



Migrant Deaths in California’s Borderlands, 2018-2023

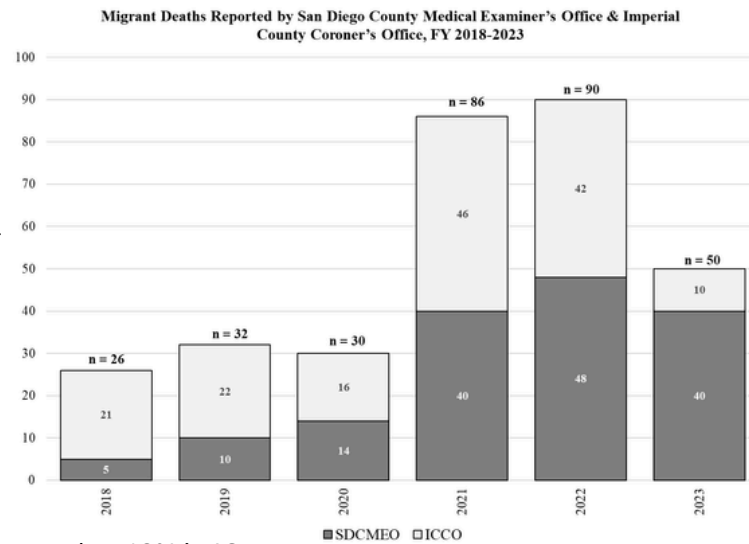
Source: LaFleur, Marni, Ligia Ceha, Kat On, and Daniel E. Martínez. Forthcoming. “Migrant deaths in California’s Borderlands, 2018-2023.” *Journal on Migration and Human Security*.

OVERVIEW

California has seen a resurgence of migrants entering the United States from Mexico. In this forthcoming *Journal on Migration and Human Security* article, Marni LaFluer and her colleagues examined the deaths of undocumented migrants in southern California (i.e., San Diego and Imperial counties) for fiscal years (FY) 2018-2023. Using data from the San Diego County Medical Examiner’s Office (SDCMEO) and Imperial County Coroner’s Office (ICCO), the authors examined differences between counties before and during the COVID-19 pandemic related to the causes of death and migrant decedent demographic characteristics. Notably, falls from the newly constructed and heightened 2019 border barrier or “wall” directly resulted in 45 deaths, providing additional evidence of its lethality, among other deterrence policies.

KEY FINDINGS

- The authors recorded 314 migrant deaths in southern California: 157 in San Diego County (SDC) and 157 in Imperial County (IC) between 2018-2023.
- Deaths were highest in 2021 and 2022, with nearly 90 known fatalities each year.
- Leading causes of death were drowning (35%), environmental exposure (24%), and “blunt force trauma” (17%).
 - 45 of the 52 blunt force trauma deaths were due to falls from the border wall.
- 75% of decedents were male, 20% were female, and 5% were of unknown sex. Among cases in which a precise age at death was listed, the average age was 34.6 years.
- Differences between *SDC* and *IC*:
 - 22% of deaths in SDC were due to blunt force trauma, compared to 12% in IC.
 - 52% of deaths in IC were due to drowning, compared to 19% in SDC.
 - SDC had a higher proportion of female decedents than IC (28% in SDC vs. 13% in IC).
- Changes from *2018-2019* to *2020-2023*:
 - Deaths due to blunt force trauma—most often falls from the border wall—increased from 3% to 20% of cases.
 - The share of female decedents increased from 5% to 24%.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The United States should eliminate the use of “deterrence” strategies to prevent further and unnecessary loss of life.
- Installing buoys or other anti-drowning devices in the All-American Canal, making potentially life-saving resources (such as blankets and water) available on known migrant routes, and reducing the height of or removing physical barriers along the border could reduce migrant fatalities in California.
- US Customs and Border Protection and medicolegal authorities should provide disaggregated data on migrant fatalities. Increased access to such information would facilitate an accurate accounting of these deaths, increase understanding of where and why deaths occur, and thus be used to support life-saving policy changes.