



# LEFT TO DIE

BORDER PATROL, SEARCH AND RESCUE,  
& THE CRISIS OF DISAPPEARANCE

No More Deaths • La Coalición de Derechos Humanos

**“If my dad was a different person,  
or a citizen, I think he would have  
received a different search.”**

*– Daughter of a 52-year-old from Honduras  
who disappeared after crossing the  
US–Mexico border in May 2016*

*For the families, friends, and communities  
who search for the disappeared.*



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## Preface: A Search and Rescue Crisis in the Borderlands

There is a search and rescue crisis in the borderlands. Every year, hundreds of thousands of people seek to enter the United States by way of the southern border. Some are fleeing U.S. sanctioned violence, severe poverty as a result of U.S. foreign policy and intervention, or the disastrous and escalating effects of global climate change. Others are seeking to rejoin their families and communities after being deported from the places they call home. As a diversity of geopolitical forces compel people to leave their countries of origin, increasingly insurmountable restrictions to legal entry mean that for many, the only option is to enter the United States without authorization, crossing rivers or trekking miles through deserts.<sup>1</sup> For years, US Border Patrol policy has deliberately pushed people crossing the border without official

**US Border Patrol policy has deliberately pushed people crossing the border into remote and dangerous areas.**

permission into remote and dangerous areas. Border Patrol's "Prevention Through Deterrence" strategy has concentrated enforcement in relatively safe urban areas, with the stated intention of diverting migration into what the agency itself describes as "more hostile terrain," where "illegal [sic] entrants crossing through remote, uninhabited expanses of land . . . can find themselves in mortal danger."<sup>2</sup> While Border Patrol itself claims an official count of 7,805 remains recovered from 1998 through 2019, our team estimates that three to ten times as many people may have died or disappeared since the implementation of Prevention through Deterrence.<sup>3</sup> Disoriented in unfamiliar deserts and lacking basic resources for survival, many people on the migration trail find themselves in life-or-death situations. Cries for help ring out across the border region.

As a direct consequence of US government policy, there is an urgent and growing need for emergency search and rescue services for undocumented people in distress in the US–Mexico borderlands. However, the same agency responsible for causing these emergencies—the US Border Patrol—has positioned itself as the primary and often sole responder to distress calls involving undocumented people. 911 response systems transfer callers who appear to be crossing into the United States without authorization away from local emergency services and to Border Patrol, an agency with an aggressive enforcement mission, notorious for its lack of accountability and public transparency.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of Border Patrol’s monopoly over search and rescue in the borderlands, access to life-saving assistance is severely diminished or simply non-existent. In Part III of the Disappeared report series, “Left To Die,” we detail a Border Patrol-dominated emergency response system fraught with dead ends. Our team reviewed hundreds of emergency cases received by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line, a non-governmental community advocacy initiative created to assist family members in searching for their loved ones. **We found that in:**

- **63%** of all distress calls that families and advocates referred to Border Patrol, the agency did not conduct any confirmed search or rescue mobilization whatsoever.<sup>5</sup>

- **37%** of cases in which Border Patrol *did* mobilize search or rescue measures, the quality and scope of the agency’s efforts were seriously diminished when compared with government search and rescue standards for cases involving US citizens.

In most of these emergencies, Border Patrol searches lasted less than a day, and in some cases, less than an hour.

- **27%** of all confirmed Border Patrol searches ended in disappearance, meaning that the missing person was never rescued, nor were their remains located, recovered, or identified.<sup>6</sup>

This failure rate—when compared with the near 100% success rate of county-led search and rescues in the same or similar remote borderland corridors—is a clear indication of systemic and deadly discrimination.

In the absence of adequate government assistance, families and humanitarian groups often take on the monumental task of conducting search and rescue missions themselves. We find, however, that Border Patrol agents routinely obstruct community-based efforts to locate and rescue the missing. **Border Patrol agents obstructed family and humanitarian search efforts in at least 115 emergencies, or in 25% of cases fielded by community advocates.** Border Patrol interference with community responders includes numerous cases in which Border Patrol agents refused to provide critical locational information necessary for an emergency search, denied access to eyewitnesses in detention, forwarded advocates and families to other agencies

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or non-working phone numbers and/or full voicemail boxes, provided false or misleading information to families and volunteers, harassed humanitarian search teams in the field, and more. As a consequence of such acts of Border Patrol obstruction, families of the missing struggle to navigate a system that is designed to fail.

Border Patrol's monopoly over emergency services is especially paradoxical considering the reality that the agency is directly responsible for driving people into life-threatening situations in the first place. On a daily basis, Border Patrol agents chase and scatter groups of people migrating on foot through rugged terrain, causing many to become injured, disoriented, and separated from guides and traveling companions.

**Based on our original data analysis, we find that Border Patrol is more than twice as likely to take part in directly causing a person to go missing through dangerous enforcement tactics than they are to participate in locating a distressed person.<sup>7</sup>**

Thus, no matter how well-positioned or resourced the US Border Patrol becomes for conducting searches and rescues, the agency will only ever be responding to a constantly growing number of emergencies of its own making.

The third part of our *Disappeared* report series exposes what happens when Border Patrol is entrusted with providing emergency services for undocumented people in distress in the US borderlands. We document the mechanics of a Border Patrol-dominated emergency response system that furthers US government policies that are designed to kill and disappear migrating people.

**Ultimately the goal of our research is transformative: to compel the immediate and lasting provision of robust emergency response services for undocumented people in distress, and to advocate for an end to state violence against those who seek safety across borders.**

### Data Sources

The pages that follow expose the underreported reality of Border Patrol's deadly non-response to emergencies, as well as the agency's obstruction of humanitarian and family search efforts in the southwest desert. We bring extensive documentation from the front lines of humanitarian efforts to mitigate death and suffering into direct conversation with government records. Our research draws on the following original data sources related to emergency cases in the borderlands:

- 456 emergency cases received from 2015–2016 by the Coalición de Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line, a community-based effort to help families locate their loved ones who go missing after crossing the southern border. During this period, Derechos Humanos received thousands of reports of people who had gone missing on US soil. Those classified as “emergency cases” were reports in which there was a possibility that a person who is reported missing was still alive and in distress in the desert, or had very recently deceased.<sup>8</sup> All names used in this report have been changed to uphold confidentiality for those who contacted the Crisis Line.
- 2,193 audio recordings of 911 calls received in a two-year period between 2016–2018 by Pima County Sheriff's Department dispatchers that were subsequently transferred to Border Patrol. The majority of these 911 calls originated from distressed people presumed to be crossing the border without authorization. These audio files were obtained through public records requests.<sup>2</sup>
- 224 audio recordings of 911 calls classified as “search and rescue cases” which generally involve lost and/or distressed US citizens, authorized residents, and/or tourists. These calls were received by Pima County Sheriff's Department and handled by Pima County's own search and rescue team, rather than being transferred to Border Patrol. The audio files were obtained through public records request.
- Interviews with current and former US Border Patrol agents conducted 2015–2019.
- Interviews with current search and rescue coordinators with Pima County Sheriff's Department, which responds primarily to emergencies involving US citizens, conducted 2018.
- 157 Customs and Border Protection press statements released between March 2015 and November 2016 that refer to an incident as a “rescue.”
- First-person witness testimony about Border Patrol emergency response from humanitarian search team members and Crisis Line volunteers from La Coalición de Derechos Humanos. Interviews conducted 2016–2019.

