



# Migrant Deaths in New Mexico: An Emerging Non-Natural Disaster & Humanitarian Crisis

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

Records from the New Mexico Office of the Medical Investigator (OMI) demonstrate that undocumented border-crosser (UBC) deaths have increased dramatically in the state. Between FY 2009 and 2020, the medicolegal authority recorded a total of 48 UBC fatalities, averaging four per year. However, deaths spiked in 2021 (n = 33), and increased again in 2022 (n = 47). By 2023, UBC deaths in the region reached 120, which constitutes the highest number recorded to date.

Jasmine Hernandez and Heather Edgar (2024), in the 11-paper Fall 2024 *Journal on Migration and Human Security* special issue on migrant deaths, offer one of the first academic studies to examine such fatalities in southern New Mexico in detail. Hernandez and Edgar describe the work of the New Mexico OMI and highlight its initiatives to track migrant deaths. The authors discuss the OMI's response to the rapid increase in fatalities. They also highlight the collateral damage of border security measures, underscored by the increasing number of deaths. The authors consider the need for new and amended policies to mitigate this unfolding humanitarian crisis. Below is a summary of findings and policy recommendations from the article:

## KEY FINDINGS

- UBC deaths in southern New Mexico have increased exponentially since FY 2020.
- The OMI investigated 248 migrant deaths from 2009-2023, with a notable increase from 47 in 2022 to 120 in 2023.
- 66% of remains were recovered in Doña Ana County, which shares its southern border with Chihuahua, Mexico, and is located west of El Paso, Texas.
- The most common causes of death from 2009-2023 were "undetermined" (46%) and environmental exposure (41%).
- While 60% of migrant deaths investigated by OMI were of males, the New Mexico OMI nonetheless had a higher proportion of females among its migrant caseload than did medicolegal authorities in other regions.
- Among those identified, 65% of decedents were from Mexico and 69% were between 20-39 years of age.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reallocate federal funds to infrastructure and staffing at ports of entry to support the vast number of asylum-seekers arriving to New Mexico's southern border and to decrease the risk of death.
- Increase federal and state funding for identification of migrants, such as for DNA analysis and other to aid investigative processes.
- Increase collaboration between New Mexico's OMI and federal agencies and programs, including US Border Patrol's Missing Migrant Program.