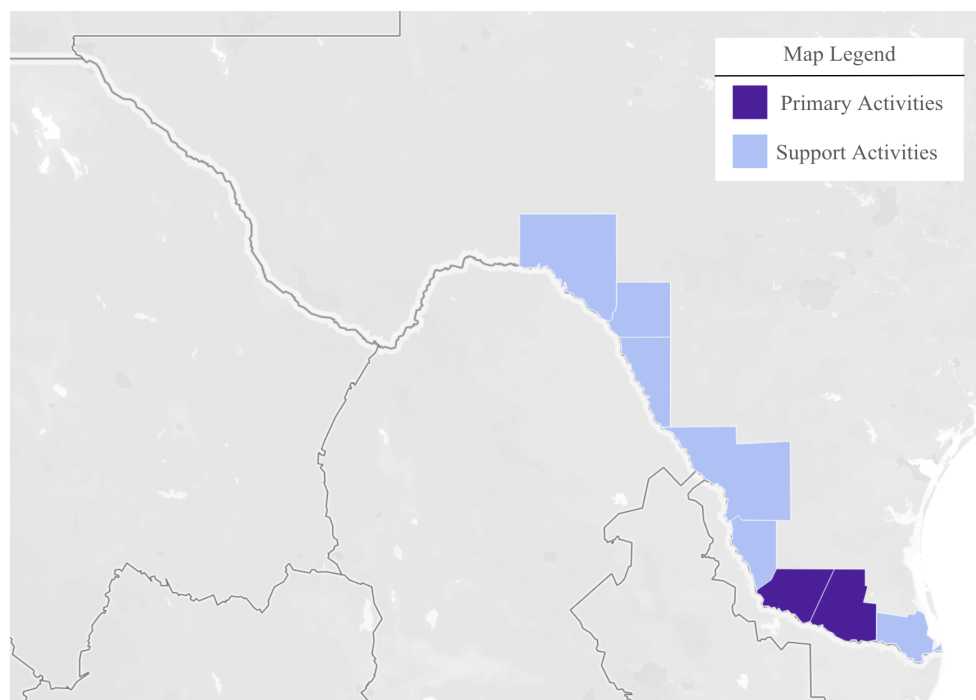
The cost related explicitly to Operation Strong Safety I is not clear. However, according to a February 2015 DPS report, from June 2013 to January 2015, Operation Strong Safety I and II had

a combined cost of around \$102 million.^{cxiv} The report noted that approximately half of that amount was funneled to DPS.^{cxv}

Operation Strong Safety II (2014-2016)

In June 2014, Governor Perry announced Operation Strong Safety II. At the time, there was a growing number of Central American minors crossing the southern border in the Rio Grande Valley. Operation Strong Safety II sought to address this migration challenge by mobilizing hundreds of DPS troopers and 1,000 Texas National Guard troops to the area.^{cxvi} The DPS troopers were stationed along the region's highways and assisted in migrant apprehensions.^{cxvii} The operation primarily focused on Starr and Hidalgo counties. However, additional support activities extended from Brownsville in Cameron County to Del Rio in Val Verde County, and eventually it covered the entire Texas-Mexico border.

Figure 6: Map of Operation Strong Safety II Counties



Source: Texas Department of Public Safety

Governor Perry credited Operation Strong Safety II with decreasing drug trafficking and human smuggling. During the operation's first week, Governor Perry reported that it had led to a 76 percent decrease in migrant apprehensions.^{cxviii} However, most of the individuals crossing at this point were unaccompanied minors, and the drop in apprehensions appears to be more clearly linked to Mexican enforcement efforts.^{cxix} Additionally, from June 2014 to February 2015, DPS reported that Operation Strong Safety had led to more than 180 tons of seized drugs.^{cxx}

However, Texas state representatives raised concerns around costs, transparency in the reporting metrics, and skepticism about whether resources truly disrupted cartels' activities.^{cxxi} A Texas state representative expressed concerns that DPS' figures reflected the efforts of local and federal

agencies.^{cxxii} According to a February 2015 Legislative Budget Board report, the Texas Legislature provided \$124.1 million to Operation Strong Safety II for the 2014-2015 biennium.^{cxxiii}

Operation Secure Texas (2015-2018)

In January 2015, Governor Greg Abbott took office in Texas and quickly put his own stamp on border operations. In September 2015, Governor Abbott launched Operation Secure Texas, which ended in 2018.^{cxxiv} In a letter to the Department of Homeland Security, Governor Abbott cited high numbers of migrants crossing the border as the rationale behind Operation Secure Texas.^{cxxv} Operation Secure Texas focused on border counties with operations ranging from El Paso to Cameron.^{cxxvi}

Figure 7: Map of Operation Secure Texas Counties

Source: Texas Department of Public Safety

Operation Secure Texas covered a broad set of enforcement and surveillance initiatives. These initiatives included permanently stationing 250 DPS troopers at the border, deploying a Texas Ranger Company, sending a high-altitude aircraft, and deploying tactical marine and ground vehicles.^{cxxvii} As part of the operation, the state constructed a training facility and established a Border Prosecution Unit to address cross-border corruption and other criminal activity.^{cxxviii}

DPS used various metrics to measure the operation's success. The agency's metrics included arrests, seizures, patrols, deployments, equipment coverage, and communications capacity.^{cxix} When comparing the first quarter of 2014 to the first quarter of 2016, DPS reported a 40 percent decrease in the value of drugs seized across the state.^{cxix} However, the *Austin-Statesman* reported that these metrics did not separate Texas agencies' specific results from regular patrol activities.^{cxix} Specifically, it found that Operation Secure Texas included all agencies (local, state,

and federal) and DPS only accounted for approximately 10 percent of drug seizures during this period.^{cxxxii} From 2016 to 2017, the Texas Legislature appropriated approximately \$800 million for border security, with most of the funds dedicated to Operation Secure Texas.^{cxxxiii}

Chapter 2: The Texas Department of Public Safety and Operation Lone Star

In January 2021, the U.S. policy and public opinion landscape was in flux. At that time, President Joe Biden took office and vowed to reshape migration and border policies by immediately rescinding programs that blocked asylum at the border and opening more legal pathways. These changes occurred amid overall low border crossings, which were a result of President Trump's restrictive migration approach during his first term and low migration numbers during the Covid-19 pandemic. In June 2021, public opinion was also relatively favorable toward migration, with 33 percent of Americans expressing a desire for increased immigration, compared to 31 percent reporting that they thought immigration should be limited or decreased.^{cxxxiv}

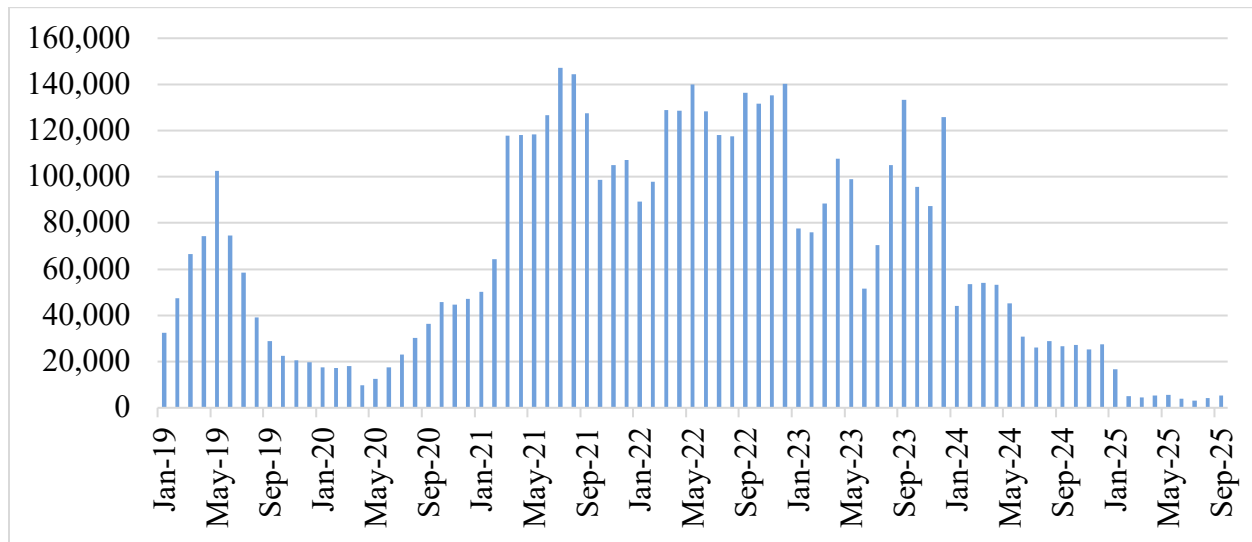
In Texas, Governor Abbott was also navigating his own shifting policy dynamics. In February 2021, the main policy issue in Texas was Covid-19. During this month, a Texas statewide polling survey indicated that 24 percent of Texans considered the Covid-19 pandemic to be the most important problem for the country, which was the most of any policy issue at the time.^{cxxxv} Governor Abbott was also facing criticism from primary contenders over his handling of the pandemic and his stance on border security, with some rivals suggesting that he had not been sufficiently tough.^{cxxxvi}

Creation and Launch of Operation Lone Star

On March 6, 2021, Governor Abbott launched a new border operation: Operation Lone Star. This operation deployed DPS and the Texas National Guard to the border to deter and apprehend migrants, arrest human smugglers and cartel members, and stop drug trafficking into the United States.^{cxxxvii} Governor Abbott declared that this new operation was principally designed to “deny Mexican cartels and other smugglers the ability to move drugs and people into Texas.”^{cxxxviii} He also blamed the Biden administration, contending that the “crisis at our southern border continues to escalate because of Biden Administration policies that refuse to secure the border and invite illegal immigration.”^{cxxxix}

When Governor Abbott launched Operation Lone Star in March 2021, the number of migrant apprehensions was beginning to tick upward. In January 2021, the Border Patrol apprehended around 75,000 people along the United States' southern border, which increased slightly to approximately 97,600 people in February 2021.^{cxli} Yet, in March 2021, the Border Patrol apprehended 169,220 people.^{cxlii} Of that total, Texas accounted for 117,880 apprehensions, representing nearly 70 percent of all border apprehensions for that month.^{cxlii}

Figure 8: Total Migrant Apprehensions in Texas (January 2019-September 2025)



Source: U.S. Border Patrol

Operation Lone Star’s launch and the uptick in migrant apprehensions brought attention to border issues in Texas. In the months leading up to Operation Lone Star’s launch in March 2021, more Texas residents steadily ranked border security and immigration as being among the most important problems facing the state.^{cxliii} Then, in a survey fielded March 16th through March 26th, 2021, 18 percent of Texas residents reported that border security was the most important problem for Texas and 17 percent of Texans reported that immigration was the most important.^{cxliv} In this period’s survey, both issues outranked Covid-19, which garnered 16 percent of the responses.^{cxlv}

DPS Deployment Under Operation Lone Star

When Governor Abbott launched Operation Lone Star, he immediately deployed DPS to the Texas-Mexico border. These troopers were instructed to deter unlawful crossings, prevent smuggling activity, and support border security operations. Governor Abbott framed the deployment as a necessary step to secure the border and deny cartels and smugglers the ability to operate in Texas, positioning DPS as a central enforcement actor alongside the Texas National Guard and federal agencies.

The number of DPS troopers deployed to the border shifted over time. In March 2021, during the initial deployment, Governor Abbott sent 1,000 DPS troopers to the border.^{cxlvi} Several months later, in September 2021—amid a surge of 16,000 Haitians crossing into the United States underneath the international bridge in Del Rio—Governor Abbott sent another 1,000 DPS personnel to the area.^{cxlvii} The number of deployed DPS troopers has ebbed and flowed over the following months and years. In January 2022, there were 1,600 DPS troopers deployed under Operation Lone Star, and the following year, in January 2023, there were 1,400 troopers, “with the capability to increase up to 1,700 troopers and other personnel within a day’s notice.”^{cxlviii} However, in 2025, as the number of migrants decreased along the border, DPS has reshuffled troopers onto other interior immigration missions.^{cxlix}

To achieve the initial large-scale deployments, DPS pulled troopers from interior Texas counties. Specifically, DPS “rotates commissioned officers to the border region” to ensure that interior counties do not permanently lose their state law enforcement presence.^{cl} Initially, DPS sent the deployed troopers to motels near the border for two-week shifts of 12 to 15 hours per day.^{cli} However, as of November 2024, these rotations were voluntary (although DPS can make involuntary border assignments if necessary) and the deployment length can be as short as seven days.^{clii}

Neither DPS nor the Texas Governor’s Office publicly lists the locations where DPS personnel are stationed on their rotations. Similarly, in an October 2025 public records request, DPS declined to provide this information, citing a section of Texas code that states that personnel records of a commissioned officer may not be disclosed or otherwise made available to the public.^{cliii} However, according to various media reports, DPS troopers’ increased presence through Operation Lone Star has been documented across the entire border region. This was initially the case in the Eagle Pass and Del Rio areas, but DPS troopers soon arrived in larger numbers to the Rio Grande Valley, Laredo, and El Paso.^{cliv}

DPS’ Primary Activities Under Operation Lone Star

DPS undertakes four primary activities related to border enforcement in Texas. These four activities include 1) river patrols; 2) patrols along the Rio Grande and in the brush; 3) highway patrols; and 4) surveillance. DPS troopers’ specific activities vary depending upon the region where they are deployed and the area’s smuggling dynamics, geography, and infrastructure. The following sections outline each of DPS troopers’ main activities.

River Patrol

One of DPS’ primary activities under Operation Lone Star is patrolling the Rio Grande on boats. The agency’s Tactical Marine Unit (TMU) takes the lead on river patrols. The TMU’s aim is to deter migrants from crossing into the United States and respond to any incidents that occur on the water. TMU’s Standard Operating Procedure (from December 2017) establishes the unit’s role as to “detect and deter illegal incursions and apprehend those in criminal organizations or terrorists who exploit Texas waters by trafficking weapons, contraband, money, munitions or undocumented persons along our border with Mexico and Texas Gulf Coast.”^{clv} On the Rio Grande, DPS undertakes boat patrols in areas where there is sufficient navigable water.