# Section I: Border Patrol Non-Response to Reported Emergencies

*On October 1, 2015, the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line received a call from Joel's sister. Joel had called her, reporting that he had crossed the border in South Texas, that he was alone, lost, thirsty, cold, and that he had not eaten in three days. Joel said that after crossing a river, he had walked for two hours until he happened upon a hunter's cabin. Soon after calling his sister, Joel's phone stopped working.*

*Joel's sister immediately contacted Border Patrol to request that they launch an emergency search and rescue effort, but Border Patrol agents refused. Joel's family then offered to pay for the cost of a helicopter search to try to compel the agency to mobilize, but Border Patrol still refused to take any action. Joel's sister then called 911. County 911 dispatchers told her to call Border Patrol, despite the fact that they had already refused to respond.<sup>10</sup> With every attempt to mobilize government assistance leading to a dead end, Joel's sister contacted the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line. The volunteer who responded to her call tried contacting a police department to see if they had received a 911 call from Joel. Police informed the Crisis Line volunteer that "Sometimes we get calls from people lost in the brush who just crossed the river, and we send them to the Border Patrol. Border Patrol takes care of it." Despite all of these efforts, Border Patrol never launched any emergency response. Joel remains disappeared.<sup>11</sup>*

Border Patrol is tasked with responding to thousands of search and rescue emergencies every year. When counties receive direct 911 calls from those presumed to be undocumented and crossing the border, dispatchers forward all such calls to be handled by Border Patrol.<sup>12</sup> For example, Pima County, Arizona alone transfers approximately 1,500 distress calls to Border Patrol annually, or 4.5 calls a day on average.<sup>13</sup> Local law enforcement agencies direct families and advocates to report migrants in distress to Border Patrol. Border Patrol agents also receive reports of emergencies from the people they are detaining in the desert—about injured and unaccounted for traveling companions—leaving it up to the agents’ discretion how, or whether, to respond. In effect, Border Patrol has monopolized emergency services for undocumented people in the borderlands and become the de facto responder for thousands in need of life-saving search or rescue.

## Border Patrol has monopolized emergency services for undocumented people in the borderlands.

However, the US Border Patrol is not a search and rescue organization. On the contrary, the agency is a massive, militarized federal police force that dedicates over 99% of its annual budget and over 99% of its personnel to support border enforcement activities. By its mission and through its allocation of personnel and resources, the agency maintains a priority of border enforcement at all times.<sup>14</sup>

Border Patrol’s ability to provide quality emergency assistance for the missing has never been proven. The federal enforcement agency provides no meaningful public information about the efficacy of their search and rescue operations. What resources Border Patrol mobilizes in response to reported emergencies are unknown. The quality, duration, and scope of Border Patrol-led search and rescue efforts are unknown.<sup>15</sup> The outcome of cases of distressed people transferred to Border Patrol—whether the person survived, died, or disappeared—is also unknown. All told, there has been no quantitative data to suggest that the federal border enforcement agency adequately responds to the high volume of emergency calls in the borderlands.



For decades, families and communities searching for the disappeared have experienced Border Patrol failing to treat missing persons cases with urgency, and often refusing to respond to emergency cases at all. For our research purposes, we turned to the records kept by La Coalición de Derechos Humanos—a non-governmental community organization based in Tucson, Arizona that has spent over a decade fielding emergency calls from individuals reporting missing loved ones in distress—to evidence this lived reality.

In 2014, Derechos Humanos established a 24-hour Crisis Line to assist families with accessing emergency services and locating loved ones in detention. In cases where Crisis Line staff had specific information regarding the location of a missing person, and the family consented to emergency law enforcement assistance, volunteers contacted Border Patrol and other government agencies. The community organization maintained a database of case notes for the thousands of missing persons cases they handled during this period.

Our review of these records has shown that Border Patrol is fatally unresponsive to emergency search and rescue requests. For example:

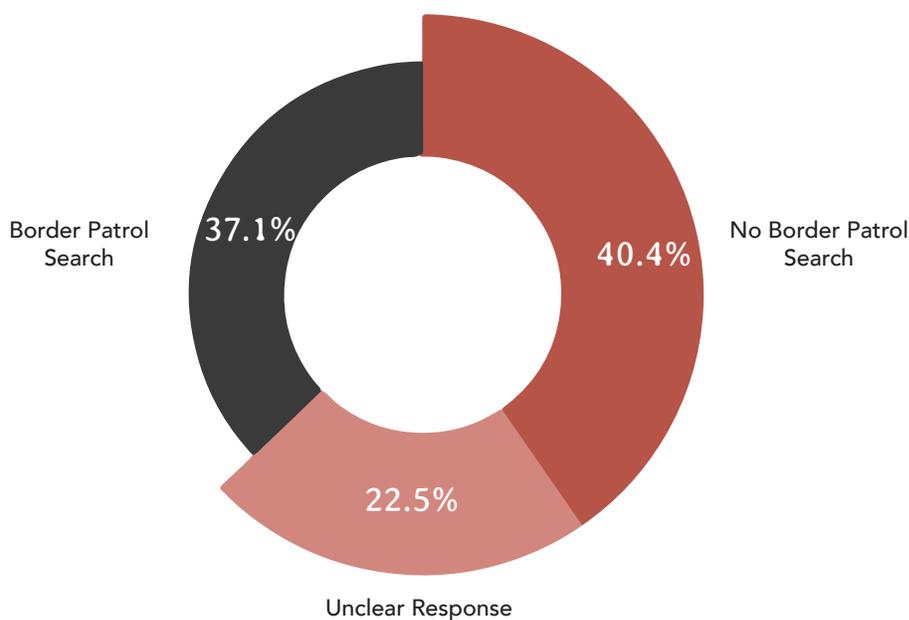
**+ In 63%<sup>16</sup> of all emergency requests made to Border Patrol, the agency did not conduct any confirmed search or rescue response for the distressed person:**

- » In 40% of these emergency cases, Border Patrol directly stated to families and/or humanitarian responders that the agency would not conduct any search or rescue response for a known distressed person.
- » In an additional 23% of these emergency cases, Border Patrol agents were unresponsive and/or unwilling to confirm to families or humanitarians that any emergency mobilization was taking place for a known distressed person. Confirmation is an essential component of any official emergency service.

**+ In the 37% of cases in which Border Patrol *did* confirm that they mobilized search or rescue measures, we find that there were significant patterns of negligence in which the quality and scope of Border Patrol’s efforts were seriously diminished or otherwise inadequate when compared with search and rescue protocols and resources deployed by government agencies for lost and/or distressed US citizens.**

- » We find that the longest amount of time that Border Patrol spent on a search was three days. In most of these emergency cases, however, searches lasted for less than one day, and in some cases, less than one hour.

### Border Patrol Non-Response to Emergency Search and Rescue Requests





In 1998, Border Patrol launched **BORSTAR**, the Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit, in response to public outcry about the rising death toll as a result of border enforcement policy. On paper, BORSTAR is a special operations group that responds to emergency situations for both agents and civilians in the borderlands. In reality, however, BORSTAR is a relatively miniscule initiative with little to no capacity to respond to the massive search and rescue crisis in the borderlands. **BORSTAR's annual budget is approximately \$1.5 million, or .03% of US Border Patrol's total annual budget of \$4.7 billion.** Only ~6% of Border Patrol agents have certified medical training, and only ~1% of agents are trained in search and rescue techniques.<sup>18</sup> Even those agents with the proper training maintain that their operational priority while on duty is border enforcement, with search and rescue objectives coming secondary. One BORSTAR agent

estimated that he spent 80–90% of his on-duty time on enforcement rather than rescue.<sup>12</sup>

***"He had tried to call 911, but no one answered."*<sup>20</sup>**

In 2007, counties began forwarding emergency 911 calls from people perceived to be undocumented and in distress to Border Patrol. Up until 2015, these calls were transferred to a single cell phone carried by a BORSTAR agent on patrol in the far reaches of the desert. This "emergency" cell phone was frequently out of service, out of battery, and at times, turned completely off over the weekend or overnight. For years, untold numbers of calls from people in dire need went unanswered. **Pima County estimates that 70% of the 911 calls from those presumed to be undocumented people in distress during this period were dropped upon transfer to Border Patrol.**

In the following section, we investigate this record of Border Patrol non-response to reported emergencies. First, we examine how Border Patrol policy funnels people crossing the border into remote areas away from established cities and towns, preventing many from being able to seek emergency assistance in the first place.

Second, we examine cases in which Border Patrol did not respond or confirm a response to a request for emergency search and rescue—either refusing outright, ignoring the request, or being otherwise unclear and uncommunicative. We also explore patterns of negligence in those cases where Border Patrol did confirm that they deployed a search and/or rescue response. Records show that the agency’s responses are often seriously delayed and diminished.

Third, we contrast Border Patrol’s fatally low rate of mobilization to search and rescue emergencies to the high rate at which the daily enforcement actions of Border Patrol agents in the field actively put people in harm’s way. Border Patrol’s practice of chasing groups of migrating people in remote areas, causing them to scatter and become lost, injured, and separated from their groups actively fuels the search and rescue crisis. We find that Border Patrol agents’ proliferation of emergencies far outpaces their attempts to rescue people in distress.

