

**CAUSES AND TRENDS IN MIGRANT DEATHS  
ALONG THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER,**

**1985-1998**

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Executive Summary

After facing a long-term, elevated wave of undocumented immigration, in the 1990s the U.S. government committed an unprecedented amount of resources to police the U.S.-Mexico border. Part of the new policing initiatives consisted of intensified border enforcement, which commenced in 1993 in the El Paso Border Patrol sector through Operation Hold the Line. While the effects of the new U.S. efforts to control the southwest borderline against unauthorized entry are still debated, it is evident to all border watchers that undocumented migration flows have been heavily affected in two major ways. Illegal border crossing patterns have been spatially restructured to circumvent areas of high border enforcement, and the whole border region, from Texas to California, has become a more dangerous area to cross for illegal entrants than before the new enforcement efforts of the 1990s. The attempts to cross the border surreptitiously away from areas of intense border enforcement and through less detected but more dangerous points, the greater use of unknown smugglers, the predatory habits of border bandits--all are examples of risk factors that have combined to make border crossings a much more dangerous experience. Not surprisingly, the increase of the risk factors has elevated the occurrence of deaths among undocumented migrants in the interval of increasing undocumented immigration in the late 1990s.

While border observers are familiar with the increasing levels of deaths among foreign transients in the U.S. southwest border regions, no attempt has been made to

assess this mortality from a standardized empirical data source, that is, a source which maintains consistent measurement criteria across time and place. Also, no attempt has been made to assess this migrant mortality across a time frame that covers time periods both before and after the implementation of intensified border campaigns in the 1990s. In this report these two methodological limitations are overcome by using a single, standardized data set--official vital registration data pertinent to the border research area under study--and subjecting this data to systematic analysis, from the standpoint of a host of causes of deaths, for the time period 1985 to 1998. A central concern of the analysis is to see if the time-series death data fluctuate with respect to the time points and areas of intensified border enforcement. In other words, a major analytical concern is to assess how intensified border campaigns are affecting the migrants' death patterns through the re-direction of undocumented migratory flows.

The study's key empirical findings include the following:

- Deaths due to exposure to extreme environmental conditions (heat or cold) is the only border-wide data series that rises sharply because of the redirection of migration flows after enhancement of border enforcement.
- A portion of the increase in environmental deaths in 1998 is attributable to the increased migration flow in the late 1990s, a portion is attributable to the unusually hot summer that year, and the remainder to redirected flows.
- Deaths due to unknown cause show a U-shaped pattern of change that is consistent with the change of the volume of undocumented migration in the 1985-1998 study period.
- Drowning deaths increase in Imperial County, California and in El Paso County, Texas. The increases in Imperial County are directly related to the re-direction of flows, but the increases in El Paso County reflect a persistent problem with drowning exacerbated by the opening of an additional canal segment, and thus cannot be specifically associated with redirected migration
- Drowning death totals in Texas outside the El Paso area were suppressed by the low water flow volume in segments of the Rio Grande River below the Amistad Reservoir.

- Auto-pedestrian accidents declined in San Diego County and in El Paso County. These declines were related to targeted enforcement that deflected flows from dangerous urban crossing locations.
- Homicide deaths of foreign transients and unidentified persons declined along the border, especially in San Diego County. The causes of these declines are manifold, and improved border control in urban crossing places, especially San Diego, is likely to be one cause of the decline.
- Other causes of death from external accidents and injury do not appear to have been restructured, and either increased or decreased in association with the spatial restructuring of undocumented immigration.
- There appears to have been a net increase in undocumented migrant fatalities along the southwest border because of spatial restructuring through 1998, since the environmental death and has increased more than other types of death have decreased. However, increases associated with restructured flows are more modest than a review of the data starting in 1993 would suggest, because 1993 appears to establish an unusually low baseline of these deaths.
- The multiplier of observed to unobserved environmental deaths is not known, so the true effects of redirection may not be fully known. In general, redirection of flows from urban to rural crossing points is likely to lead also to a re-direction to causes and places of death that decrease the probability that a death will be discovered and registered.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that behind intense strategies of border enforcement stands immigration policy. It is policy, not enforcement, that ultimately determines the migrants' mode of entry, for which there is a clear and sharp distinction in the migrants' death bill. Short of a completely controlled border or the emergence of home-country economies as or more prosperous than the United States, migrant border deaths will continue to parallel the temporal and spatial contours of undocumented immigration. Moreover, discontinuing intensified border enforcement will only mean the return of migrant border deaths to earlier patterns, not the disappearance of the deaths.