When DPS personnel are conducting river patrols, they may encounter migrants in the water. According to the Tactical Marine Unit’s Standard Operating Procedures, “waterborne arrests made by TMU personnel may only be attempted when there is adequate vessel staffing,” and must make every attempt to be adequately tethered to a TMU operated vessel when making entry into the water for an arrest or rescue.^{clvi} However, if DPS personnel encounter a person in the area of operation that is clearly in distress or in grave danger, the Standard Operating Procedures manual requires that they attempt to rescue that person.^{clvii}

Since the start of Operation Lone Star, DPS’ number of boats has increased. In September 2021, DPS reported that it maintained six shallow water and seven extreme shallow water jet tactical

boats for border security.^{clviii} However, as of December 2025, the TMU reported that it maintained 65 boats, but declined to provide information on the specific type of boats in their possession or how many were assigned to the Rio Grande.^{clix} Yet, publicly available photos of DPS boats suggest that many are likely Davis-class patrol boats with slight modifications. In December 2022, DPS procured boats with advanced communications capacity, weapons mounting capabilities, and color video/thermal imagery cameras.^{clx}

Patrols Along the Rio Grande and in the Brush

As part of Operation Lone Star, DPS deploys personnel along the U.S. bank of the Rio Grande and throughout the brush in Texas' interior. These patrols operate with the goal of deterring migrants from crossing into U.S. territory and apprehending or arresting migrants after they emerge from the river or are walking through ranchland. DPS troopers participating in these patrols are often deployed alongside Texas National Guard soldiers and/or Border Patrol agents.

Along the Rio Grande, DPS troopers are often stationed directly on the riverbank at common crossing points, where their activities center on providing visibility, monitoring, and immediate response. In practice, this includes watching for approaching groups, issuing verbal commands or gestures to discourage crossings before individuals reach U.S. territory, and positioning vehicles or personnel to block access at key entry spots. If migrants do cross the Rio Grande, troopers may detain them under applicable state charges, such as criminal trespassing when on private land, or coordinate for transfer to federal authorities.^{clxi}

DPS troopers undertaking patrols in the brush face various restrictions. Much of the land along the Texas border and surrounding the Border Patrol's interior checkpoints is privately owned. Troopers may not enter privately owned property without owner consent, a warrant, or proof of exigent circumstances (i.e. a hot pursuit or a migrant in danger).^{clxii} This means that troopers conducting routine brush patrols must be aware of property boundaries, and which property owners have provided their consent for DPS' presence. Overall, DPS' operations are limited to accessible segments shaped by private land ownership, terrain, and coordination requirements, resulting in a fragmented presence.

DPS troopers often utilize other resources to aid them in these patrols. This may include tracking K-9s that help find migrants and helicopters that direct troopers' to migrants' locations. DPS also has a Mounted Horse Patrol Unit (MHPU) that supports border security operations and search efforts by allowing troopers access to rough terrain and dense areas where they cannot travel on vehicles. The brush patrols often work as part of mixed teams. For example, in April 2025, a DPS tracking team in Webb County was made up of troopers walking on foot, troopers on horses, and canines.^{clxiii}

Vehicle Patrol

As part of Operation Lone Star, DPS' Highway Patrol also conducts vehicle patrols on Texas roadways.^{clxiv} Under Operation Lone Star, DPS troopers engaging in vehicle patrols are stationed in high traffic areas and pull over cars that commit traffic infractions or that are suspected of smuggling migrants or engaging in other illicit activities. During Operation Lone Star's early days,

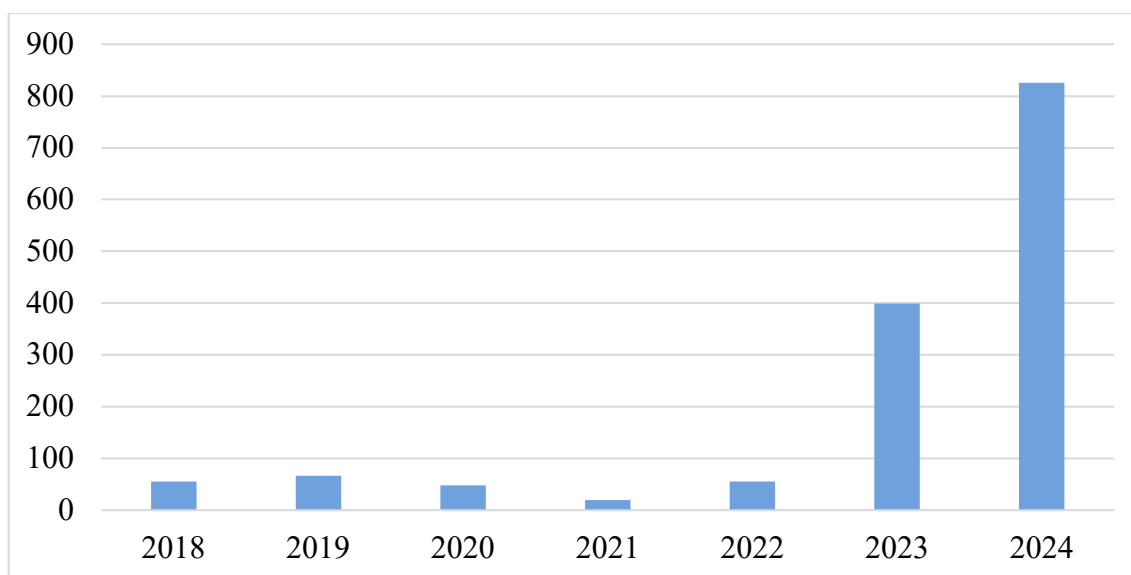
deployed DPS troopers were generally sent to Val Verde, Kinney, and Maverick County.^{clxv} However, the DPS troopers deployed at the border to conduct vehicle patrols have rotated throughout the Texas border region.

DPS troopers on vehicle patrols are often searching for migrants riding in or concealed in vehicles. When DPS troopers stop a car suspected of smuggling migrants, the troopers ask for consent to search the vehicle, and the driver either grants or denies the request. When drivers comply with the request, troopers proceed with the search. When drivers deny the request, DPS troopers may request assistance from Border Patrol's canine units, which can signal if people or drugs are hidden in vehicle compartments.^{clxvi} If the canine signals positively, this can provide the level of reasonable proof that authorities need to search the car. If the DPS troopers discover hidden migrants in the vehicle, DPS arrests the driver for migrant smuggling and refers any migrants to Border Patrol for processing.

At times, the vehicle drivers do not yield when DPS Highway Patrol troopers signal for them to pull over, which leads to a vehicle pursuit. DPS does not place specific restrictions on when officers are permitted to engage in vehicle pursuits, and, instead, leaves the decision up to the individual trooper's discretion.^{clxvii} DPS also allows troopers to use various tactics during vehicle pursuits. For example, in response to a November 2025 public information, DPS outlined that officers are permitted to use a tire deflation system to end vehicle pursuits.^{clxviii} However, DPS troopers must take various factors into consideration prior to deploying tire deflation systems, including the traffic volume, time of day, road surface, population density, natural barriers, construction areas, line of sight, roadway configuration, and weather conditions.^{clxix}

These vehicle pursuits have become common in border counties. In December 2021, DPS reported that since Operation Lone Star's launch, its troopers had engaged in more than 1,000 vehicle pursuits in border communities.^{clxx} The following year, in 2022, DPS troopers were involved in 1,683 pursuits in border counties or counties close to the border.^{clxxi} El Paso County reported a particularly dramatic increase in vehicle pursuits during Operation Lone Star. In 2024, the county reported 825 vehicle pursuits, with DPS involved in 97 percent of these cases.^{clxxii} By comparison, the county reported between 20 to 66 vehicle pursuits a year from 2018 to 2022.^{clxxiii}

Figure 9: Number of Vehicle Pursuits Reported in El Paso County



Data source: El Paso County Attorney's Office

Surveillance

Under Operation Lone Star, DPS deploys surveillance technology to counter migrant smuggling, drug trafficking, and other illicit activity.^{clxxiv} At the center of these surveillance activities are Operation Drawbridge's motion-activated cameras.^{clxxv} As of March 2026, DPS deployed more than 9,500 cameras in South Texas to capture images of the international border or on private ranchland.^{clxxvi} However, DPS also uses other technology for surveillance, including fixed-wing aircraft surveillance and license-plate readers, and unmanned aerial and mobile video systems.^{clxxvii}

Under Operation Lone Star, DPS surveillance assets are concentrated in border counties, with equipment clustered along the Rio Grande and major smuggling corridors. Once the surveillance technology captures images or videos of interest through live feeds from aircraft, drones, or cameras, it sends them to DPS' Border Security Operations Center.^{clxxviii} As of April 2025, these cameras were feeding more than 250,000 images a day into AI analytics, which sorts and tags the images according to whether they contain people, weapons, drugs, or other items.^{clxxix⁵} Officials or Border Patrol agents then respond to the images and attempt to apprehend the migrants or arrest the smugglers.

Operation Lone Star's Primary Tenets

While the previous sections outlined DPS troopers' deployment to the border and their primary activities, Operation Lone Star has also involved a range of other activities. First, the operation also deployed thousands of National Guard troops to the border region, who often worked jointly with DPS troopers. The operation also included four additional central tenets. These included 1) the use of disaster declarations across the state, 2) charging migrants with criminal trespassing on private property, 3) constructing physical barriers along the border, such as concertina wire, buoys,

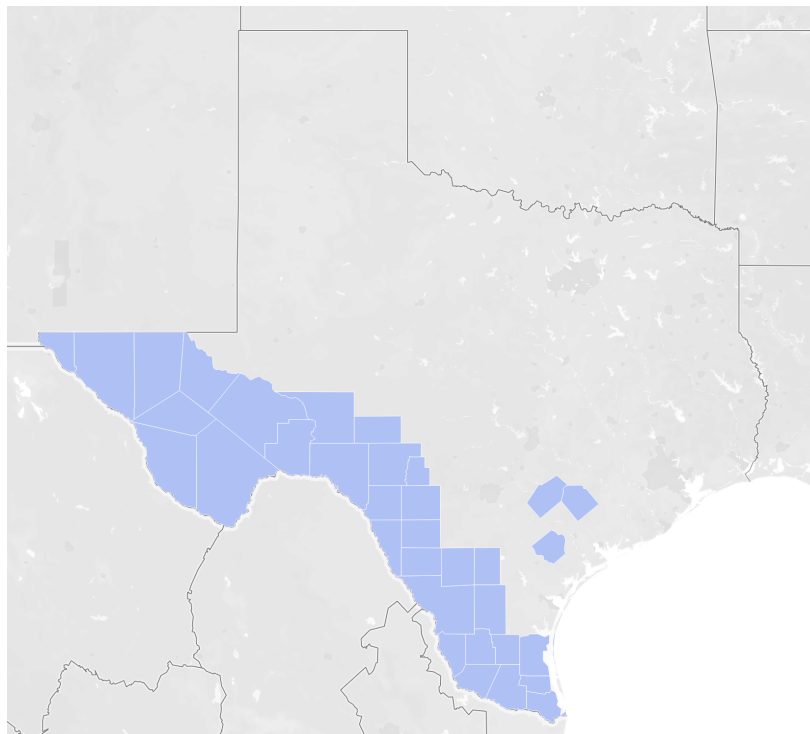
⁵ DPS has contracted for AI tools that scrape web data and enable device location tracking.

and a state-funded border wall, and 4) a busing initiative that transported migrants to U.S. cities outside of Texas. The following subsections explore each of these activities.

Disaster Declarations

One of Operation Lone Star’s central tenets is the county-level disaster declarations that relate to migration and other illicit activities at the border. On May 31, 2021, Governor Abbott issued the first disaster declaration and claimed that “the ongoing surge of individuals unlawfully crossing the Texas-Mexico border poses an ongoing and imminent threat of widespread and severe damage, injury, and loss of life and property.”^{clxxx} It also justified the disaster declaration on the grounds that the federal government was not doing enough at the border, noting that the Biden administration had shown “unwillingness, ambivalence, or inability” to stop and control migration.^{clxxxi} This initial disaster declaration covered 34 Texas counties, including all Texas border counties (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Texas Counties Included in the May 2021 Disaster Declaration



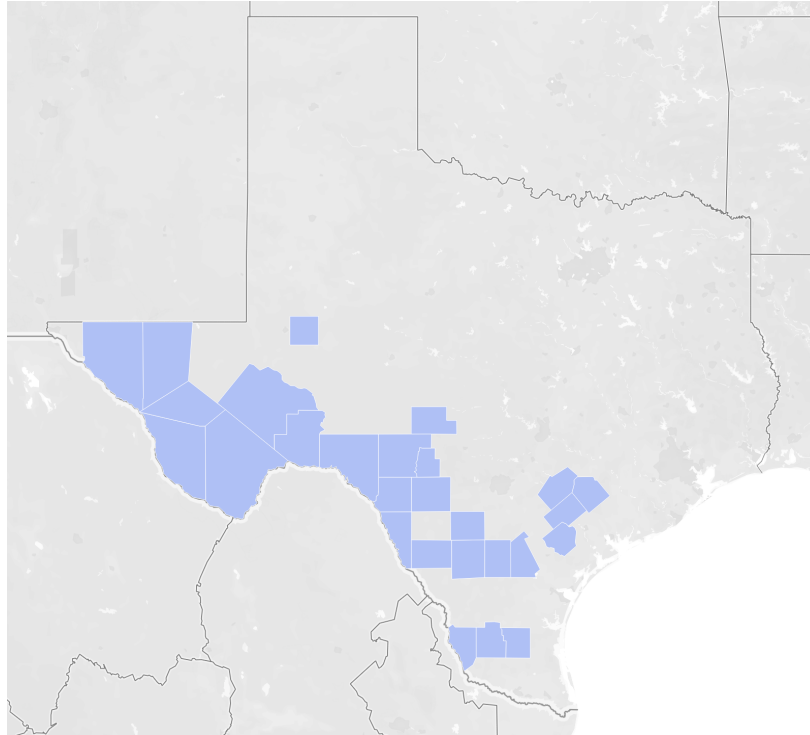
Data source: Office of the Governor

By issuing a disaster declaration, Governor Abbott was able to use state and local resources as needed to respond to any migration disaster.^{clxxxii} This included reallocating \$250 million in appropriated funds for a Texas-led border wall.^{clxxxiii} The declaration also directed DPS to enforce all applicable state laws along the border, including trespassing, smuggling, and human and drug trafficking.