Finally, we contrast Border Patrol’s rescue-related publicity efforts with the agency’s lack of record keeping and public transparency. We conclude that the Border Patrol’s media initiative to portray its agents as rescuers amounts to little more than a campaign to obscure the agency’s widespread culture of devaluing the lives of undocumented people.

## ***Border Patrol Policy Creates Barriers to Rescue***

*“On the 15th of January, 2016, 32-year-old Heraldo began walking from Sonoyta. The group crossed on the west side of Sonoyta. They walked for five days. On the first day they saw nothing distinct. On the second day they saw Border Patrol surveillance antennas in the distance. On the third day they saw nothing distinct. On the fourth day they saw nothing distinct. On the fifth day Heraldo could not continue. He had blisters over the majority of the bottom of his feet and could barely walk. He stayed behind alone with water but no food. He had a cell phone but no battery.”*

– Case notes from Missing Migrant Crisis Line, Case #182  
Outcome: Disappeared

On a daily basis, numerous families receive a final phone call from a loved one embarking on a dangerous trek through the desert to attempt to enter the United States. Then, silence. As time passes, they realize that their loved one may not have survived the journey.

Since 1994, Border Patrol’s implementation of the “Prevention Through Deterrence” strategy has sought to make crossing the border without official permission more dangerous by funneling migrating people into increasingly remote areas. The construction of border walls, the massive influx of Border Patrol agents, and the proliferation of surveillance technology have all deliberately pushed people into more and more isolated and deadly migration corridors.<sup>12</sup> Border Patrol immigration checkpoints, located up to 100 miles from the actual border, force many to walk days or weeks through wilderness.

This expansion of Border Patrol's operations into the interior of the country has created an enforcement zone of nearly 100,000 square miles.<sup>21</sup> Throughout this entire enforcement zone, untold numbers of people disappear into its jumbled terrain of rugged canyons, jagged mountains, arid deserts, and tangled vegetation, leaving holes in families and communities but no public record of their deaths.

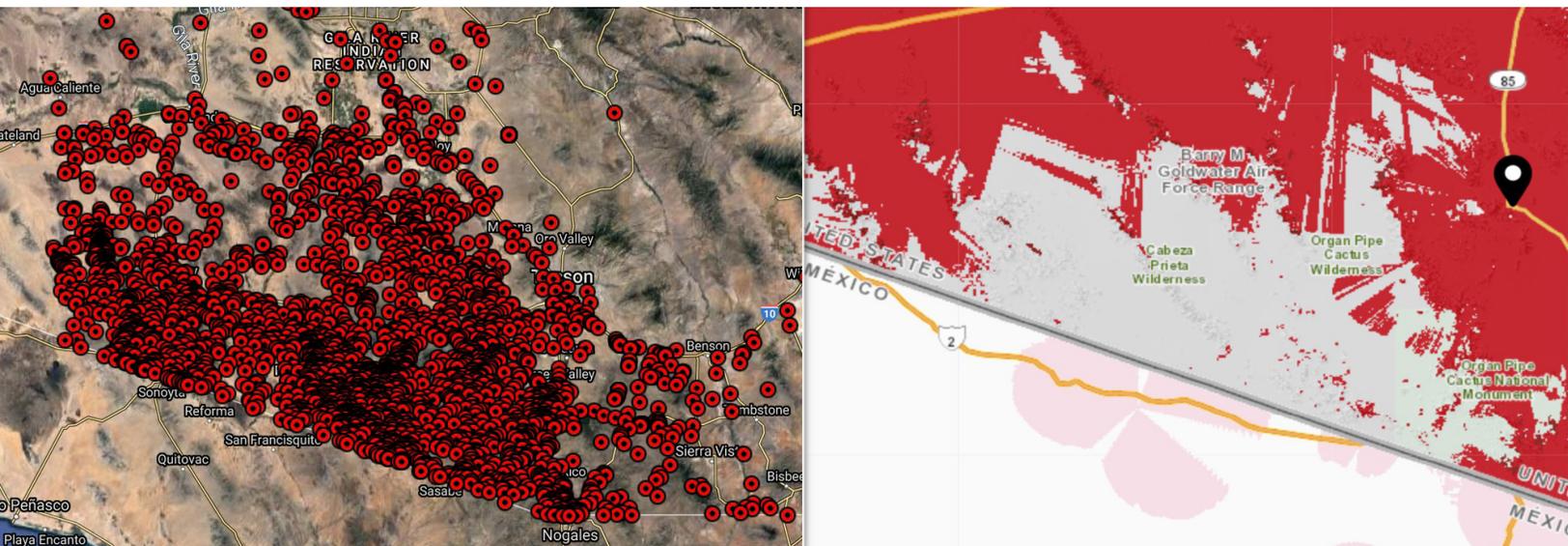
### ***Threats to life in Remote Environments Reported to Derechos Humanos Crisis Line***

- Lost without water (Case #016)
- Hurt ankle, cannot walk (Case #024)
- No food or water (Case #074)
- Fainted and vomiting, alone (Case #085)
- Walking nine days, lost and alone (Case #087)
- No water, dehydrated, injured (Case #103)
- Alone, vomiting (Case #125)
- Chest pain, alone and lost (Case #145)
- Freezing, not moving (Case #152)
- Hallucinating, alone (Case #153)
- Alone with a small child (Case #156)
- Alone without water, too tired to walk any further (Case #163)
- Injured feet, ill, has not eaten or slept, afraid (Case #177)
- Blisters covering bottoms of feet, could not walk, has water but no food (Case #182)
- Out of water (Case #196)
- Dehydrated, could barely move (Case #215)
- Fainted, foaming at the mouth (Case #248)
- Pain in her chest (Case #251)
- Broken leg (Case #264)
- Cannot breath (Case #283)
- Cannot not walk (Case #312)
- Stopped breathing, unresponsive (Case #361)
- Fractured ankle (Case #362)
- Leg injured, vomiting (Case #367)
- Fell from a ravine (Case #384)
- No food or water for three days, coughing up blood (Case #395)
- Convulsing from the heat, unresponsive (Case #427)
- Thirsty, hungry, cold (Case #442)
- Alone, not breathing (Case #444)

**See Appendix III for continued list**

For those traversing the borderlands, exposure to extreme climate and prolonged foot travel through desert terrain can cause rapid deterioration of health and wellbeing. Access to potable water is scant or absent altogether. Dehydration, heat-related illness, hypothermia, lower-extremity injuries, gastrointestinal illness from drinking contaminated water, as well as other injuries and maladies quickly become deadly if help is not found. When lost individuals report that they have seen a sign of possible human habitation, it is often at a distance; due to the terrain and their potentially compromised state, they are often unable to reach these distant glimmers of hope. For example, in a distress call to the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line, a disoriented 17-year-old boy from Guatemala said that "he was going to try to walk to a house he could see far away but he was weak and had no water nor food."<sup>22</sup>

Without the ability to access areas of human habitation to seek help, the only remaining hope for reporting one's emergency in the remote borderlands is to make a phone call. Cell phones are therefore critical lifelines. As one civilian search and rescue operation explains, "Cell



Left: map of recovered human remains in southern Arizona 2000-2018, Right: map of Verizon Cell Coverage in southern Arizona <sup>25</sup>

phones (or mobile phones) have become the most important safety item that people take into the wilderness."<sup>23</sup> People in distress call families and loved ones, often imparting crucial details about their location and condition. As 911 dispatchers have access to call-tracing technology to produce GPS coordinates that can help narrow in on a caller's location, contacting 911 can also drastically increase a distressed person's chances of being located.<sup>24</sup> However, Border Patrol policy funnels those crossing into areas where there is little to no cell phone reception, and, for people walking days or weeks through the desert, cell phones quickly become useless once battery life has drained due to searching for a meager signal.

Many people who find themselves in distress are therefore unable to ever place a call to emergency services, or to speak to their families in what may be their final moments. **There are 158 cases in the Derechos Humanos database that describe situations in which a distressed person did not have access to a cell phone at all, had a cell phone that had run out of battery, or did not have sufficient cell phone signal to call for help.** Countless emergencies therefore go unreported altogether, obscuring the true scale of the search and rescue crisis. *Reported* emergency cases represent only a fraction of the human crises wrought by border militarization.

