



# Forced Migration, Deterrence, & Solutions to the Non-Natural Disaster of Migrant Deaths Along the US-Mexico Border & Beyond

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

A new 11-paper special issue of the *Journal on Migration and Human Security* documents and reports on migrant deaths along the US-Mexico border. The issue represents a unique collaboration between the University of Arizona's Binational Migration Institute, the Center for Migration Studies of New York, and the Working Group on Mapping Migrant Deaths along the US Southwest Border. The Working Group includes medicolegal authorities, scholars, and practitioners from California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and New York who have met monthly since late 2021. The studies reported on in this special issue examine the primary causes of migrant deaths and provide data from every US state that borders Mexico. They document US border enforcement strategies and tactics, the inadequacy of "official" migrant death statistics, and the resource and capacity challenges faced by US counties along the US-Mexico border in investigating these deaths, including grossly insufficient funding for DNA testing of unidentified human remains.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Forced migration and border and immigration enforcement strategies, including "prevention through deterrence," the denial of access to asylum, and the expansion of the border wall have directly contributed to migrant fatalities.
- Migrant death counts include only deaths that occur in the United States that have come to the attention of officials. Moreover, Border Patrol tallies do not include all the deaths that come to their attention: the studies in the special issue identify types of deaths less likely to be counted by the Border Patrol, as well as enforcement tactics that contribute to these deaths.
- The true number of migrant fatalities remains unknown, but significantly exceeds official counts.
- No independent, centralized, systematic effort exists at present to track and enumerate migrant fatalities along the entire US-Mexico border.
- Variations in medicolegal death investigations, limited access to resources, and diverse geographies across the border represent notable challenges to creating a much-needed centralized accounting system.
- While the US Border Patrol has tracked migrant fatalities since fiscal year 1998, the agency's annual counts are routinely lower than those from local medicolegal authorities in similar geographies and should be interpreted with caution.
- The lack of timely, sufficient, "official" data represents a barrier to policies that could reduce deaths. Media and human rights agencies report, for example, that migrant deaths reached record highs in some Border Patrol sectors, such as the El Paso sector, in FY 2024. However, the Border Patrol has not yet even publicly released these data for FY 2023.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Invest more significantly in stemming the conditions that give rise to forced migration, terminate the "prevention through deterrence" strategy, expand access to the US asylum system, and stop the expansion of the border wall.
- Improve access to legal immigration pathways and reduce the backlog in US immigration courts.
- Establish "Regional Migrant Identification Centers" throughout South Texas to improve accounting and increase documentation of migrant fatalities.
- Add an "undocumented border crosser" checkbox on death certificates in counties within the 100-mile border zone.