On June 25, 2021, the Governor’s Office released a revised disaster declaration that listed a new set of counties (see Figure 11). Of the 34 counties originally included in the initial May 2021

disaster declaration, only 28 were listed in the June 2021 revised disaster declaration.^{clxxxiv} However, it also included an additional five counties that had not been in the original declaration. In this new June 2021 declaration, Governor Abbott announced that the disaster declaration would only cover counties that 1) agreed to cooperate with the state of Texas in carrying out its border enforcement efforts and 2) released their own disaster declaration.^{clxxxv}

Figure 11: Texas Counties Included in the June 2021 Disaster Declaration



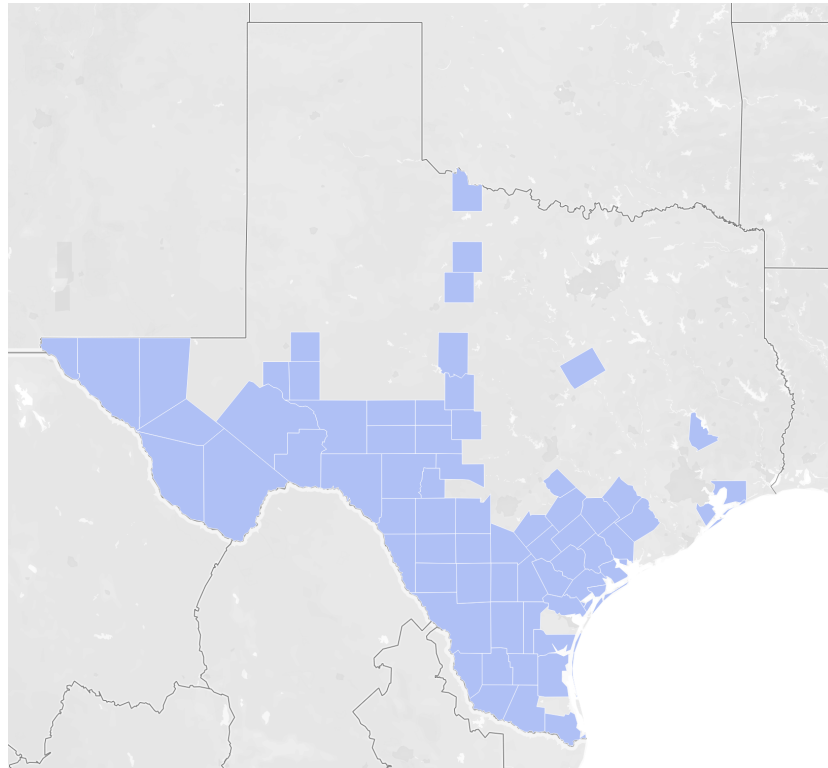
Data source: Office of the Governor

However, migration effects were not the only reason for Texas counties to issue their own disaster declaration. There was also a financial incentive. In September 2021, the Texas Governor’s Office announced grants for counties that had issued a disaster declaration and were involved in Operation Lone Star.^{clxxxvi} Eligible counties could receive up to \$5 million in grants “to cover the costs of additional personnel, equipment, supplies, contractual support, travel, and training in support of the border security mission.”^{clxxxvii} In 2025, the Texas Governor’s Office also eliminated the Local Border Security Program grants, including Border Star grants, which created budget holes in various border counties. For example, in February 2025, Starr County commissioners agreed to sign a disaster declaration to qualify for Operation Lone Star grants after learning that the county would lose between \$5 million to \$8 million in revenue from the Local Border Security Program’s closure.^{clxxxviii}

Since June 2021, Governor Abbott has renewed the disaster declaration each month. On April 17, 2026, Governor Abbott released the most recent declaration (before this report’s publication), which included 69 affected counties in Texas (see Figure 12). The covered counties now include all Texas border counties and most border adjacent counties. Many inland counties are also included. These counties claim that they face spillover effects from unauthorized migration. For

example, counties along U.S. Route 283—which runs north from central Texas to Oklahoma and acts as a corridor for some human smuggling activities—have declared border disasters.

Figure 12: Texas Counties Included in the April 2026 Disaster Declaration



Data source: Office of the Governor

Trespassing Charges

Another one of Operation Lone Star’s central tenets is the state’s use of criminal trespassing charges against migrants entering Texas and stepping foot on private property. In Governor Abbott’s May 2021 disaster declaration, he directed DPS to “use available resources to enforce all applicable federal and state laws to prevent the criminal activity along the border, including trespassing.”^{clxxxix} Additionally, in the same disaster declaration, Governor Abbott called for county jails to expand or add capacity for migrants arrested for trespassing or other criminal activity and to ensure that there was sufficient staff to operate the jails.^{cxc}

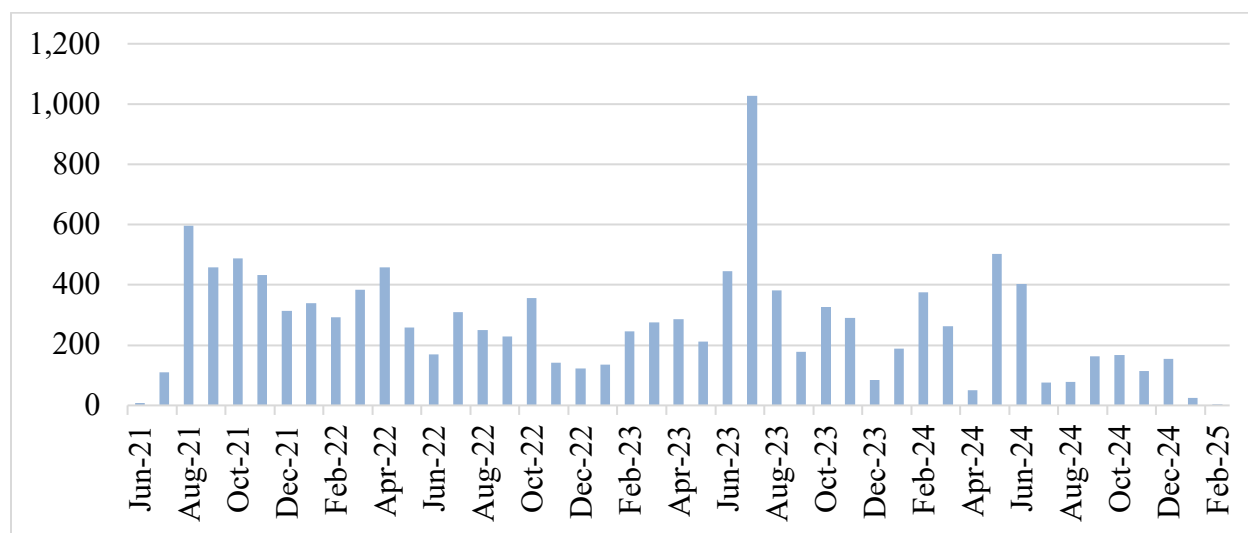
On June 10, 2021, Governor Abbott announced that DPS troopers would begin arresting migrants crossing the border “on suspicion of trespassing on private property.”^{cxci} By focusing on state charges, DPS could arrest migrants while circumventing legal restrictions on state actors enforcing federal immigration policy.^{cxcii} To conduct these arrests, the troopers arrested migrants at railyards, at Shelby Park in Eagle Pass for a period of time, and collaborated with private land owners to apprehend migrants on their property. Federal authorities also appeared to participate in some migrants’ arrests for criminal trespassing. In December 2022, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) identified 29 cases where Border Patrol agents apprehended male migrants and then passed them over to DPS for trespassing charges.^{cxci} As part of the same investigation, the ACLU

reported that Border Patrol agents directed DPS to migrants via helicopter and drone surveillance.^{exciv}

Once arrested, individuals were channeled into a specific criminal system designed for the arrested migrants. They were not booked into the county jail, which is the ordinary site for pretrial detention, but rather taken to a separate processing center—a “criminal migrant processing center”—specifically for migrants arrested on criminal trespassing charges as part of Operation Lone Star.^{excvi} After their initial appearance, DPS troopers took the migrants to one of two jail booking facilities, and then to state jails while they awaited their virtual court hearings.^{excvi} In December 2021, the ACLU claimed that delays led to migrants being held in custody for weeks without an attorney.^{excvi} Judges in the border counties could decide whether or not to hear the trespassing cases. If judges dropped the cases, migrants were typically released to Customs and Border Protection (CBP) for immigration processing.^{excvi}

From June 10, 2021 through February 3, 2025, DPS arrested more than 12,200 migrants and charged them with criminal trespassing.^{excix} In 2023, DPS arrests for trespassing peaked with 3,903 recorded arrests, which were bumped upward when Shelby Park in Eagle Pass was briefly declared to be private property. However, in 2024 and early 2025, arrests steadily declined. In March 2025, Governor Abbott announced plans to close the Jim Hogg booking facility, citing a decrease in migrants crossing the border.^{cc} While in August 2025, Texas officials quietly closed the Operation Lone Star booking facility in Val Verde County.^{cci}

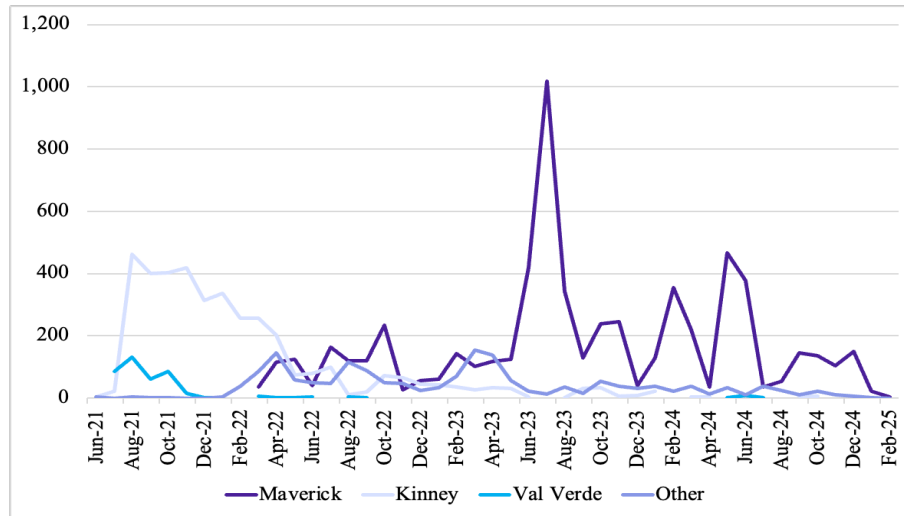
Figure 13: Total Number of Criminal Trespassing Arrests (June 2021-February 2025)



Data source: Texas DPS

The geographic scope of the criminal trespassing arrests varied over time. During the first few months of arrests, DPS troopers concentrated their efforts in Kinney County and Val Verde County (see Figure 14).^{ccii} However in February 2022, DPS also began arresting people in other counties, and increasingly arrested migrants in Maverick County, which is home to Eagle Pass. However, DPS did not arrest migrants and refer them for criminal trespassing charges in every border county, since some county prosecutors summarily dismissed the charges.

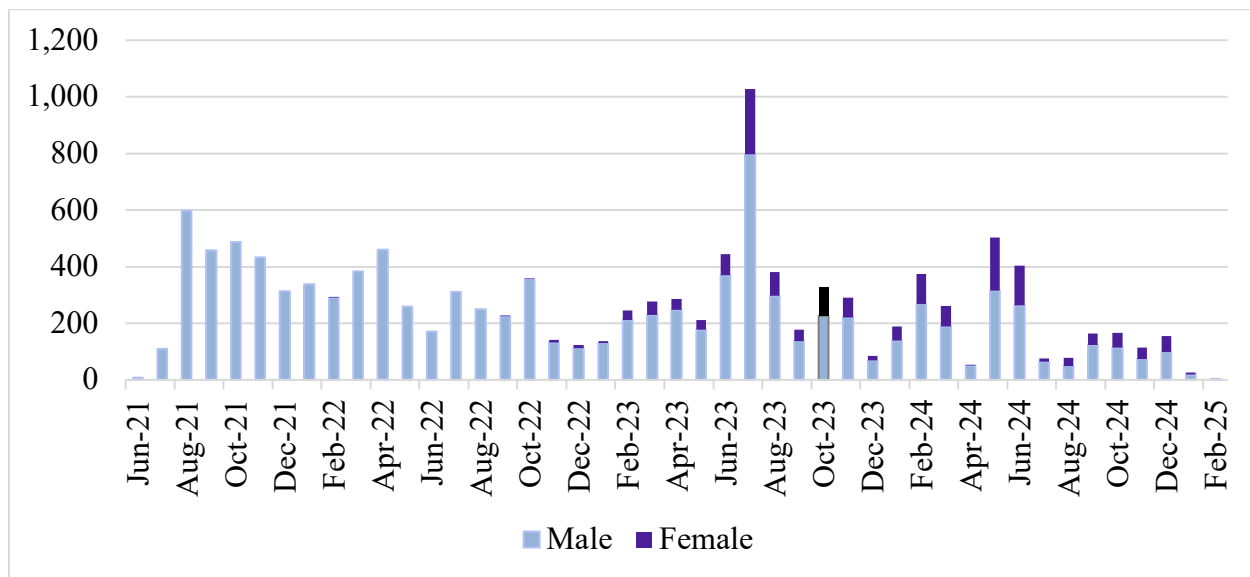
Figure 14: Trespassing Arrests By County (June 2021-January 2025)



Data source: Texas DPS

The demographics of arrested migrants also shifted over time. Under Operation Lone Star’s initial guidelines for criminal trespassing arrests, DPS only arrested and charged single adult males.^{cciii} DPS troopers would refer women, minors, families, and adults over 65 years old to the Border Patrol for processing.^{cciv} However, in September 2022, a state district judge declared that only arresting male migrants for criminal trespassing charges constituted sex discrimination.^{ccv} As a result, DPS expanded its trespassing arrests to include more women.^{ccvi} Still, DPS troopers’ migrant arrests for criminal trespassing remained overwhelmingly male. From September 2022 to February 2025, females never constituted more than 29 percent of monthly arrests (see Figure 15).^{ccvii}

Figure 15: Percentage of Trespassing Arrests by Gender (June 2021-January 2025)⁶



Data source: Arrest Records, Texas DPS

Trespassing charges also led to family separation in certain cases. In summer 2023, there were initial reports that DPS troopers were separating families.^{ccviii} Prior to this development, when DPS encountered a family, it would refer all members to the Border Patrol. However, in mid-2023, DPS began charging fathers traveling with their families and placing them in the Operation Lone Star legal pipeline, while simultaneously referring the families' mothers and children to the Border Patrol.^{ccix} Overall, DPS troopers separated more than 26 families through this process.^{ccx}

Physical Deterrents Along the Border

A third pillar of Operation Lone Star is the construction of physical barriers along the Texas-Mexico border. These barriers include a state-funded border wall, concertina wire, and buoys in the Rio Grande, which all aim to make it harder to enter the United States. Specifically, the buoys seek to stop migrants from crossing the Rio Grande—which is the dividing line between Texas and Mexico—and the concertina wire and border wall attempt to block migrants from entering Texas once they are on the U.S. side of the river.