**Reported emergency cases represent only a fraction of the human crises wrought by border militarization.**

### ***Border Patrol Failure to Search or Rescue: Direct Refusals, Ignoring Reported Emergencies, Unclear Responses***

For people crossing the border who are able to report their emergencies, government response systems transfer their cases to the US Border Patrol for a search and rescue response. For many, their last call for help is ultimately a dead end. Our analysis reveals that when family members, advocates, and distressed people contacted Border Patrol for emergency assistance, they were met with evasiveness, disinterest, and downright refusal.

Volunteers with the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line were trained to conduct a thorough intake interview with callers reporting someone lost. When a case was considered an emergency—meaning there was a chance that the person was still alive in the desert—volunteers explored every possible avenue to collect locational information and determine if a search was possible. Additionally, volunteers consulted with experts on the search area to determine whether locational information was sufficient to request a search or rescue mobilization from Border Patrol.<sup>26</sup> After taking these initial steps, Crisis Line volunteers requested a search from Border Patrol in 89 emergency cases, or 20% of the total emergency cases.

**In at least 40% of the cases in which a Crisis Line worker contacted Border Patrol with substantive information on the location of a distressed person to request an emergency response, Border Patrol did not mobilize any search or rescue whatsoever.<sup>27</sup>**

Case notes from the Derechos Humanos archives document Border Patrol agents refusing to conduct search and rescue operations, ignoring emergency requests, and providing unclear and/or uncooperative communication about what measures, if any, were taken to respond to a reported emergency. This failure to respond is not merely reflective of Border Patrol agents shirking their duties; we contend that it is a logical extension of an overall strategy that uses death as a deterrent to enforce the border.



## Border Patrol Direct Refusals to Respond to Emergencies

Twenty-two-year-old Roberto crossed the border on foot through the Growler Valley in Southern Arizona. After two days in the desert, he fell ill and could no longer walk. Roberto was last seen near Charlie Bell Well, a known landmark. One of his traveling companions called Roberto's parents to report that their son was missing and in distress, and described the area where Roberto had last been seen. Roberto's parents then contacted the Coalición de Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line for assistance. With permission from his parents, the Crisis Line volunteer reached out to the Border Patrol-designated point of contact for missing migrant emergencies to request a hasty search.<sup>28</sup> However, Border Patrol refused to deploy any search assets, telling volunteers that "it was not an emergency because it was more than 48 hours" since Roberto had been heard from. In the absence of any clear Border Patrol emergency response, humanitarian volunteers mobilized. While searching the vast Growler Valley on foot, volunteers saw no evidence of a Border Patrol search and rescue operation for Roberto. Despite their efforts, humanitarian volunteers were not able to locate Roberto. In the following days, Roberto's parents repeatedly contacted Border Patrol for emergency search and rescue assistance, specifically requesting a helicopter flyover of the area. Border Patrol never responded to their request; Roberto was never found.<sup>29</sup>

The Derechos Humanos database contains numerous cases in which Border Patrol agents told Crisis Line volunteers and family members that they would not mobilize a search or rescue in response to a reported emergency. **Volunteers and family members requesting searches from Border Patrol were met with a direct, outright refusal in at least 38 emergency cases, or 43% of cases where a search was requested.<sup>30</sup> In 16 of these instances, Border Patrol's direct refusal to respond to a reported emergency resulted in the distressed person's death or disappearance. Exemplary cases of death and disappearance as a result of Border Patrol's refusal to search or rescue include:**

- Twenty-six-year-old Jasiel from Honduras went missing in Arizona in July 2016. Case notes read: "Border Patrol said [Jasiel] was not in their detainee lists but was also unwilling to search for him" (Case #169).
- Fifty-six-year-old María from El Salvador went missing in Arizona in July 2016. Case notes read: "They [the family] called the police and Border Patrol but they said 'it's not our problem to look for illegals [sic]. We don't have to help in this case'" (Case #246).
- Seventeen-year-old Javier from Mexico went missing in Arizona in July 2016. Crisis Line volunteers contacted Border Patrol to request a search. They did not get a reply until several days later. Border Patrol responded that they "had no information on Javier and would not look for him" (Case #162).
- Twenty-four-year-old Joel from Mexico went missing in South Texas in October 2015. Case notes read: "[The family] spoke to Border Patrol and asked if they would go out to look for [Joel] and the Border Patrol said that they could not go to search" (Case #442).<sup>31</sup>
- Thirty-three-year-old Nery from Guatemala went missing in Arizona in August 2015. Case notes read: "Crisis Line volunteers spoke to several different police and Border Patrol agents who refused to take any action on this situation, while confirming that it seemed Nery had not been detained nor had her remains been recovered" (Case #440).

## Defining Borderlands Search, Rescue, and Recovery

“A rescue is a known problem at a known location. A search is an unknown problem at an unknown location. However, a search sometimes transitions into a rescue. Because a search is an unknown problem *it is always an emergency and generally requires some type of immediate response.*”

– Southern Arizona Rescue Association<sup>32</sup>

The term **SAR** stands for search and rescue and/or recovery:

A **search** is an attempt to find a person whose current location is unknown or unspecific.

A **rescue** is an intervention to save the life of a person in distress whose location is known.

A **recovery** is the location and retrieval of the remains of a deceased person. Recovery efforts may involve local sheriffs’ departments, which are responsible for retrieving remains from the field and overseeing their transport to the medical examiner’s office for investigation. A search and rescue mission becomes a search and recovery mission when the distressed person passes away before being found.

**The border context presents a unique set of challenges to traditional principles of search and rescue:**

**Point Last Seen (PLS)** is the most recently known location of a missing person and provides the starting point for a search and rescue mission. PLS information may be provided by the distressed person directly, by a third person, or determined technologically through the triangulation of cell phone coordinates. There are unique barriers to using a PLS to activate a search in the borderlands context, which include:

- Undocumented people who become lost while crossing the border are more likely to move far from their last known location in an attempt to rescue themselves. Whereas recreational hikers who become lost would likely stay put and wait for rescue, lost border crossers cannot trust that assistance is coming and thus may go search for help themselves.
- They may also choose not to seek rescue from law enforcement due to the high

consequences of incarceration and deportation. Because of this, many wait until their circumstances become very dire before seeking any sort of rescue, and may move further from signs of human habitation, even as their situation worsens.

- Many people crossing through the remote borderlands are completely unfamiliar with their surroundings. Thus, even if they are able to report their emergency, they may have no knowledge of nearby landmarks to provide a starting point in contrast to a lost recreational hiker, who typically knows the name of the trail they started on, and/or what towns, roads, or mountains are closest.

**Lost in Detention:** When searching for a missing person crossing the border, it is generally unclear whether or not the person is still lost in the desert or has been apprehended by border enforcement and has not been located in the detention system.<sup>33</sup>

**Limitations of Reporting Party:** In the borderlands, missing persons reports are often made by family members who have not heard from their loved one(s) in some time, or by a member of the person’s group, who last saw them in the desert. In turn, the reporting party may know little to nothing about the precise location of the missing person, or they may be caught in the detention/deportation system and therefore unable to provide a detailed account. Moreover, fellow travelers often have little to no prior knowledge of the area they were traversing, and were themselves in medical distress while traveling, making it difficult to accurately recall details such as time, distance, and location.

**Encountering Others in Need:** In the border zone, where hundreds of people experience emergency situations on a daily basis, it is not uncommon to encounter additional distressed migrants while conducting a field search for a specific individual or group. In turn, borderlands SAR must be flexible and ready to render aid to multiple persons in distress.



Photo Credit: No More Deaths

## ***“Like a Needle in a Haystack; Like a Wave in the Ocean:” Border Patrol Falsely Cites Lack of Sufficient Locational Information as Justification for Inaction***

*“It just felt like with our interactions with Border Patrol we were always banging our heads against the wall because repeatedly we would have an emergency missing persons case where we would ask, ‘Would you like to have law enforcement involvement in this?’ Families would say yes because they want their loved ones found by any means necessary, and so we’ll reach out to Border Patrol and local sheriffs. Many times, no matter how detailed our information was, they’d say, ‘If we don’t have a direct call from the field that pings off of at least two cell phone towers then we really can’t do anything.’”<sup>34</sup>*

– Anonymous Aid Worker Testimony

*“Border Patrol agent Mario Agundez, who used to work for BORSTAR, would often say it was ‘impossible’ to search for migrants lost in the desert. He would always say, ‘Yeah they call us and say, you know, “Here I am under the moon,” and how are we supposed to find them?’ He would always say this laughing.”*

– Robin Reineke, Colibri Center for Human Rights

The most common justification that Border Patrol agents provided families and Crisis Line volunteers for refusing to enact a search or rescue response was that there was not specific enough locational information on the case. Indeed, mounting an effective search in the vast desert is an enormous challenge; in many cases received by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line,

**“You’re talking about allocating resources to find a needle in a haystack. Me allocating my resources is not going to be beneficial.”**

– supervising Border Patrol Agent



Photo Credit: No More Deaths

there was not enough information on the location of the missing person to provide a clear starting point for a search. However, in our review of the 89 cases that Crisis Line volunteers *did* refer to Border Patrol, there was significant and detailed information regarding the Point Last Seen of a distressed person. Border Patrol agents consistently claimed that to mount any emergency response would be futile, regardless of the details of the case.

