



Migrant Deaths Along the Arizona-Sonora Border: Blocked Access to Asylum & Excessive Use of Force by US Border Patrol as Contributing Factors

Special Issue: Kerwin, Donald, Daniel E. Martínez, and Courtney Siegert. 2024. "Forced Migration, Deterrence, and Solutions to the Non-Natural Disaster of Migrant Deaths Along the US-Mexico Border and Beyond." *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 12(3).

OVERVIEW

The Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME), in Tucson, Arizona, is among the leading forensic authorities when it comes to investigating undocumented border-crosser (UBC) fatalities along the US-Mexico border. PCOME has investigated more than 4,000 UBC fatalities in southern Arizona to date, working closely with foreign consulates and nongovernmental organizations to identify the deceased and return their remains to their families. Migrant deaths began to increase in Arizona in the late-1990s after the “prevention through deterrence” strategy funneled UBCs into remote areas of the region. Despite fluctuations over time, these deaths continue unabated. The Fall 2024 special issue of the *Journal on Migration and Human Security* features 11 unique papers on migrant deaths, two of which are empirical articles based on data gathered from PCOME records (Martínez et al. 2024; Reineke and Martínez 2024). Below is a summary of findings and policy recommendations stemming from these articles:

KEY FINDINGS

- The use of Title 42 “expulsions,” representing one recent federal effort to impede access to the US asylum system, has led to increased migrant fatalities in southern Arizona.
- Deaths rose from an annual mean of 133 during the period preceding Title 42 to 198 during the Title 42 era, representing a 48% increase.
- The geography of death also changed, with deaths clustering closer to the border. This suggests increased recidivism rates – attempts to cross multiple times – during Title 42 may have placed UBCs at risk of death as they became increasingly exhausted and depleted over time.
- In addition, US Border Patrol practices represent an under-examined factor contributing to migrant death and disappearance in southern Arizona. Several of these practices constitute “excessive use of force,” including reckless motor vehicle pursuits, aggressive strategies used to detain individuals who are on foot, and the use of lethal force.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The US federal government should not impede or limit migrants’ access to the asylum system. Policymakers should instead create legal pathways and procedures that obviate the need for migrants to undertake dangerous journeys and overcome perilous barriers to fair consideration of their claims.
- The US federal government must expand its ability to address asylum claims.
- The US federal government must take measures to eliminate the backlog of asylum cases in the immigration courts.
- The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should desist from using enforcement methods that provoke fear, panic, or confusion.
- DHS should substantially reduce the use of high-speed motor vehicle pursuits by Border Patrol and other immigration enforcement officials.
- DHS should ensure that Border Patrol agents comply with Department of Justice standards on use of deadly force, in particular with the policy that “Deadly force may not be used solely to prevent the escape of a fleeing suspect.”