Texas-Funded Border Wall. In June 2021, Governor Abbott announced Texas' plan to build a border wall. In the announcement, Governor Abbott directed the Texas Facilities Commission to oversee the wall's construction and authorized an initial transfer of \$250 million to fund the process.^{ccxi} Simultaneously, Governor Abbott opened a fundraising website where the public could donate money for the border wall's construction. By August 2021, private donors had contributed \$54 million dollars to the project.^{ccxii} On December 18, 2021, builders began border wall construction in Rio Grande City in the Rio Grande Valley.^{ccxiii} Six months later, in June 2022, the builders had completed the first 1.7 miles of border wall.^{ccxiv}

⁶ Figure 15 includes only arrests with a known gender.

Yet, construction along the entire Texas-Mexico border hit roadblocks. First, to build the wall along the border, Texas authorities had to gain the private landowners' permission. However, about a third of landowners on the border declined to have the wall built on their property, accounting for 41 miles where Texas authorities had hoped to build the wall.^{ccxv} As of February 2026, Texas had built 82.2 miles of border wall.^{ccxvi} Yet, this wall does not form a contiguous line, but runs for smaller patches of 1.5 miles to 7 miles.^{ccxvii}

Concertina Wire. During 2021, after Governor Abbott first deployed the National Guard to the border under Operation Lone Star, soldiers began laying concertina wire along the border. The National Guard soldiers concentrated the wire on the U.S. side of the Rio Grande, near high traffic areas. The wire was arranged in coils, often layered in intersecting rows along the riverbank. As of February 2025, Texas had deployed 150 miles of wire along the border.^{ccxviii} At times, National Guard soldiers also placed anti-climb barriers behind the concertina wire, which are eight feet wide and twelve feet tall fencing panels overlaid with razor wire.^{ccxix} These panels are weighted down with heavy water ballasts (large plastic containers filled with water) so that they cannot be easily pushed over or pulled down.^{ccxx}

On October 24, 2023, Texas sued the Biden Administration over its state-placed concertina wire. The state claimed that Border Patrol agents destroyed state property when they cut through concertina wire on the Rio Grande bank in order to reach migrants.^{ccxxi} The lawsuit also claimed that the administration was disrupting Texas' border efforts, since the cut areas left gaps in the concertina wire.^{ccxxii} On November 27, 2024, a federal judge ruled in Texas' favor and stated that the federal government could not destroy the concertina wire when carrying out Border Patrol operations.^{ccxxiii}

River Buoys. In July 2023, Governor Abbott announced that Texas officials were installing 1,000 feet of buoys on the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass. The buoys were placed in the middle of the Rio Grande at a high-traffic crossing point, and were separated by saw blades and a submerged mesh net.^{ccxxiv} The buoys created a physical barrier in the water, which made it impossible to swim under or climb over. In November 2024 and January 2025, the Texas Governor's Office announced it was expanding the buoys near Eagle Pass.^{ccxxv}

The Rio Grande buoys have been subject to national and international contention. On June 26, 2023, Mexico filed a diplomatic complaint and claimed that the buoys would "impede the flow of water, which would violate the [1970 Boundary Treaty and the 1944 Water Treaty]."^{ccxxvi} A few weeks later, on July 24, 2023, the U.S. Department of Justice also filed a lawsuit against the buoys' installation. This lawsuit claimed that Governor Abbott had failed to obtain the necessary permit for installing the buoys and that he had also violated federal law by installing the barrier without congressional approval.^{ccxxvii} This latter claim was based on the Rivers and Harbors Appropriation Act of 1899, which stated that Congress must approve any obstruction to U.S. waters.^{ccxxviii} However, this lawsuit was dismissed when the second Trump Administration assumed office.

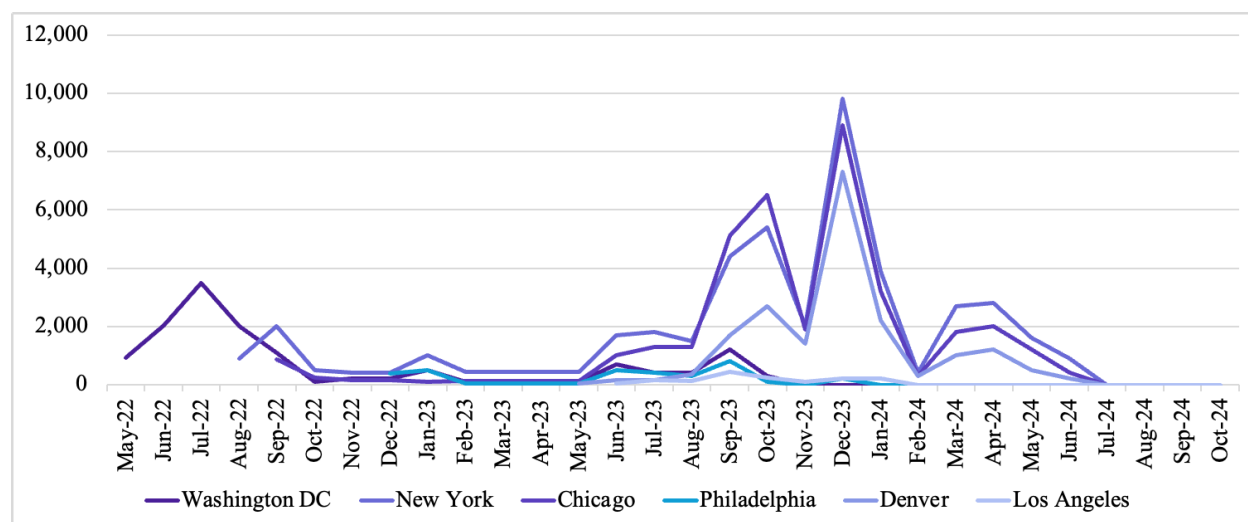
Further, in February 2025, Texas announced that the federal government was taking over the state's Rio Grande buoys.^{ccxxix} Several months later, in July 2025, then-Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem announced that CBP was installing 17 miles of buoys in the Rio Grande in

Cameron County.^{ccxxx} The new buoys are more akin to long tubes than individual buoys, and have sensors to detect if a person or animal tries to cross over them or becomes stuck.^{ccxxxi}

Busing Initiative. Operation Lone Star’s fourth pillar is the state’s migrant busing program. On April 6, 2022, Governor Abbott announced the creation of a busing initiative and authorized the Texas Department of Emergency Management to begin coordinating migrants’ voluntary transportation to Democratic Party-governed major cities.^{ccxxxii} This program was only for migrants whom the federal government had processed and released into Texas communities. To board a bus, a migrant had to both voluntarily enter the bus and show documentation of their release from federal custody. Migrants also signed waivers consenting to travel.^{ccxxxiii} Migrants could board buses traveling to a range of cities, specifically Chicago, New York, Washington D.C., Los Angeles, Denver, and Philadelphia.

Over the span of two years—from May 2022 to June 2024—Texas bused a total of 119,400 migrants across the country.^{ccxxxiv} Initially, the first buses went to Washington, DC. However, Texas authorities soon added other cities, such as New York, Chicago, and Denver. In August 2023, the initiative picked up speed, with a total of 60,660 migrants bused out of Texas over the following five months (see Figure 16). However, in June 2024, Texas officials stopped busing migrants, as they could no longer fill buses amid low numbers of migrants at the border.^{ccxxxv} Overall, the buses transported approximately 12,500 migrants to Washington D.C., 45,900 migrants to New York, 36,900 migrants to Chicago, and 19,200 migrants to Denver. An additional 3,400 migrants were bused to Philadelphia and another 1,500 migrants to Los Angeles.

Figure 16: Number of Migrants Bused to Major Cities (May 2022-October 2024)



Source: Office of the Texas Governor

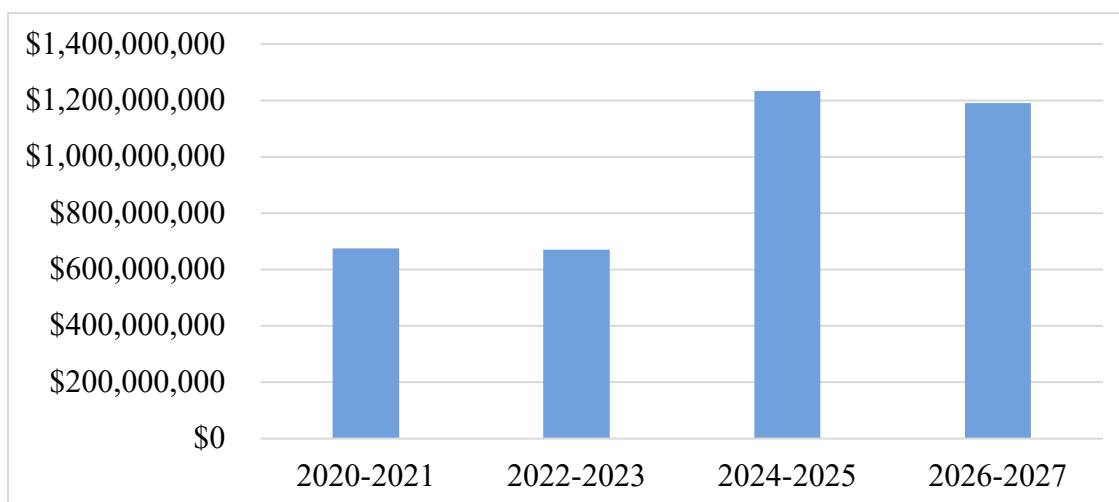
Initially, Texas’ buses arrived in the U.S. cities during daytime hours. This timing allowed civil society organizations to meet the migrants and provide them with services. However, by September 2022, there were reports of buses arriving in destination cities at night, including anywhere between 10pm and 6am.^{ccxxxvi} At these times, the cities’ civil society organizations were generally closed, and no one was available to help guide the arriving migrants to appropriate housing or services.^{ccxxxvii} Further, by September 2023 Texas stopped informing these

organizations of the bus schedules, which made coordinating services even more challenging.^{ccxxxviii}

Cost of Activities

Overall, Operation Lone Star has constituted a significant cost. The Texas Legislature allocates funding in two year increments, called a biennium. From March 2021 through the 2026-2027 biennium, Texas has spent nearly \$14.4 billion on the operation.^{ccxxxix} Of this amount, the Texas Legislature allocated approximately \$3.7 billion to DPS. During the 2020-2021 biennium, DPS' budget was roughly \$675 million, but by the 2024-2025 cycle, it had doubled to more than \$1.2 billion.^{ccxli} In the 2026-2027 cycle, Texas legislators allocated another nearly \$1.2 billion to DPS for its border security efforts.^{ccxlii}

Figure 17: Total DPS Appropriations for Border Security (2020-2027)



Source: Texas Legislative Budget Board

Funding for DPS has paid for personnel, travel costs, and operational activities. The funding has gone to troopers and Texas Rangers' salaries and overtime and helped in recruiting new personnel and training. In September 2021, DPS estimated that the weekly cost of overtime, travel, and fuel for Operation Lone Star totaled more than \$2.3 million.^{ccxlii} The funding has also been used to support infrastructure and technology, including maintaining Operation Drawbridge cameras and new boats for river patrols, among many other categories.^{ccxliii}

Operation Lone Star has also encompassed a range of costs beyond DPS' deployment. Notably, one of the largest budget items is the National Guard's deployment, totaling more than \$5 billion through the 2026-2027 biennium.^{ccxliv} Yet, billions of dollars in funding has also been allocated toward the operation's other various activities. These activities include Operation Lone Star grants to counties and cities, the construction of physical barriers along the border (a border wall, concertina wire, fencing, and floating buoys), and busing migrants out of Texas.