This was the case for 44-year-old Militza and her son, who had fallen ill several kilometers south of a Border Patrol checkpoint near Laredo, Texas in August of 2015. Militza had already called 911, and was trying to reach the checkpoint to turn herself in. Her last reported location was between one and five kilometers south of the checkpoint on Highway 35, at a ranch, by two cattle tanks. When volunteers requested a search, the supervising Border Patrol agent said, “You’re talking about allocating resources to find a needle in a haystack. Me allocating my resources is not going to be beneficial.”<sup>35</sup>

This was also the case for 22-year-old Geovany, who was last seen without water near the Topawa Hills on the Tohono O’odham Nation in July of 2016, where he stayed behind from his group with a mirror to try to signal a helicopter. Border Patrol told the Crisis Line volunteer that searching for Geovany would be “like looking for a wave in the ocean.” Geovany remains disappeared.<sup>36</sup>

The same was true in the case of Flora, a 40-year-old woman from El Salvador, who became dehydrated and fainted while traveling with others in a region south of Carrizo Springs, Texas in July of 2016. Flora’s traveling companions had provided a thorough description of Flora’s last known location to a Crisis Line volunteer, who communicated that information to Border Patrol. The agent told the volunteer that they “can’t search for her without GPS coordinates and that even with those, it can be very unreliable locational information.” Flora was never found.<sup>37</sup>

In our review of these emergency cases, we find no clear or consistent parameters from Border Patrol agents regarding the level of detail in locational information that they require to launch a search. The decision of whether or not to mount a search instead appears to be arbitrary and at the complete discretion of the individual Border Patrol agents on duty. Agents frequently state that they can't search for a missing person unless that person has placed a direct call to 911 from the field, and Border Patrol has been given exact GPS coordinates traced by 911 dispatchers. This stringent parameter effectively excludes Border Patrol from any search effort whatsoever, limiting the agency's emergency response provision to that of rescue from an already-known location. It also excludes anyone who is not able to place a direct call from the field, even if their traveling companions, family members, or advocacy groups have information about their location sufficient to warrant a search response.

This was true in the case of Ricardo, a 38-year-old from Mexico who was stranded with several others in the Arizona desert, unable to walk and without food or water. Ricardo had attempted to contact 911 multiple times without success—the calls were dropped and Ricardo was unable to communicate. He was able to make a successful distress call to his sister. She contacted the Mexican Consulate and the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line. When a Crisis Line volunteer contacted Border Patrol with the locational information that Ricardo had imparted to his sister, the agent said, "If [Ricardo] doesn't call an emergency service, there's nothing we can do."<sup>38</sup>

## *Border Patrol Provides Illogical Justifications for Inaction*

In our review of the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line database, we found numerous instances in which Border Patrol agents provided Crisis Line volunteers, humanitarian volunteers, and family members with nonsensical, indefensible, and often hostile justifications for refusing to mobilize in response to reported emergencies.

For example, there was the case of Martín, who was "lost, alone, and very tired" after wandering for nine days in the South Texas brush. A Border Patrol agent told a Crisis Line volunteer that they "needed to send a formal request for a search through postal mail." When the volunteer questioned the agent's reasoning regarding this time-sensitive emergency, the Border Patrol agent responded that he couldn't help with a faster response, saying "Ma'am, this is a Sunday."<sup>39</sup> In another case, a 17-year-old from Guatemala was last seen in one of the most deadly areas of the border, about 15 miles due north of the line. Border Patrol told the responding Crisis Line volunteer that the agency would not activate a search for the unaccompanied minor because they "didn't work that far south."<sup>40</sup>

In another case, humanitarian volunteers were told that Border Patrol would not activate a search for Rafael, an 18-year-old who was last seen unconscious in South Texas, for precisely the opposite reason: in their words, because "it wasn't the border anymore," presumably meaning that it was too far north. Rafael was never found.<sup>41</sup>

**The Border Patrol agent responded that he couldn't help with a faster response, saying "Ma'am, this is a Sunday."**

During a case in which humanitarian aid volunteers contacted Border Patrol's Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit (BORSTAR) after receiving specific information about a person who was lost and alone in the Arizona desert, Border Patrol told the volunteers that it was "too hot" for them to respond.<sup>42</sup>

These examples show Border Patrol's extreme disregard for life-threatening emergencies involving people crossing the border. However, whether Border Patrol agents respond to requests for search and rescue with such hostility, hide behind mundane justifications such as lacking sufficient information, or avoid responding to requests for assistance at all, the result is the same: the missing are left to die in remote border regions with no government response.

## *Vague, Unclear, and Non-Committal Border Patrol Responses to Emergencies*

Beyond ignoring or directly refusing requests for emergency assistance, the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line database reveals a pattern of Border Patrol agents being vague, evasive, and unclear with families and Crisis Line volunteers as to what measures, if any, they would take to respond to a person in distress. **In 23% of the active search or rescue cases fielded by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line, Border Patrol would neither confirm nor deny whether they would provide any emergency assistance.**<sup>43</sup> Confirmation is an essential component of any functional emergency response system. Without confirmation, families are left not knowing what measures, if any, are being taken to locate their loved one, and what further measures to take themselves. Vague responses from Border Patrol agents documented by Crisis Line volunteers include:

- “Agents are currently conducting patrols in the area.”
- “We’ll keep an eye out for him.”
- “We’ll make sure the agents are aware of the case.”
- “This information will go to the appropriate people.”
- “Our guys are out there looking all the time—it’s what they do.”
- “I’ll leave a message for my supervisor in the morning.”

In one case, the Crisis Line volunteer noted that “the agent at the Tucson Sector office said he would send out a notice about the situation but refused to give more information and terminated the communication quickly.”<sup>44</sup>

Families and Crisis Line volunteers often never heard back from the Border Patrol agent who received their emergency report, despite being told that the agent would follow up with them as the case progressed. In one emergency case, a Crisis Line volunteer asked Border Patrol for exact search plans and a point of contact to consult as the situation progressed. The agent replied, “If anything should develop, we will let you know.” No Border Patrol official ever contacted the Crisis Line volunteer to follow up on the case, and the person remains disappeared.<sup>45</sup>

In the case of 45-year-old Marcos from Mexico, who was last seen in very bad shape and unable to walk, the Border Patrol agent who picked up the line said, “I’ll pass this to a supervisor and see what we can do,” before quickly hanging up. However, the Border Patrol agent had not allowed the volunteer to communicate vital information about the case, such as the missing person’s name or description, and never called back. Marcos’ remains were recovered and identified some time later.<sup>46</sup>

Recently, a Border Patrol agent publicly admitted that the agency’s unwillingness to confirm its search and rescue efforts is a calculated practice. In the June 2019 federal felony trial of humanitarian volunteer Scott Warren, BORSTAR Supervisor Gerardo Carrasco testified that the

border enforcement agency would not verify its search or rescue efforts to reporting parties, families, or the public because they felt it would jeopardize their law enforcement mission:

**[US Prosecutor]:** Now, when triaging calls and deciding what assets to assign—let’s say that call originated with a civilian calling in one way or another. Does Border Patrol ever tell that civilian exactly what the Border Patrol response to that call is?

**[Agent Carrasco]:** No.

**[US Prosecutor]:** Does Border Patrol ever even tell that civilian whether or not there will be a response to that call?

