



Highlights of [GAO-06-770](#), a report to the Honorable Bill Frist, Majority Leader, United States Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Reports in recent years have indicated that increasing numbers of migrants attempting to enter the United States illegally die while crossing the southwest border. The Border Patrol implemented the Border Safety Initiative (BSI) in 1998 with the intention of reducing injuries and preventing deaths among migrants that attempt to cross the border illegally.

GAO assessed: (1) Trends in the numbers, locations, causes, and characteristics of border-crossing deaths. (2) Differences among the Border Patrol sectors in implementing the BSI methodology. (3) The extent to which existing data allow for an evaluation of the effectiveness of the BSI and other efforts to prevent border-crossing deaths.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Commissioner of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) ensure that BSI sector coordinators follow consistent protocols for collecting migrant death data from local authorities and that CBP assess the feasibility of using multivariate statistical approaches to enhance estimates of the impacts of its initiatives. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) concurred with GAO's findings and outlined plans for addressing both recommendations. DHS and the Department of Health and Human Services also provided technical comments, which were incorporated as appropriate.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-770.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Laurie Ekstrand at (202) 512-2758 or ekstrandl@gao.gov.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

Border-Crossing Deaths Have Doubled Since 1995; Border Patrol's Efforts to Prevent Deaths Have Not Been Fully Evaluated

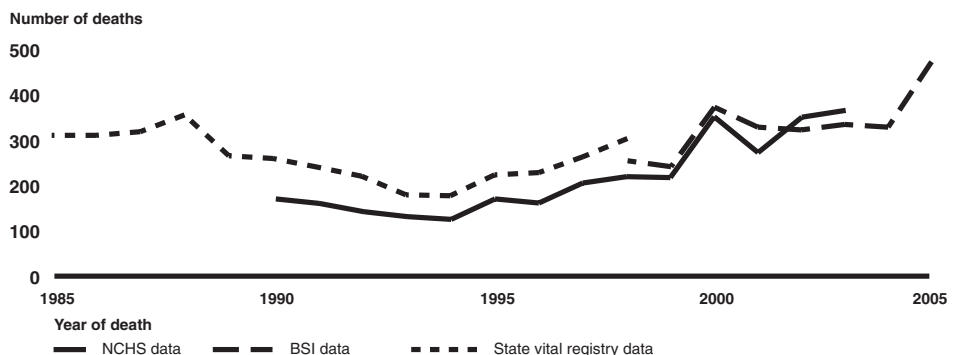
What GAO Found

GAO's analysis of data from the BSI, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), and studies of state vital registries shows consistent trends in the numbers, locations, causes, and characteristics of migrant border-crossing deaths that occurred along the southwest border between 1985 and 2005. Since 1995, the number of border-crossing deaths increased and by 2005 had more than doubled. This increase in deaths occurred despite the fact that, according to published estimates, there was not a corresponding increase in the number of illegal entries. Further, GAO's analysis also shows that more than three-fourths of the doubling in deaths along the southwest border since 1995 can be attributed to increases in deaths occurring in the Arizona desert.

Differences among the BSI sector coordinators in collecting and recording data on border-crossing deaths may have resulted in the BSI data understating the number of deaths in some regions. Despite these differences, our analysis of the BSI data shows trends that are consistent with trends identified in the NCHS and state vital registry data. However, the Border Patrol needs to continue to improve its methods for collecting data in order to accurately record deaths as changes occur in the locations where migrants attempt to cross the border—and consequently where migrants die. Improved data collection would allow the Border Patrol to continue to use the data for making accurate planning and resource allocation decisions.

Comprehensive evaluations of the BSI and other efforts by the Border Patrol to prevent border-crossing deaths are challenged by data and measurement limitations. However, the Border Patrol has not addressed these limitations to sufficiently support its assertions about the effectiveness of some of its efforts to reduce border-crossing deaths. For instance, it has not used multivariate statistical methods to control for the influences of measurable variables that could affect deaths, such as changes in the number of migrants attempting to cross the border.

Migrant Border-Crossing Deaths, 1985 through 2005



Source: GAO analysis of BSI and NCHS data; findings from the Center for Immigration Research, University of Houston.