Figure 18: Operation Lone Star Expenditure Overview (Recent Estimates)

Category	Activity	Expenditures
Operation Lone Star grants	Grants to local governments and law enforcement agencies	\$177 million ^{ccxlv}
Trespassing charges	Criminal processing centers, court costs, and health services	\$110 million ^{ccxlvi}
Physical barrier construction	Border wall	\$3.0+ billion ^{ccxlvii}
	Concertina wire + fencing	\$58 million ^{ccxlviii}
	Buoys	\$1 million ^{ccxlix}
Migrant busing	Transportation of migrants to other U.S. cities	\$230 million ^{cccl}

In July 2025, President Trump signed into law the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, a spending bill that would reimburse Texas for the \$11.1 billion it spent on Operation Lone Star from March 2021 to January 2025. As of November 2025, 27 Republican members of Congress sent a letter to then-U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi and then-Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem asking for “the Departments [to] prioritize Texas in disbursing these funds.”^{cccli} As of March 2026, the funds had not yet been disbursed to Texas.^{cccli}

Chapter 3: Effects of Operation Lone Star and DPS Deployment to the Border

Since March 2021, Operation Lone Star and the deployment of DPS along the border have generated a range of effects. Some of these effects were concentrated in DPS itself, stemming from increased funding and the deployment of its personnel to the border. However, the operation and deployment had other effects, particularly relating to migration dynamics and migrant safety, state-level ramifications (from border counties' finances to Texas political debates), national politics, and international relations. The following sections explore each of these wide ranging effects.

Achievement of Operation Lone Star's Stated Objectives

In March 2021, when Governor Abbott launched Operation Lone Star, he stated that the operation had three primary objectives: 1) deterring and apprehending clandestine migrants, 2) arresting human smugglers and cartel members, and 3) stopping the flow of drugs into the United States.^{ccliii}

To achieve these objectives, Governor Abbott undertook various steps. First, he deployed DPS troopers and National Guard soldiers to the border, where they patrolled the Rio Grande and region's highways, participated in brush patrols, and conducted surveillance operations. Second, Governor Abbott issued a broad disaster declaration and opened up grant money to counties that issued their own declarations. Third, he directed DPS troopers to arrest and prosecute migrants for the state crime of trespassing on private property. Fourth, Governor Abbott pushed for the construction of various physical border barriers, including a state-funded wall along the Texas-Mexico border, concertina wire along high traffic areas, and buoys in the Rio Grande. Finally, he directed the Texas Department of Emergency Management to begin busing migrants to Democratic Party-governed cities across the U.S. interior.

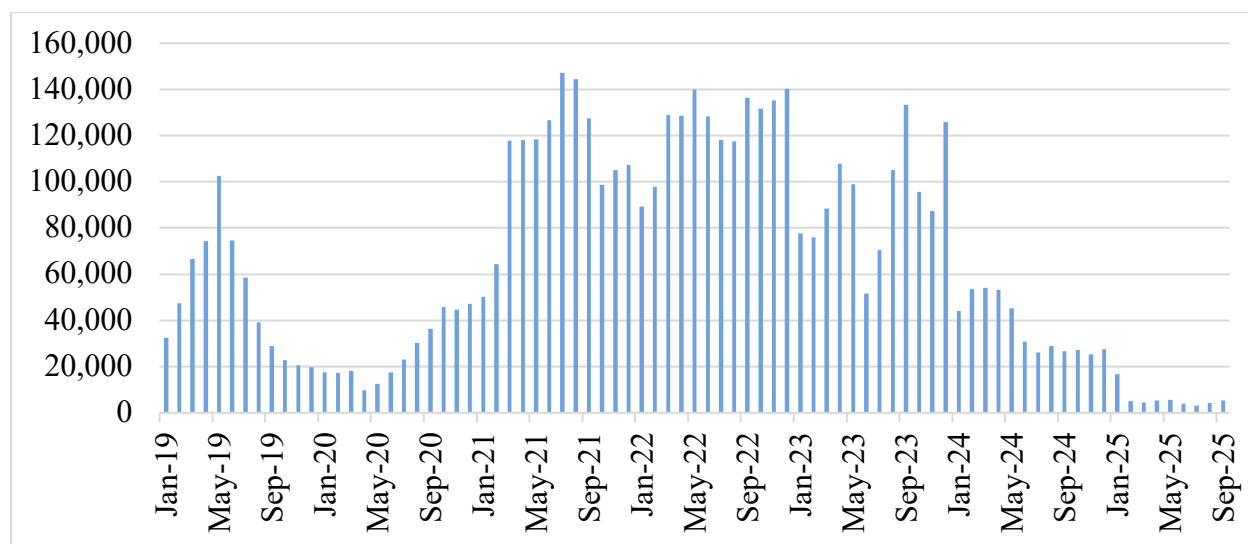
The Office of the Texas Governor has reported various indicators each month to measure the operation's efficacy in achieving its goals. These indicators included the numbers of apprehended migrants, individuals arrested on criminal charges, and amount of seized fentanyl. As of June 2025—the latest press release on Operation Lone Star that listed these indicators—Texas authorities reported apprehending more than 500,000 migrants and seizing more than 735 million doses of fentanyl.^{ccliv}

However, outside sources have raised doubts around these numbers. For example, in March 2022, *The Texas Tribune*, *ProPublica* and *The Marshall Project* reported that migrant apprehension numbers may be inflated, as DPS troopers, Texas National Guard soldiers, and the Border Patrol agents often work alongside one another and may all count the same group of people crossing the border in each of their agency tallies.^{cclv} They also discovered that Operation Lone Star's reported smuggling and other arrests extended well beyond the border counties, initially including arrests in Midland and beyond.^{cclvi} Additionally, these same journalists raised concerns that Operation Lone Star's seized fentanyl numbers were statewide and not limited to the border.^{cclvii}

Changes in Migration Dynamics

One of Operation Lone Star’s primary objectives was to reduce migration numbers. However, the operation’s effects on migration dynamics are not straightforward. During the operation’s early months, the number of migrants crossing the Texas-Mexico border—measured by Border Patrol apprehensions—increased dramatically. In March 2021, upon the operation’s announcement, there were 117,880 migrant apprehensions along the Texas-Mexico border.^{cclviii} Yet, four months later, by July 2021, the apprehensions had increased by 25 percent to reach more than 147,000 apprehensions.^{cclix} Over the following two and a half years, these numbers largely remained stable.

Figure 19: Total Migrant Apprehensions in Texas (January 2019-September 2025)

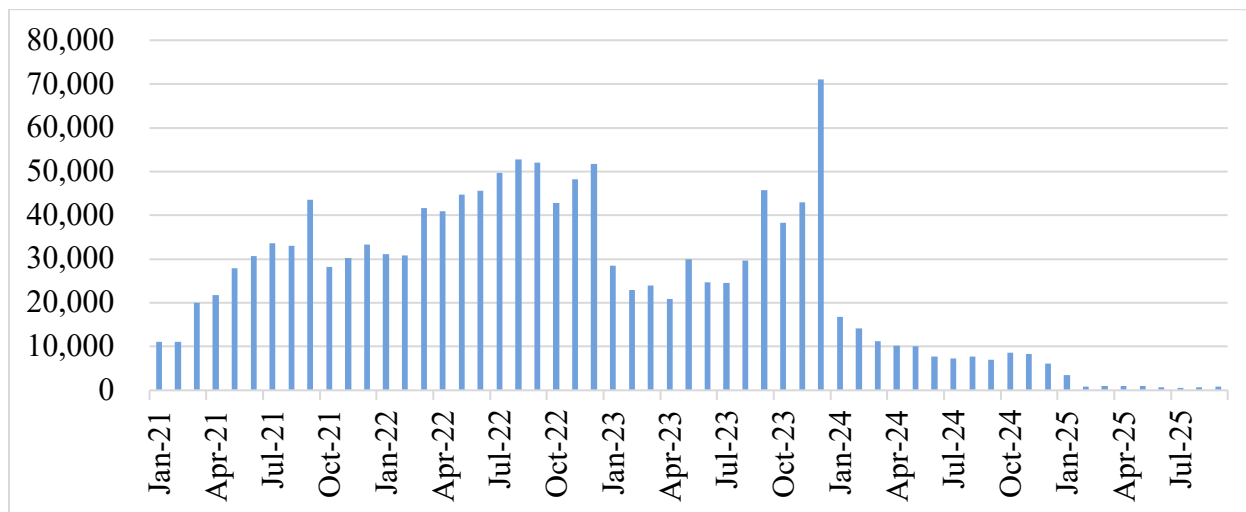


Source: U.S. Border Patrol

While it is impossible to know the counterfactual scenario of what apprehensions might have looked like without Operation Lone Star and its various activities, the operation does not appear to be associated with the sharpest drops in migration numbers across the state. Specifically, when apprehensions significantly dropped in January 2024 and June 2024, the reasons appear to be more closely related to Mexico’s enforcement activities and U.S. policy shifts, rather than Operation Lone Star. Similarly, the numbers have remained low since January 2025—when President Trump assumed office—which suggests that migrants are still largely responding to U.S. federal government changes rather than Texas policy. The following subsections walk through some of these migration dynamics.

Mexico’s Migration Enforcement and Shelby Park. In December 2023 and January 2024, the Border Patrol reported a significant drop in migrant apprehensions in its Del Rio Sector. This sector begins north of Laredo and stretches through Eagle Pass and Del Rio to reach Lake Amistad. During these two months, Border Patrol apprehensions dropped by 76 percent in this area of the border (from 71,050 people in December 2023 to 16,710 people in January 2024).^{cclx}

Figure 20: Del Rio Sector Apprehensions by Month (January 2021-September 2025)



The activities that led to this drop in migrant apprehensions began in November 2023. At this time, migrants were arriving in the thousands to Eagle Pass, which is across the Rio Grande from the Mexican city of Piedras Negras. In response, on December 17, 2023, CBP closed one of the two international bridges that connect Eagle Pass to Piedras Negras to “redeploy enforcement resources elsewhere in response to large numbers of migrants.”^{cclxi} The bridge closure shifted pressure to the Mexican side of the border, where Piedras Negras residents soon encountered longer crossing times.^{cclxii}

On December 20, 2023, members of Mexico’s National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM), the Mexican Army, and the Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña mayors met in Piedras Negras.^{cclxiii} They implemented a strategy to reduce migration in the state, which involved expanding the number of checkpoints on highways and increasing the number of buses and planes to move migrants to southern Mexico.^{cclxiv} In the days following the plan’s implementation, the number of Border Patrol apprehensions dropped from 4,000 migrants a day to 450 migrants.^{cclxv} By January 4, 2024, CBP reopened the international bridge.^{cclxvi}

Around the same time, Mexico also launched a nationwide migration enforcement strategy. In early 2024, INM and the Mexican military increased their efforts to apprehend migrants before they reached the U.S.-Mexico border. Specifically, Mexican officials began busing apprehended migrants to southern Mexico.^{cclxvii} From January 2024 to August 2024, Mexican authorities bused more than 60,000 migrants to the southern border cities of Tapachula, Chiapas and Villahermosa, Tabasco.^{cclxviii} This busing policy became colloquially known as the Merry-Go-Round, and migration analysts suggest that it played a major role in decreasing the number of migrants who reached the Texas border.^{cclxix}

Yet, as the number of migrant apprehensions decreased, Governor Abbott and Texas authorities pointed to Operation Lone Star as deserving credit. For example, these actors highlighted the Texas National Guard’s January 11, 2024, takeover of Shelby Park as playing a role in the falling apprehension numbers. In April 2024, an official Texas statement claimed, “We attribute the decrease in illegal entries at Shelby Park and Eagle Pass to the presence of Texas DPS and National

Guard...it's a much safer location because...we have been there and [provide] barriers and consequences to those who cross illegally."^{cclxx} Yet, the timelines do not fully align, as the Texas National Guard took over Shelby Park seven days after CBP reopened the international bridge connecting Eagle Pass to Piedras Negras amid dramatically lower crossing numbers.

“Securing the Border” Interim Final Rule. In June 2024, the Border Patrol reported another significant drop in migrant apprehensions. In a one month span—May 2024 to June 2024, the number of apprehensions border-wide dropped by nearly one third.^{cclxxi} At the time, a new federal-level immigration rule was reshaping border dynamics. On June 3, 2024, President Biden issued an interim final rule titled “Securing the Border.” This interim final rule declared an emergency situation when the Border Patrol’s daily apprehensions surpassed an average of 2,500 encounters per day over a seven day period.^{cclxxii} During these emergencies, the border would temporarily “close” and there would be no access to asylum processing. The border would only reopen after seven consecutive days of an average daily apprehension number below 1,500 crossings.^{cclxxiii}

For migrants, this interim final rule went into immediate effect as an emergency situation and quickly changed migration dynamics. Before this policy, migrants were released into the U.S. interior, as the Department of Homeland Security could not keep up with the number of migrants requesting credible fear interviews.^{cclxxiv} However, under this new rule, DHS officers were told they no longer had to offer credible fear interviews, which allowed them to move quickly toward removal proceedings.^{cclxxv} Individuals could still be eligible for other forms of protection, such as withholding of removal or protection under the Convention Against Torture. However, they would have to proactively express a fear of persecution and pass a reasonable probability interview, which is a higher standard than a credible fear interview.^{cclxxvi} This resulted in a dramatic shift in migrants’ processing dynamics, as migrants were no longer detained and released but rather immediately deported.^{cclxxvii} These shifting outcomes also likely deterred many asylum seekers from crossing the border.

On June 14, 2024, Governor Abbott also sought to tie the drop in the Border Patrol’s apprehension numbers to Operation Lone Star. In a press release, Governor Abbott claimed that the operation had led to a 74 percent reduction in the number of migrant crossings.^{cclxxviii} However, the press release did not offer any specifics regarding why the operation was now causing the decrease in apprehensions. Similarly, in November 2024, Governor Abbott pointed to even lower migration numbers and claimed that “Texas has decreased illegal crossings into the state by over 86 percent due to [Texas’s] historic border security mission.”^{cclxxix} However, these claims did not account for broader federal policy changes and shifting migration patterns that may have independently contributed to the decline in apprehensions.

Effects on DPS and DPS Personnel

Operation Lone Star has had effects for DPS as an agency and for individual DPS troopers. The agency is the primary actor in charge of running the operation—receiving billions of dollars in funding and sending thousands of troopers on rotation to the border. These changes had a wide range of effects, including shifting pay structures, fluctuating morale among troopers, and even, in a few cases, negative effects for their safety. The following subsections explore these effects.