**[Agent Carrasco]:** No.

**[US Prosecutor]:** And why is that?

**[Agent Carrasco]:** Because we are a law enforcement agency. We still have operational commitments that we have to make, and we don’t want to give out information that we don’t have to give out, because we still have to operate, and there’s some operational security, so to speak, that we have to keep in mind. If we start giving out information to the general public, it would kind of compromise some of our operations.<sup>47</sup>

In this exchange, Supervising Agent Carrasco makes it clear that Border Patrol’s law enforcement mission preempts any obligation to communicate with families and advocates about the efforts being taken to save the lives of their loved ones. The border enforcement agency’s refusal to provide information and transparency about its search or rescue efforts thus places families and advocates in an impossible position. Having no confidence that government services are responding to their emergency, families are left without any clear way to save the lives of their loved ones.

## ***Fear of Reporting Emergencies***

*“Her breathing was severely reduced, she was only able to make two-to-three word sentences and gulp for air. She was crying and saying that she was ‘terrified of the police,’ and begging us to not call 911 because her son was very ill and that she needed to make it into the US to be able to work to cover his medical bills, that she could not go back to her country.”*

– Humanitarian volunteer testimony about encountering a woman who had been assaulted and stranded in the desert with a collapsed lung

In the US borderlands, a call for emergency 911 services from a person perceived to be undocumented triggers a Border Patrol response. Border Patrol vehicles escort regional ambulances, and patients in medical distress are placed in Border Patrol custody while in the hospital. After treatment, patients are transferred to short-term Border Patrol holding centers and are either deported or

incarcerated in an immigration detention center. Once in custody, those in distress may suffer further abuse and may not receive necessary medical care.<sup>48</sup> In the case of Mateo, case notes from the Crisis Line read: “He was deported with his leg still injured and he couldn’t walk by himself. His wife drove up to the border to pick him up and drive him to a hospital for treatment.”<sup>49</sup>

In addition to fearing abuse at the hands of immigration enforcement officials, many people crossing the US–Mexico border have legitimate fears about their safety if deported. Notes from another Crisis Line case read:

*Once we had determined that Gabriel was alive and in detention, his mother began to explain why his life was still in peril. She feared he was going to be deported. “He’ll be killed immediately if he comes back here.” To make matters worse, Gabriel called from detention in poor medical shape, he was*

having severe pain in his lungs and coughing up blood, and had just been told he was about to be moved to the “hielera”—Border Patrol’s notoriously cold cells. He faced death in three ways: in the desert while lost, now through abuse in detention, and, once deported, back in his home country.<sup>50</sup>

The integration of government emergency services with border enforcement agencies creates a dangerous deterrent to contacting 911 for rescue or medical assistance. Those entering the US without official permission may face an impossible choice in trying to save their own lives in the desert, caught between the potential for death in the remote wilderness, abusive conditions and possible death while in Border Patrol and ICE custody, family separation, and a legitimate fear of death if they are deported to their country of

origin.<sup>51</sup>

There is no way to know how many people never place an emergency call for fear of interacting with a notoriously abusive federal border enforcement agency. Fear of punishment is therefore not only a deterrent to accessing emergency response, but is also an obstacle to quantifying the full scope of the search and rescue crisis in the borderlands.

*“We have, quite often, gotten 911 calls where they’re asking for someone to come get them—for medical attention or whatever—but they ask not to have the Border Patrol come. And we’re the ones talking to them (laughs).”<sup>52</sup>*

– BORSTAR Supervisor John Redd  
Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit

## “Ruse Calls:” Border Patrol Disbelieves Reported Emergencies

**[US Prosecutor]:** “Please describe what a ruse call is.”

**[Border Patrol Agent Carrasco]:** “Those are calls that we’ve determined sometimes that they are used to maybe draw resources to a certain area, to pull resources out of another area . . . Many times the person calling will give injuries or something that’s very dramatic that will kind of, you know, lead us to believe that this person is dying, but they refuse to answer questions, they give very vague information, and then, once we try to get more information, they don’t answer the phone.”<sup>53</sup>

Interviews with Border Patrol agents, 911 call recordings, and the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line database all evidence a troubling pattern of Border Patrol agents disbelieving distress calls and therefore refusing to mount a search and rescue effort. In one case from the Crisis Line, for example, a volunteer called Border Patrol to report a man who was calling for help from the side of a steep mountain after having fallen and broken both his legs. The Border Patrol agent said that a search would not be initiated because there was no way to tell that the call was “not a prank.”<sup>54</sup>

In a 2015 interview, a Border Patrol agent working with the Search, Trauma, and Rescue (BORSTAR) Unit described how agents decide a distress call is “bogus,” while admitting that they “aren’t 100%” on making that determination.<sup>55</sup> Elaborating on how agents make the determination, he stated, “Sometimes we’ll get another call and it’ll be the same guy but then we’ll see the triangulation—the location’s changed, so we’ll know we’re being played. We discontinue it at that point.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in a series of 911 calls forwarded by Pima County dispatchers from a man who reported being cold, lost, and alone in the desert, the responding Border Patrol agent suggested that the caller’s distress may be false on the basis that he had moved from his initial location. The agent told the 911 dispatcher, “I’m not sure this is legitimate . . . who knows what he’s trying to do.”<sup>57</sup> The mobility

**The Border Patrol agent said that a search would not be initiated because there was no way to tell that the call was “not a prank.”**

of a caller is thus apparently one criterion used for dismissing the legitimacy of an emergency call. However, people calling 911 often continue to walk to try to reach a road, water, or some other form of survival in case help does not come. Aside from situations like these, technological errors can make triangulation itself an unreliable tool.<sup>58</sup>

**“The resources are limited. We’ve got everyday stuff going on, so it’s hard to put all those calls at a priority.”**

– John Redd, BORSTAR Agent<sup>63</sup>

Importantly, the motivation for disbelieving calls is not simply to preserve the agency’s time or resources. Rather, agents suspect that such calls are traps meant to manipulate border enforcement patterns to “draw resources to a certain area.” Thus, what causes agents to refuse assistance to reported emergencies is precisely the conflict of interest inherent in their dual role as border enforcers and emergency responders.

## **Border Patrol Prioritizes Enforcement Operations while Claiming a Lack of Resources for Rescue**

*“Border Patrol has mass resources in play, including helicopters, specialty units on ATVs, side-by-side four wheelers. We have the capabilities to remove this person from a situation that’s perilous.”*

– Tucson Sector Border Patrol Agent Joseph Curran<sup>59</sup>

**[911 Dispatcher]:** *“Yes sir, we just wanted to clarify on the calls . . . y’all are too busy, you’re not going to go out so you’re not going to send anybody?”*

**[Border Patrol]:** *“No, I never said we’re not going to send anybody, but I can’t afford to cut all my guys from the checkpoint for every single call . . . I cannot deplete my manpower from the checkpoint, that’s what I’m telling you.”<sup>60</sup>*

A commonly documented justification for sheriffs’ departments transferring 911 calls to Border Patrol is that the federal agency has capacity and resources that far surpass those of county search and rescue outfits. For example, in one emergency case in which a Derechos Humanos Crisis Line volunteer contacted local sheriffs to request a search, the sheriff’s deputy told the volunteer, “Pima County doesn’t have the resources to go out. We only go out when someone

is deceased.” The Crisis Line volunteer then asked, “You don’t have the resources to go out and do a search for someone missing in the desert?” The sheriff replied “No, BORSTAR does that.”<sup>61</sup>

## **Border Patrol is the most heavily resourced federal law enforcement agency in the United States.**

Indeed, as part of Customs and Border Protection, Border Patrol is the most heavily resourced federal law enforcement agency in the United States. Its annual budget is more than the annual budgets of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Secret Service, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Marshals Service, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms combined.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, data from the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line evidences numerous cases in which Border Patrol agents claim that they lack the resources necessary to respond to reported emergencies.

In one exemplary case, 38-year-old Denilson, from El Salvador, became severely injured and ill after crossing the border in South Texas. Denilson called a friend and together they were able to determine his exact location by comparing his own descriptions of his surroundings to images on Google Earth.

In his final distress call, Denilson said that he had tried to contact 911 but that the call had dropped and his phone battery was very low. Denilson's friend called the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line. Initially, when a Crisis Line volunteer contacted Border Patrol to request a search, the agent agreed to deploy. However, when the man's friend contacted the agent who was leading the search, the agent told him that he wasn't going to continue the search because he wasn't going to "waste any more resources on it."<sup>64</sup>

### ***International Relief Standards in Humanitarian Emergencies: Assistance Must Be Non-Military and Unarmed***

The conflict of interest between Border Patrol's enforcement mission and its directive to search for and rescue those in distress on US soil is precisely why international governing bodies mandate the strict separation of humanitarian and military activities during human rights emergencies. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs explains that "it is critical to distinguish humanitarian action from the activities and objectives of political, military, and other actors."<sup>62</sup> Border Patrol's routine practice of prioritizing enforcement over search and rescue at the expense of people's lives and safety, illustrates the critical importance of making such separations.