Funding

To fund Operation Lone Star, Governor Abbott and the Texas Legislature have allocated more than \$14.4 billion. Of this total, Texas authorities earmarked \$3.7 billion for DPS.^{cclxxx} From March 2021 through the 2026-2027 biennium, this funding doubled. The increased funding allowed the agency not just to maintain its personnel, technology and surveillance capabilities but often to expand them. For example, in March 2021, DPS noted that they had deployed approximately 5,825 motion detection cameras. However, as of March 2026, the number had increased to approximately 9,500 cameras.^{cclxxxi}

For troopers, the biggest notable funding shift has been through overtime payments during Operation Lone Star rotations. DPS troopers work a 50 hour work week but have to exceed that number when stationed at the border.^{cclxxxii} This means that they are eligible for overtime, which has become costly to DPS but profitable to troopers. From March 2021 through April 2022, DPS paid at least \$68 million in overtime to officers on Operation Lone Star rotations. These overtime payments have not slowed down in the following years. As of June 2025, one in ten DPS troopers were on track to double their annual salary through overtime pay.^{cclxxxiii} While in September 2025, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that Operation Lone Star overtime pay accounted for one-third of all DPS overtime payments and 124 DPS troopers had at least one \$10,000 monthly overtime payment.^{cclxxxiv}

DPS Troopers Morale and Safety

DPS troopers have also faced effects for their personal lives during Operation Lone Star rotations to the border. Over the past years, DPS leadership has framed trooper morale as being high and emphasized some troopers' positive feelings about protecting their homeland as part of Operation Lone Star.^{cclxxxv} However, September 2024 testimony from the Director of the DPS Troopers Union suggests that this sentiment is not universal.^{cclxxxvi}

Initially, there were reports of lower morale among the deployed personnel. This morale was linked to sudden involuntary deployments that often sent DPS troopers away from their families and personal lives and left them feeling burnt out. For example, in a Center for Immigration Studies article, a former Criminal Investigations Division supervisor, based in Houston, recalled that he was on the border for Christmas the year that his grandchild was born.^{cclxxxvii} Additionally, this supervisor discussed that the deployments can put a strain on marriages.^{cclxxxviii} Regional commanders may be specifically taxed, given that they are in charge of all issues for their region, including not just border security but also any natural disasters, increased crime, and any other emerging issues.^{cclxxxix}

However, there is also anecdotal evidence that some troopers support Operation Lone Star's mission and feel positively about their efforts during rotations. In a May 2024 ride-along interview, a DPS trooper described Operation Lone Star as fundamentally reshaping her role toward combating human smuggling and emphasized her responsibility to "serve Texas," reflecting a sense of mission alignment among some personnel.^{ccxc} However, there is little transparency into agency-level morale. DPS responded to a November 2025 public records request by stating that the agency did not have any morale surveys or datasets pertaining to overall trooper morale.^{ccxci}

During Operation Lone Star, at least two troopers have lost their lives. In September 2021, a special agent passed away from Covid-19 complications, which he contracted during his time stationed on the border for Operation Lone Star.^{ccxcii} In January 2022, another special agent died in a San Antonio hospital after sustaining injuries while apprehending a group of migrants. The agent was riding on top of a CBP truck—with migrants located in the back—when the truck flipped and he was crushed underneath.^{ccxciii7}

Effects on Migrants

Operation Lone Star also produced a range of consequences for migrants crossing the Texas border. Some of these effects occurred during the initial border crossing, when migrants attempted to traverse the Rio Grande or climb onto the U.S. riverbank. Other effects occurred after migrants had already crossed the river, including arrests for the state crime of trespassing, involvement in vehicle pursuits, and participation in Texas’s migrant busing program. Yet, Operation Lone Star’s effects were not uniform for all migrants, and depended on where and when the individual crossed the border and whether the migrant was an asylum seeker or a clandestine migrant trying to evade detection. Some of the operation’s activities—particularly charging migrants with criminal trespassing—only targeted specific demographics, primarily adult men. The following subsections cover Operation Lone Star’s effects for migrants along the Rio Grande and in the Texas interior.

Effects for Migrants Along the Rio Grande

The Texas–Mexico border is defined by the Rio Grande, and all migrants entering the state between ports of entry must cross the river. A central pillar of Operation Lone Star involves the construction of physical barriers in the Rio Grande or on the U.S. riverbank, including buoys, concertina wire, and a state-funded wall. The operation also deployed DPS troopers and Texas National Guard soldiers on boats and on foot patrols, who interacted with migrants once they reached U.S. territory. The following subsections dive into these factors’ effects for migrants.

Buoys and Drownings. In July 2023, Texas authorities installed floating buoys to create a 1,000 foot barrier in the middle of the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass. As migrants attempted to cross the river, they could not go over the buoys and, instead, sought ways to circumvent them. Some investigative news articles and advocacy groups have argued that these buoys force migrants to cross through deeper and faster moving sections of the river, which could increase their risk of drowning.^{ccxciv} However, this report finds that the relationship between migrant drownings near Eagle Pass and the buoys is not conclusive.

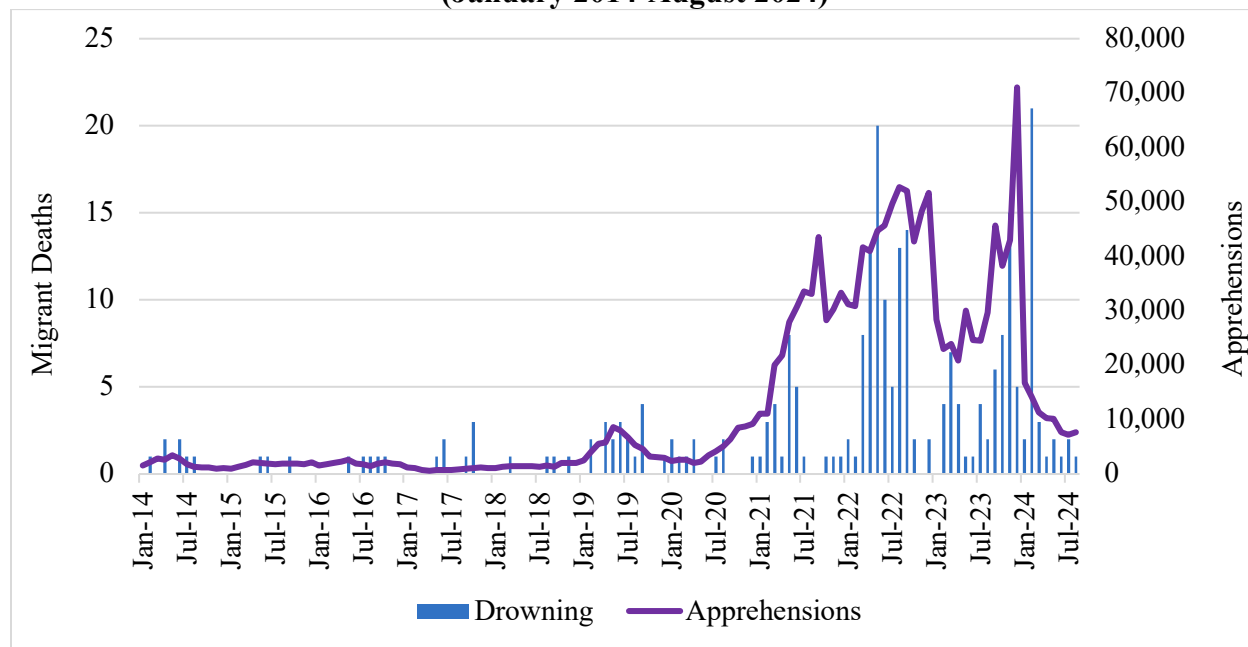
In December 2024, an investigative journalism piece sought to understand the relationship between the buoys and drownings in Eagle Pass.^{ccxcv} They argued that migrant drownings increased after the buoys installation by displacing migrants toward more dangerous areas of the Rio Grande. The authors also note that interviews with migrants and local shelter operators suggest that some migrants chose to cross in less monitored areas of the river in order to avoid areas with more law enforcement presence.^{ccxcvi} The authors come to their conclusion by reviewing drowning data showing deaths concentrated in a more southern area of the city for 2017 to 2023. Yet, this analysis includes years before the buoys were placed.

⁷ Subsequently, the deceased trooper’s family sued CBP in a 2025 civil lawsuit and was awarded \$45.6 million.

In contrast, Texas state officials have claimed that the buoys' presence on the Rio Grande can decrease drownings by discouraging unlawful crossings. For example, in June 2023, the DPS director noted that officials considered migrant safety when deciding to place the buoys. He noted, "We don't want anybody getting hurt, in fact, we want to prevent people from getting hurt, prevent people from drowning."^{ccxcvii} The following month, in July 2023, another DPS leader noted, "Now, having this marine barrier in place in the middle of the river will deter unlawful crossings and prevent drownings and human smugglers from bringing people across the river into the country."^{ccxcviii}

Overall, drownings along the Texas-Mexico border increased during Operation Lone Star's early years. This was particularly the case in the Del Rio Sector, where Eagle Pass and the buoys are located. Using the Border Patrol's person-level migrant death data, it is possible to track drownings over time.^{ccxcix} In 2021, drowning deaths in the Del Rio Sector were sparse, with mostly zero deaths per month, and occasional small spikes. In February 2024, the drownings peaked, with 21 deaths in one month. However, the number of migrants crossing in this area also simultaneously increased during the same period. When tracking the total number of drownings compared to the total number of apprehensions (as a proxy for the number of migrants crossing), the total rate of death for the Del Rio Sector remained steady. This suggests that the link between migrant drownings and the buoys has been inconclusive. However, the lack of conclusive effects may also be related to the relatively small buoy length, which left many possible crossing locations, and could change as more buoys are placed in the Rio Grande.

Figure 21: Apprehensions and Drownings in the Del Rio Sector (January 2014-August 2024)



Source: No More Deaths and Border Patrol Data

Concertina Wire and Texas-Funded Border Wall. Since the beginning of Operation Lone Star, National Guard troops installed more than 150 miles of concertina wire along the Texas-Mexico border. Migrants crossing the Rio Grande and arriving in U.S. territory generally have three

options once they reach the concertina wire. They can either attempt to climb through it, go around the wire, or wait until the Border Patrol cuts it. Migrants may also attempt to cut through the razor wire themselves, though, if caught, they could be charged with damage to state property.^{ccc} There are also reports of migrants tearing down concertina wire fences in El Paso.^{ccci}

Many migrants climb over or through the concertina wire. To do so, they may place clothing or blankets on top or under the wire to hold it back.^{ccci} Migrants who attempt to pass through the concertina wire have reported injuries, such as lacerations, cuts, and wounds.^{ccci} In a leaked July 2023 email, a DPS trooper described migrants being caught, cut, or immobilized by concertina wire, including instances involving women and children.^{ccciv} From June 2023 to February 2025, a DPS public records request documented that the agency had treated 310 people who suffered trauma after being in contact with concertina wire.^{cccvi}

Migrants may also walk along the Rio Grande to find a gap in the concertina wire or wait on the riverbank between the wire and the water. When migrants go around the wire, they are either directed or self-navigate to gaps or breaks in the fencing where there is no barrier. This typically means walking along the riverbank or the edge of the concertina wire until they reach an opening that is wide enough to pass through. In a February 2024 report, human rights advocates described witnessing asylum-seeking families, including small children, who were begging for help while stuck between the Rio Grande and the concertina wire.^{cccvi}

As of February 2026, Texas had also built 82.2 miles of border wall.^{cccvi} However, the wall construction has been fragmented, due to landowner resistance. Given the many gaps, the wall does not appear to have had a significant effect on migrants crossing into Texas.^{cccvi}

DPS and National Guard Excessive-Use of Force. As part of Operation Lone Star, Governor Abbott deployed more than 1,000 DPS personnel to the Texas-Mexico border and thousands of Texas National Guard troops. Many of these authorities were stationed along the U.S. bank of the Rio Grande, where they frequently served as the first point of contact for migrants climbing out of the river. Since the operation's early stages, both DPS troopers and National Guard soldiers have faced accusations of using excessive force.^{cccix} These allegations include forcing migrants back toward Mexico, firing pepper-ball rounds or rubber bullets, and engaging in verbal or physical confrontations with migrants.^{cccix}

These allegations have persisted through recent years. On July 3, 2023, a leaked email documented incidences of excessive force. In the email, a DPS state trooper reported that, while on patrol along the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass, he had been instructed to deny water to a group of recently crossed migrants, including children, and push them back into the river. State officials denied that such actions reflected official policy, and a subsequent DPS internal investigation concluded that it found no evidence of systematic misconduct.^{cccx} Other recent allegations have focused on projectiles. For example, on May 28, 2024, a Venezuelan man reported being struck by pepper balls on his neck and side when he crossed the Rio Grande near El Paso.^{cccxii}

Effects for Migrants in the Texas Interior

Migrants also face Operation Lone Star's effects once they reach the Texas interior. These effects may occur soon after the migrants emerge from the Rio Grande, on ranchland far from the border, on interior highways, or after being released from CBP custody. The following subsections explore how Operation Lone Star activities—specifically, charging migrants with the state crime of trespassing on private property, the increased numbers of vehicle pursuits, and the migrant busing program—have also generated effects for migrants.