The United Nations Human Rights Council's four principles of humanitarian assistance—humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence—make clear the necessity for a strict separation between humanitarian and political/military activities.

The principle of "**independence**" instructs that "humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented." Border Patrol as an agency, and Border Patrol agents in the field, cannot reasonably advance both humanitarian and political/military objectives simultaneously.

The "**impartiality**" mandate specifies that humanitarian action must be carried out "giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality."

The "**neutrality**" clause stipulates that "humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious, or ideological nature." Yet, Border Patrol claims to be the United States' "front line" of defense in its notoriously hostile and controversial war on drugs and terror.<sup>70</sup>

The "**humanity**" principle requires that "human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found" and not simply when convenient to the enforcement operations of Border Patrol.

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), a forum of UN and non-UN humanitarian partners, provides guidelines on the use of armed escorts for humanitarian convoys. Importantly, the IASC advises that life-saving humanitarian action must, by definition, be unarmed—a requirement that is categorically at odds with the enforcement mission of a thoroughly weaponized agency such as the US Border Patrol.<sup>71</sup>

Such refusals by Border Patrol agents directly contradict the stated rationale for the agency being tasked with emergency response—namely, that Border Patrol is the most well-resourced agency in the area. While it is true that Border Patrol has a massive budget and access to helicopters, ATVs, and ample personnel to conduct ground patrols, the reality is that those assets are not dedicated to finding missing persons. In one striking example, a Border Patrol supervisor told a Crisis Line volunteer, “We’re not going to take the helicopter out for just a few subjects . . . Our helicopters are tasked with other things right now.”<sup>65</sup> Such cases show that, rather than simply lacking the resources, the agency instead directs those assets toward border enforcement activities—activities that, far from being life-saving, directly contribute to the crisis of death and disappearance in the borderlands.<sup>66</sup>

## Delayed and Diminished Mobilizations

*“If my dad was a different person, or a citizen, I think he would have received a different search. At first, Border Patrol said they would help me and they tried, but they lost interest in the case very quickly. They searched for part of three days, but it was not a *busqueda profunda* [thorough search], they made a few calls on some days, then they said they had agents in the area. I think they gave it a little more importance because I was there and I was asking them about my father; many of these cases don’t feel so real to them because their families don’t go to them in person. Where he went missing is in the *monte* [mountains]. It was very dangerous . . . With me they were very *groseros* [rude], I gave them all the information and they would take my call and say they would call me back then never did. All we want is to know what happened. If he appears dead, if he appears alive, we just want to know.”*

– Daughter of Andrés, who went missing in South Texas after crossing the border in May 2016.

Andrés was never found.<sup>67</sup>

*“They are calling off the search, they sent out agents and didn’t find anything.”*

– Case notes from Missing Migrant Crisis Line, Case #357

In addition to Border Patrol’s staggering rate of failure in responding to reported emergencies, our research also shows that even when Border Patrol does mobilize a search, the agency’s responses are typically delayed or seriously diminished when compared to the emergency assistance efforts routinely afforded to US citizens.

Border Patrol does not appear to follow any consistent protocol that reflects the time-sensitive exigencies of search and rescue requests. The agency’s inconsistent emergency response times demonstrate an erratic and diminished regard for the preservation of life. When Border Patrol does take action in response to a reported emergency, it is often because consulates and families have gone to great lengths to pressure the agency to mobilize. Yet, the protracted amount of time it can take to spur Border Patrol into action renders many of these emergency reports obsolete, as agents often gather life-saving information only after the possibility for survival has severely dwindled. In the case of Flora, who was last seen severely dehydrated and losing consciousness in South Texas, a Crisis Line volunteer notes that, despite pressure from consulate officials, it was not until *14 days* after Flora was last seen that Border Patrol conducted an interview with an eyewitness who was already in their custody. Flora was never found.<sup>68</sup>

Even when Border Patrol launches searches or rescues in a timely manner, we find that the duration of the deployment is significantly diminished when compared to cases involving US citizens in distress.

We defined a “diminished” search as one that was called off after searching for less than one week without locating the lost person, based on the minimal standard for adequate search and rescue operations.<sup>88</sup> Though standard in conventional search and rescues, multi-day Border Patrol searches appear to be extremely rare.

### ***Search and Rescue Standards for Distressed US Citizens***

*“We absolutely should be able to find you . . . we’re out there searching for you.”*

– Local sheriff’s office 911 dispatcher to a 35-year-old hunter who had broken his ankle “out in the middle of the mountains” in Pima County, Arizona.

In the fall of 2018, a woman called 911 in Pima County to report that her 49-year-old husband, a US citizen, had become lost while hunting in the hills outside of the border town of Arivaca, Arizona—a major corridor for undocumented migration and border deaths. He had run out of water, his GPS wasn’t working, and his cell phone had 5% battery remaining. His wife told 911, “He’s lost, trying to get to a road but not sure if there is a road or how far it is.” The details of this lost US citizen’s case were uncanny in their similarity to the hundreds of cases of border crossers who have called 911 while stranded in that same geographic area. Rather than transfer the call to the Border Patrol, however, the 911 dispatcher instead told the woman, “I have a deputy en route to you.” Despite having little to no exact locational information, the dispatcher indicated that the sheriff’s department was already mobilizing personnel and resources to help her search for her husband, and made no mention of Border Patrol involvement.

When US citizens and foreign tourists go missing in remote areas, official emergency services are mandated to respond with urgency, professionalism, and accountability to the public. Their emergencies are not referred to border enforcement. And, unlike Border Patrol response to undocumented people crossing the border, searches and rescues for citizens involve outside observers and accountability to the public, multiple agency participation and funding, the involvement of external resources and experts, and active support for a missing person’s loved ones.

Though search efforts are always situational and complex—mobilizations vary greatly according to the details of the case, capacity, outside pressure, funding, and weather, among other factors—government officials treat missing person scenarios involving US citizens as genuine emergencies, worthy of deploying all available resources and personnel.<sup>22</sup>

### **Dedicated Resources and Personnel**

*“In the first 12 hours, you might have 10 or 15 people searching . . . In the second 12 hours, you’ll probably have 20 to 30 people. And, depending on resources and weather, the second 24 hours you may have 30 to 100 searchers.”*

– Paul Anderson, a veteran backcountry SAR expert <sup>23</sup>

At the federal level, there are robust resources allocated to search and rescue for missing and distressed people, most notably those provided through the US Air Force.

Some states also mandate that counties provide search and rescue.<sup>74</sup> In Pima County, Arizona, for example, the Sheriff's Department employs eight search and rescue coordinators, and responds to over 100 search and rescue events a year. Coordinators work with a team of trained civilian volunteers called the Southern Arizona Rescue Association (SARA), which consists of approximately 150 volunteers who deploy under the supervision of the Sheriff's Department to assist with rescues or searches for lost people.<sup>75</sup> Search team members train extensively in search and rescue techniques and are required to maintain medical certifications.<sup>76</sup> In addition to this substantial volunteer base, county search and rescue coordinators can mobilize local volunteer drone pilots, canine search and rescue teams, and a mounted contingent.<sup>77</sup>

There are also technological measures that can be taken to search for US citizens, but are rarely if ever utilized for missing or distressed border crossers. Law enforcement has the ability to reach out to cell phone carriers to request far more accurate and thorough locational data than can typically be retrieved by 911 dispatchers based solely on tracing an incoming call.<sup>78</sup> Although these measures could surely be life-saving in many situations, we have no evidence of Border Patrol, let alone local sheriffs, undertaking this measure for undocumented people crossing the border. When Crisis Line volunteers have requested that Border Patrol contact cell phone carriers to obtain improved locational information, agents refused.<sup>79</sup>

When fielding emergencies involving undocumented people crossing the border, the US Border Patrol typically works alone, without the oversight or support of other government agencies. Searches for citizens, on the other hand, frequently involve interagency collaboration. In Arizona, for example, this may include agencies such as the sheriff's department, volunteer search teams, the Department of Public Safety, the National Park Service, and at times, Border Patrol or other federal agencies.<sup>80</sup>

Government agencies may occasionally request backup from Border Patrol agents during a search for citizens in the remote borderlands. However, even if Border Patrol assists, they do so under the direction of county emergency services.<sup>81</sup> Unlike the thousands of distressed undocumented people whose calls are handed over to Border Patrol, cases of missing and distressed US citizens are not fully transferred to the immigration agency and away from dedicated government search and rescue resources.