Criminal Trespassing Charges. On June 10, 2021, Governor Abbott announced that DPS troopers would begin arresting migrants crossing the border who trespass on private property.^{cccxi} From June 10, 2021 through February 3, 2025, DPS arrested more than 12,200 migrants and charged them with criminal trespassing.^{cccxi} These arrests generally targeted only one demographic: single adult males. DPS troopers would refer any women, minors, families, and adults over 65 years old to the Border Patrol for processing, although eventually they also began charging single adult females. During the summer of 2023, DPS also charged some fathers with criminal trespassing and separated them from their families.^{cccxi}

Arrested migrants did not always receive immediate due process. Legal filings and media reports reveal that the systems processing these migrants were initially overwhelmed, resulting in many detainees being held past statutory deadlines.^{cccxi} Specifically, arrested migrants often waited for days, weeks, or months without a lawyer, formal criminal charges, options for a bond, or a legitimate detention hold or court date.^{cccxi} At times, this was in violation of Texas Code, which states that a defendant must be released on a personal bond or via reduced bail if the state is not ready for trial within certain time periods.^{cccxi} For trespassing, the deadline generally ranged from 15 days to 30 days, depending on the charge level.^{cccxi}

As delays persisted, the county moved away from court-appointed counsel. In July 2021, the state assigned the Lubbock Private Defenders Office (which changed its name to Lone Star Defenders Office in 2023) to appoint attorneys to detain migrants.^{cccxi} In August 2021, the Texas Supreme Court directed that the Texas Indigent Defense Commission develop procedures for the appointment of counsel for arrested migrants.^{cccxi} However, the appointed lawyers often had hundreds of cases and reported struggling to locate or communicate with their clients given the detention facilities' disorganized management.^{cccxi} The Lone Star Defenders Office reports appointing counsel for Operation Lone Star cases in nine Texas counties.^{cccxi}

The arrested migrants also faced various other effects while detained. In particular, they reported subpar conditions in the Texas detention centers where they were held. Migrants reported that they were not given an adequate amount of food or clothing, were rarely allowed to go outside, could not contact their family members, suffered from extreme temperatures, and received insufficient access to medical care during their detention.^{cccxi} Many migrants were incarcerated in these conditions for months before receiving any due process, and then, at times, even after their charges were dismissed or their sentences had been served.^{cccxi}

Vehicle Pursuits. Asylum seekers often turn themselves in immediately after crossing the Rio Grande in order to make a protection claim. However, clandestine migrants try to evade detection

and generally rely on smugglers to move them from the Texas-Mexico border to cities within the U.S. interior. Drivers may pick up these migrants in vehicles right after they cross the Rio Grande, drive them through or around Border Patrol checkpoints, or pick them up after they hike in the brush around a Border Patrol checkpoint.^{cccxxvi}

With more DPS troopers patrolling in certain border areas, there are more opportunities for them to detect migrant smugglers' vehicles.^{cccxxvii} However, not all drivers stop when a DPS trooper tries to pull them over. Since Operation Lone Star began, DPS troopers have been involved in thousands of vehicle pursuits across Texas border counties.^{cccxxviii} These pursuits can be dangerous and even deadly for migrants. In July 2022, the ACLU and the Texas Civil Rights Project documented 30 deaths and more than 70 injuries in high-speed pursuit chases involving DPS troopers during Operation Lone Star's first 16 months.^{cccxxix} Similarly, a November 27, 2023 Human Rights Watch report found that, between March 2021 and July 2023, vehicle pursuits in Operation Lone Star counties—involving DPS troopers, Border Patrol agents, and local law enforcement agencies—resulted in at least 74 deaths and 189 injuries.^{cccxxx} A February 2025 Human Rights Watch update raised the death toll to more than 100 people with more than 300 injuries.^{cccxxxi} Migrants constituted the vast majority of the individuals who died or were injured in these vehicle pursuits.

Busing of Migrants to U.S. Cities. Beginning in April 2022, Governor Abbott directed the Texas Division of Emergency Management to provide bus transportation to migrants released from federal custody.^{cccxxxii} From April 2022 to March 2024, Texas bused more than 100,000 migrants to various cities, specifically Washington D.C., New York City, Chicago, Philadelphia, Denver, and Los Angeles.^{cccxxxiii} These migrants did not need to pay for the buses and could board them in a range of cities along the Texas-Mexico border.^{cccxxxiv}

During the busing program, migrants were often enthusiastic about the free transportation to a major U.S. city.^{cccxxxv} In fact, the free transportation was so popular that there were even anecdotes that some migrants may have chosen to cross the border through Texas in order to have access to the buses.^{cccxxxvi} The primary reason behind the popularity centered on travel costs. Bus tickets from border cities to interior cities could cost hundreds of dollars per person and flights could be similar in price or even more expensive, depending on the time of year and final destination. For families with multiple members, the free bus ride often saved them hundreds if not thousands of dollars in transportation costs.

However, the conditions on the buses were not always comfortable. In October 2023, a security guard hired to accompany migrants on the buses reported that there were unsanitary conditions on some of the buses.^{cccxxxvii} In his report, he noted that migrants were not let off the bus for bathroom breaks, and, on one bus, the onboard bathroom quickly overflowed with urine and leaked down the aisle.^{cccxxxviii} However, other anecdotes suggest that in most cases, the bus conditions were standard.^{cccxxxix}

Migrants not only received free transportation, but they also arrived in more migrant friendly destinations. For example, New York initially had a long-term “Right to Shelter” decree, which guaranteed a bed to anyone seeking shelter in the city.^{cccxl⁸} Migrants took advantage of this free

⁸ The law has since been amended to only provide shelter for migrants for up to 30 days.

housing, and in December 2023, there were more than 68,000 migrants staying in the city's shelters.^{cccqli} In March 2024, this policy was amended to only provide shelter for migrants for up to 30 days.^{cccqlii} Other cities and their civil society organizations offered medical help, food, clothes, phones, and legal support.^{cccqliii} Chicago also rented hotel rooms and opened additional shelters.^{cccqliv}

Consequences for Texas

DPS' deployment to the border and Operation Lone Star more broadly have had wide-ranging effects across Texas, including for residents living along the border, border counties, non-border counties, and at the statewide level. These effects have generated both benefits and challenges for residents, local agencies, and politicians, and stem from an increased law enforcement presence in certain areas, an influx of grant funding, and public opinion surrounding the operation. The following subsections explore these effects across Texas.

Effects on Texas Border Residents

Operation Lone Star's activities have been concentrated in border counties, and residents in these communities have faced many of the most immediate effects. Specifically, some residents have benefited from a boom in business as deployed DPS troopers and National Guard soldiers arrived in the area. However, other residents have had to navigate property damage from an increased number of vehicle pursuits and more interactions with law enforcement and subsequent traffic infractions. While widespread polling of border residents' opinion on Operation Lone Star is sparse, anecdotes suggest that public opinion is mixed. Some residents credit Operation Lone Star with establishing greater safety, while others view it as infringing on their civil liberties.^{cccqlv}

Benefits and Disadvantages to Local Industries and Resources. Operation Lone Star sent more than 1,000 DPS troopers and thousands of National Guard soldiers to the border. These troopers and soldiers often needed places to stay and stopped by local restaurants to eat. As a result, some Texas border residents in the hospitality and restaurant industries have benefited from the DPS and National Guard deployments.^{cccqlvi} This was particularly true in border counties that received large influxes of deployed authorities, such as Kinney County, Val Verde County, and Maverick County. For example, in February 2024, the Eagle Pass Chamber of Commerce (in Maverick County) claimed that visitors to Eagle Pass were struggling to find available hotel rooms, as they all hosted DPS troopers, and that even budget chains were charging more than \$200 per night.^{cccqlvii}

Yet, in certain areas, Operation Lone Star's activities cut border residents off from various public spaces. For example, the National Guard has taken over part of Anzalduas Park in the Rio Grande Valley as a staging area with an observation post.^{cccqlviii} Similarly, in January 2024, Texas National Guard soldiers took over Shelby Park in Eagle Pass. Previously, Eagle Pass residents were able to use the park to play sports, launch kayaks on the Rio Grande, or host festivals and carnivals.^{cccqlix⁹} In April 2025, the park reopened, but it continues to have concertina wire, a cargo container wall along the Rio Grande, and a law enforcement presence.^{ccccli}

⁹ A local activist with a kayaking business in the area reported that his employment was negatively impacted as a result of this takeover.

Traffic Stops and Citations. As Texas authorities deployed DPS troopers into border counties, the total number of traffic stops and citations increased. While these troopers were deployed to establish border security, they also issued more traffic violations for residents. For example, in Kinney County, the number of DPS troopers increased from 14 in 2019 to 41 in 2022.^{cccli} During the same time period, the number of DPS-issued citations in the county more than quadrupled, from 1,400 citations from March 2019 to February 2020 to more than 6,800 citations from March 2021 to February 2022.^{ccclii} Other border counties have experienced similar increases in DPS-issued citations. For example, from January 2021 to June 2021, the number of citations in Starr County skyrocketed.^{cccliii} These included a 1,060 percent increase in the number of DPS citations linked to having anything on a car’s windshield.^{cccliv}

Civil liberties groups have also complained that DPS troopers have racially profiled drivers in border counties. In a July 2022 federal complaint, these groups—specifically the ACLU of Texas and the Texas Civil Rights Project—argued that DPS has used ethnicity alone to justify searching a vehicle after a traffic stop.^{ccclv} The groups alleged that citation records show cases where troopers prolonged a traffic stop to investigate potential illegal activity based on vehicle occupants being Hispanic.^{ccclvi} Similarly, a May 2025 study on traffic stops—which was initiated by the Texas Legislature and conducted by the Institute for Predictive Analytics in Criminal Justice of Texas A&M University—revealed that DPS officers were more likely to search Hispanic drivers than White ones, despite White drivers being more likely to have contraband in their vehicles (as discovered during DPS searches).^{ccclvii}

Property Damage: As more DPS troopers arrived in border counties, the number of vehicle pursuits also increased. While the most direct effect was related to migrant safety—with at least 100 people dying in the ensuing vehicle crashes—border residents also faced increased property damage. In May 2024, Texas launched a landowner compensation program to cover damage from border operations and vehicle pursuits.^{ccclviii} Since its inception, this program has paid out more than \$140,000 to impacted Texas landowners.^{ccclix} Other border actors took their own non-monetary measures to protect their property. Following the uptick in high-speed chases during Operation Lone Star, a Kinney County school in Brackettville lined its entrance with large rocks in order to prevent vehicles from crashing into the campus during a vehicle pursuit.^{ccclx}

Effects on Texas Border County Agencies

Operation Lone Star has not only affected border residents but also agencies within Texas border counties. Some of these effects have been beneficial to these agencies, such as an influx of funding and support from deployed DPS troopers and National Guard soldiers. However, other Operation Lone Star activities have strained these agencies’ operations, such as processing the increased number of arrested smugglers or the thousands of migrants charged with criminal trespassing. The following subsections outline these effects.

Operation Lone Star Grants. In September 2021, Governor Abbott announced the availability of an initial \$100 million in Operation Lone Star grants for counties that issued a disaster declaration related to migration and other border activities.^{ccclxi} Counties could receive up to \$5 million, which could go toward assisting local law enforcement, jail administrators, prosecutors, and medical examiners. The money could also be used to reimburse counties that were prosecuting migrants

charged with the state crime of trespassing on private property.^{ccclxii} Over the following years, Governor Abbott has renewed these grants. From September 2021 to February 2025, the Texas Governor’s Office authorized \$177 million in grants to both cities and counties for border security efforts and paid out about \$113 million.^{ccclxiii}

This Operation Lone Star funding has become an integral revenue source for border counties’ governmental agencies. The funding has not only gone to reimburse counties for expenses but has been used to pay the salaries of sheriff’s deputies, prosecutors, grant writers, investigators, and other county employees.^{ccclxiv} Some counties now rely heavily on these grants. For example, in 2024, Operation Lone Star grants accounted for 8 percent of Maverick County’s revenue.^{ccclxv} City officials in Eagle Pass—located in Maverick County—have noted that if the Operation Lone Star grants were to end, it could cripple the community and lead to layoffs.^{ccclxvi}

Effects on Border Law Enforcement. The additional DPS troopers and National Guard soldiers along the border have also affected law enforcement in these counties. Some border county officials have expressed gratitude for DPS’ increased presence in their counties.^{ccclxvii} These officials often credit DPS with filling a law enforcement gap. For instance, in August 2021, the mayor of Uvalde claimed that the county’s police and sheriff’s department used to spend 60 to 70 percent of their time pursuing clandestine migrants, but were now able to focus on other law enforcement responsibilities after Operation Lone Star.^{ccclxviii}

Yet, other border police departments have expressed concerns regarding losing officers to DPS amid pay differentials, particularly from the overtime during rotations. In September 2025, an Eagle Pass police department spokesperson stated that the department had lost five of its 70 officers to DPS since Operation Lone Star, which was more than its usual one or two officers every few years.^{ccclxix} The department spokesperson summed up the differences in earnings: “Within a year they’re making six figures. Here you’d have to work 24 hours a day a year straight to get even near that.”^{ccclxx}

Effects on Border Justice Systems. Operation Lone Star’s activities have also periodically strained border counties’ justice systems. In June 2021, as DPS began charging migrants with criminal trespassing, participating border counties’ judicial systems were stretched thin.^{ccclxxi} For example, during the early months of criminal charges, Kinney County’s court system was overwhelmed by the number of trespassing cases.^{ccclxxii} By September 2021, reporters were noting that migrants had been sitting in the prison for weeks with no charges filed against them and no assigned attorneys.^{ccclxxiii} Similarly, in July 2024, El Paso county officials noted that Operation Lone Star’s arrests—including human smugglers and migrants charged with rioting or trespassing—have cost the county millions of dollars and overwhelmed their criminal justice system.^{ccclxxiv}

Effects for Texas’ Interior Counties and Cities

Texas counties far from the border have also felt Operation Lone Star’s effects. One effect—which is similar to border counties—centers on local law enforcement’s struggle to recruit new officers or keep existing ones, since DPS offers a more attractive pay structure. In September 2025, a Bee County Sheriff sympathized with the desire for local officers to leave his office to join DPS,

because of its desirable pay scale and consistent work. However, he noted how these dynamics hurt local law enforcement agencies when they lose high quality officers.^{ccclxxv}

Additionally, local law enforcement in non-border counties also report difficulties providing the same safety levels when DPS troopers rotate to the border.^{ccclxxvi} In June 2023, in response to concerns that large-scale border deployments were depleting law enforcement capacity in interior counties, the Texas Legislature passed SB22. The bill established grant funding of up to \$500,000 to increase recruitment and avoid any vacancies in local counties during DPS troopers' rotations.^{ccclxxvii}

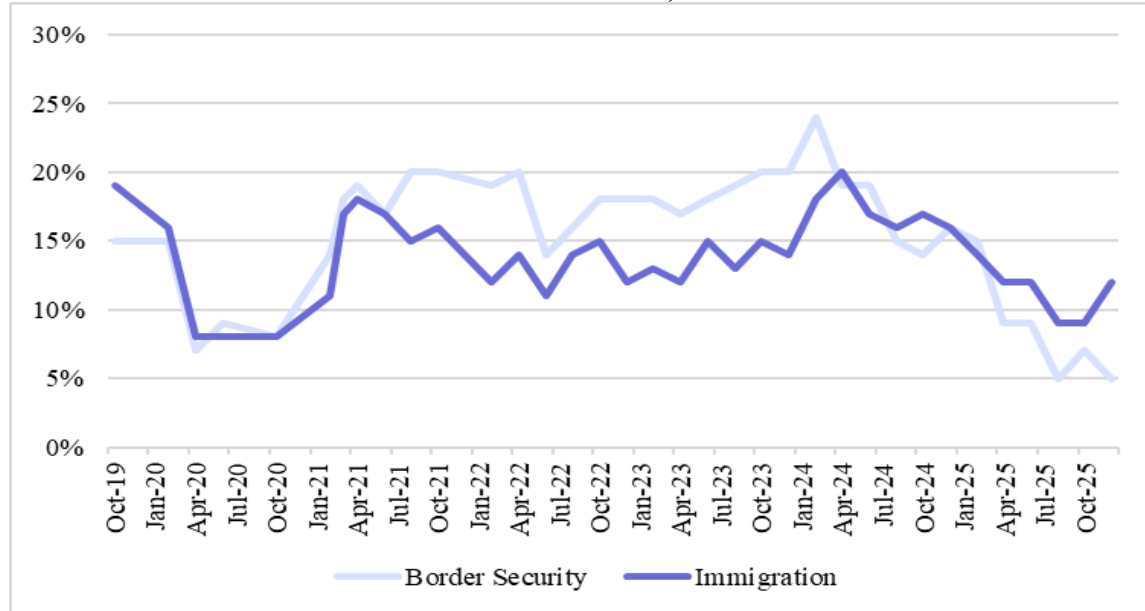
In a related case, Operation Lone Star also affected policing in Texas' capital city of Austin. In late March 2023, the City of Austin and DPS announced a policing partnership, as the city was struggling to maintain adequate response times for 911 calls.^{ccclxxviii} This partnership was successful in addressing public safety concerns in Austin, with violent crime rates down 35 percent since the week before the partnership.^{ccclxxix} However, on May 13, 2023—when the Biden Administration ended the Covid-related Title 42 authority—Governor Abbott suspended the policing partnership program and sent the DPS troopers to the border.^{ccclxxx}

Statewide Issues

Operation Lone Star also created a range of statewide effects. First, the operation has proven to be politically popular and a boon to associated state politicians. Yet, it has come with significant costs, which, at times, were supported by transfers from state agencies' existing budgets. Other costs have emerged from lawsuits stemming from Operation Lone Star.

Popularity. Overall, Operation Lone Star has been broadly popular with Texas voters. According to the Texas Politics Project surveys, for almost the operation's entire lifespan, Texas voters consistently ranked "immigration" and "border security" as the two most important problems facing Texas.^{ccclxxxi} Between 20 and 40 percent of Texas residents selected these answers during each monthly survey, surpassing other listed concerns such as political corruption, inflation, and abortion.^{ccclxxxii}

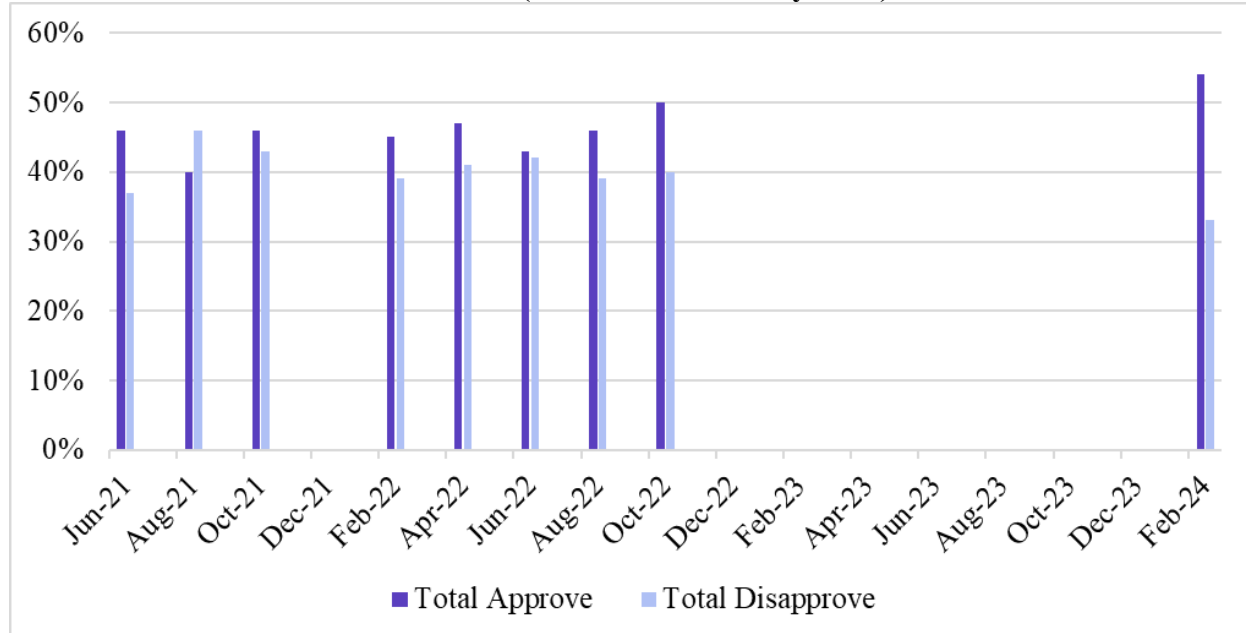
Figure 22: Texas Public Opinion on Immigration and Border Security (October 2019-October 2025)



Source: The Texas Politics Project

Texas voters also supported efforts to address these two perceived top issues. Specifically, when asked whether they approved or disapproved of how Governor Abbott has handled immigration and border security, Texas residents tended to approve of the policies.^{ccclxxxiii} While the percentages shifted over time, a majority of Texas residents almost always approved of the specific enforcement activities. The policies were at their most popular before the 2024 presidential election. According to a February 2024 poll, 49 percent of Texas residents approved of how state leaders and the state legislature handled border security and immigration, while 36 percent disapproved.^{ccclxxxiv}

Figure 23: Texas Public Opinion on Greg Abbott’s Immigration and Border Security Initiatives (June 2021-February 2024)



Source: The Texas Politics Project

Polls have also periodically attempted to capture public opinion toward specific Operation Lone Star activities. The polls show that the activities are generally popular, but there are varying levels of support. The most popular activities have been deploying additional state police and military resources to the border, placing buoys and concertina wire at the Rio Grande to deter migration, and constructing and repairing walls or physical barriers at the border.^{ccclxxxv} During the polling period, Texas residents’ support for these activities did not drop below 52 percent and was sometimes as high as 69 percent.^{ccclxxxvi}

State Funding. Operation Lone Star has constituted a significant cost for Texas. From March 2021 through the 2026-2027 biennium, Texas has spent nearly \$14.4 billion on the operation.^{ccclxxxvii} To maintain constant funding, Texas authorities have not only requested billions from the Texas legislature but also repeatedly redirected funds from other agencies. First, in May 2022, Texas authorities shifted approximately \$480 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds to the governor’s disaster fund, which then helped finance Operation Lone Star. Then, in October 2022, officials diverted an additional \$359.6 million from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to cover border-related costs.^{ccclxxxviii} Other budget transfers to Operation Lone Star have come from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, the state’s juvenile justice system, and Texas Health and Human Services, among other agencies.^{ccclxxxix}

Legal Repercussions. Texas has been involved in several high-profile lawsuits stemming from Operation Lone Star. This includes the 2024 case where Texas sued the federal government over Border Patrol agents cutting through concertina wire barriers.^{cccxc} It also includes the legal case where the federal government sued Texas over the buoy installations in the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass.^{cccxi} The litigation has generated significant legal and administrative resources, with repeated injunctions, emergency appeals, and Supreme Court rulings.^{cccxcii}

In addition, complex federal litigation often requires specialized legal expertise, including outside counsel or consultants working alongside the Texas Attorney General’s Office. In April 2024, the *Texas Observer* reported that Texas spent nearly \$1 million on experts in just the Rio Grande buoy lawsuit.^{cccxciii} Notably, these contracts were more expensive than the \$850,000 that the state paid to install the first 1,000 feet of buoys.^{cccxciv}

National Effects

Operation Lone Star’s effects have not been confined to Texas, with effects reaching the national stage and U.S. relations with Mexico. As the United States geared up for the 2024 presidential election, Operation Lone Star elevated migration and border security as defining political issues. Further, as Trump Administration officials began solidifying their initial policy positions and actions, the operation provided a blueprint for border enforcement policies. Yet, the operation’s effects were not contained to the U.S. borders and also affected relations with Mexico. The following subsections explore these broader effects.

The 2024 Presidential Election

Operation Lone Star influenced politics well beyond Texas’ state boundaries. As the country got ready for the November 2024 presidential election, the operation kept migration and border security in the national news, with Texas officials holding frequent press events and releasing regular updates on migrant apprehensions, smuggler arrests, and drug seizures. These activities ensured that images of migrant apprehensions, concertina wire, DPS troopers, and Texas National Guard soldiers continuously appeared across major news outlets and social media. This constant stream of visuals and official statements shaped coverage and likely reinforced voter attention.^{cccxcv}

Operation Lone Star’s migrant busing activities were particularly effective in generating political pressure. These buses relocated 119,400 migrants from the Texas-Mexico border to a handful of U.S. interior cities. Many of the migrants arrived in these cities without housing, stable employment, or even reliable access to work authorization, and often entered the cities shelter system or relied on organizations for food, medical care, and legal-immigration support.^{cccxcvi} The cities’ shelters and services quickly became overwhelmed, forcing cities to deploy emergency measures, set up tent encampments and temporary facilities, and stretch their budgets.^{cccxcvii}

This strain amplified inter-Democratic Party conflict at a moment when Democratic politicians were trying to project unity.^{cccxcviii} In August 2022, then-mayor of New York City Eric Adams initially stated that the busing was “horrific” and amounted to using “innocent people as political pawns to manufacture a crisis.”^{cccxcix}¹⁰ However, in September 2023, he expressed concern over the total number of migrants being bused into the area, saying that the migrant crisis will “destroy New York City.”^{cd} Similarly, in August 2022, the then-mayor of Chicago, described the practice as “racist,” and noted that her city tried to “welcome the new arrivals with dignity and respect.”^{cdi} Yet, in December 2023, after new arrivals overwhelmed local services, the mayor warned that Texas’ tactic was “determined to... sow seeds of chaos,” calling the unscheduled drop-offs a

¹⁰ In January 2024, New York City filed a lawsuit against 17 bus companies that transported migrants from Texas, seeking over \$700 million in damages to cover costs associated with migrant busing. However, in July 2024, a Manhattan Supreme Court judge deemed the case to be unconstitutional.

“dangerous task” with national-level consequences.^{cdii} Ultimately, the busing issue pitted Democratic-led cities and states against the Biden administration, creating infighting within the political party.^{cdiii}

Operation Lone Star as a Trump Administration Blueprint

When Governor Abbott announced Operation Lone Star, he stated that Texas was filling a gap left by the Biden Administration. However, during the operation’s first four years, it did not visibly lead to any direct shifts in federal immigration policy. In fact, in July 2023, federal government officials claimed that Operation Lone Star was interfering with U.S. immigration policy enforcement, and “adversely affecting CBP’s ability to interdict individuals crossing between ports of entry.”^{cdiv}

However, when Donald Trump won the 2024 presidential election, Texas had an opening to influence federal policy. In November 2024, the incoming Border Czar Tom Homan said, “There is unprecedented success in Texas. This is the model we can take across the country.”^{cdv} On December 6, 2024, the Texas Governor’s Office presented Operation Lone Star as a “border security blueprint for the nation.”^{cdvi} Then in January 2025, the Trump Administration assumed office and began to model its border enforcement policies after Operation Lone Star by mirroring both its general philosophy and practices.^{cdvii} The Trump administration also immediately hired Texas’ first border czar, Michael Banks, who had led activities under Operation Lone Star to become the head of the Border Patrol.^{cdviii}

International Relations Effects

Operation Lone Star has also generated tension between the United States and Mexico’s federal government.^{cdix} These tensions have primarily centered over the operation’s border barriers, such as floating buoys and concertina wire. In July 2023, Mexico filed a formal diplomatic complaint with the United States over the concertina wire and buoys in the Rio Grande, arguing that Texas had violated the 1944 Water Treaty and had installed structures in a shared international waterway.^{cdx} Mexico’s then-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador called the physical deterrents “inhumane” and said, “no one should be treated like this.”^{cdxi}

Operation Lone Star has also had more limited effects on relations with Mexico’s states along the Texas-Mexico border: Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Chihuahua.^{cdxii} In April 2022, Texas began inspecting all commercial vehicles crossing the border.^{cdxiii} The Mexican border governors voiced concerns about how this tactic could generate delays that would impact Mexican businesses and cause economic disruption.^{cdxiv} Ultimately, Governor Abbott agreed to end these inspections, and the Mexican governors committed to boosting security on their side of the border.^{cdxv} Yet, there is no evidence that these agreements produced a measurable, lasting impact.

Endnotes

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- ^{iv} Michel, *A Breed Apart*, 2.
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- ^{xxxvii} Michel, *A Breed Apart*, 46.
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ISBN: 978-1-951006-27-3