## Near 100% Success Rate

Between the robust volunteer resources, interagency collaboration, and technological options for locating an individual, search and rescue efforts undertaken by government agencies for lost US citizens and tourists tend to be successful. The Pima County Sheriff's Department has a near 100% success rate for lost citizens.<sup>82</sup> Government agencies searching for distressed US citizens very rarely call off their efforts without locating the subject. This is in stark contrast to missing persons reports received by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line in which **27% of Border Patrol searches ended in disappearance.**<sup>83</sup>

## Accountability & Reporting

When people recreating in remote areas of the United States become lost, injured, or otherwise in need of rescue, media outlets treat such incidents as significant and newsworthy. For example, in June 2016, two German hikers died of heat exhaustion in the Santa Catalina Mountains northeast of Tucson, Arizona during a summer heat wave.<sup>84</sup> When a companion called 911, the Pima County Sheriff's Department mobilized multiple agencies in a hasty off-trail search and rescue effort which included both air and foot patrols. Government officials searched for multiple days until they had recovered the bodies of both of the missing hikers. The Sheriff's Department and the Office of the Medical Examiner commented on the case, explaining to the public the cause of death and describing the substantial measures government agencies had taken to attempt to save their lives. The case was covered extensively by local news organizations as well as The Washington Post, which ran an article highlighting the dangers of dehydration and exposure to extreme heat.<sup>85</sup>

What these outlets failed to report was that during that same month, June 2016, at least 28 undocumented people had died while crossing the border, their remains recovered from remote areas of Southern Arizona.<sup>86</sup> These 28 deaths were apparently not newsworthy: There was no reporting on what measures, if any, government agencies took to save their lives, and their deaths were not included in local newspapers' tally of "four deaths" as a consequence of the summer heat wave in Arizona.<sup>87</sup>

In more than half of the cases in which Border Patrol did mobilize an emergency response for a distressed person, they conducted a diminished search.<sup>89</sup> The longest amount of time that Border Patrol spent on a search was three days. In most of these cases, however, searches lasted for less than a day, and in some cases, less than an hour.

In one case, Crisis Line volunteers received a report of someone who had been severely injured while attempting to cross through the Arizona desert north of Sonoyta, Sonora. Volunteers called the Ajo Border Patrol station and spoke with an agent who agreed to send a ground and aerial patrol to search the area. However, case notes indicate that Border Patrol never found the person and had called off the search after looking for "about 30 minutes, no more than one hour."<sup>90</sup> In another case, a Crisis Line volunteer notes that Border Patrol knew the Point Last Seen for a distressed person and had sent agents to the area; the agents "looked in the area for three hours but did not find him," so they called off the search.<sup>91</sup>

## ***Border Patrol Delayed Response to 911 Call Transfers***<sup>92</sup>

In a call from March 2018, a man named Jaime contacted 911 eleven times over the course of ten hours. He was lost and alone in the vast and deadly Growler Valley on the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range in southwestern Arizona. As the hours passed, his condition was clearly deteriorating, and his voice fading. Despite the fact that his exact location had been traced to within *five meters*, there is no indication that a search was underway. He was transferred to Border Patrol each time he called 911. Eventually, he simply stopped calling. The outcome of his case is unknown.

In our review of audio recordings of 911 calls from border crossers in distress received by the Pima County Sheriff's Department, we find ample evidence of delayed response by Border Patrol.<sup>93</sup> We found:

- **200 cases of a distressed person calling 911 over a period of 1 hour or longer (43% of cases)**
- **37 cases of a distressed person repeatedly calling 911 over a period of 5 hours or longer**
- **17 cases of a distressed person repeatedly calling 911 over a period of 10 hours or longer**
- **9 cases of a distressed person repeatedly calling 911 over a period of 20 hours or longer**
- **One case of a distressed person repeatedly calling 911 over a period of 51 hours, one case of a distressed person repeatedly calling 911 over a period of 71 hours, and one case over an 80-hour period.**

This phenomenon is not limited to Southern Arizona. In 2014, The Investigative Fund (now Type Investigations) conducted their own review of 600 emergency calls from distressed people crossing the border in Texas that were received by the Brooks County Sheriff's Office 911 dispatchers over a 12-month period and subsequently transferred to Border Patrol. The Investigative Fund's findings were remarkably similar to our own:

- **Of all the emergency cases transferred away from county officials, 56% had no record of any Border Patrol response whatsoever.**
- **Of the cases in which there was a Border Patrol mobilization, the average response time to a distressed caller was 2 hours and 18 minutes.**
- **In 14% of cases, the response time exceeded 5 hours. In their research into rural emergency response times, the Investigative Fund found that a typical mobilization should take 8 to 20 minutes.<sup>94</sup>**

## Failure to Follow Up on Emergencies Reported During Apprehension

*“It’s really dangerous when you have a [Border Patrol] culture that dismisses someone and their concerns inherently . . . [i]f the person is scared shitless of you, but like, their cousin is still out there in the desert, and you don’t speak Spanish, and you’re not providing an environment for them to voice that, then that’s somebody who is lost in the desert and you don’t know about it.”<sup>25</sup>*

– Former Border Patrol agent

Those on the migration trail take it upon themselves to seek out emergency assistance for others in their group who have become so injured or ill that they are unable to continue. Thus, it is common for those being arrested by Border Patrol to inform agents of other traveling companions in distress. It is therefore critical that Border Patrol agents treat those they encounter and arrest as potentially the only eyewitnesses with specific information about the whereabouts of a person in need of help. However, we find that Border Patrol agents frequently ignore or do not conduct sufficient follow-up on emergency reports provided by people in their custody. Our research indicates that Border Patrol agents in the field do not take reported emergencies seriously, but instead prioritize conducting arrests and funneling people into detention and deportation proceedings as rapidly as possible.

This appears to have been the case for 45-year-old Narciso and his son, both from Honduras, who were last seen in the remote Arizona desert. Narciso was unable to walk, so his son went in search of assistance and was encountered and apprehended by Border Patrol. The Derechos Humanos Crisis Line worker’s case notes read: “possible Border Patrol left father behind in desert after apprehending son.” Despite the fact that his son reported his father’s emergency to arresting agents, Narciso was never found.<sup>26</sup>

In another case, José, a 25-year-old from El Salvador, went missing in Southern Arizona, and his traveling companion reported the details of José’s last known location to the Border Patrol agents who arrested him. According to case notes, “He says that he told Border Patrol to go pick [José] up, but they ignored him.” José’s body was recovered and identified some time later.<sup>27</sup>

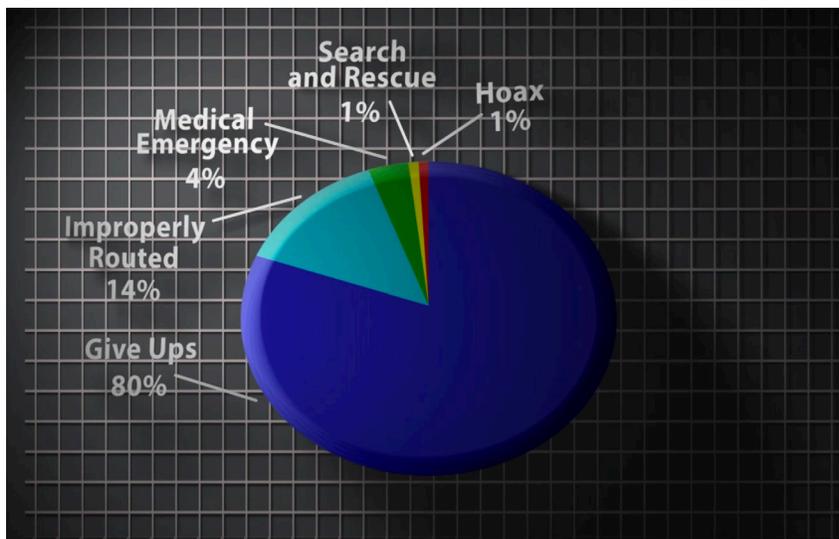
In 2015, there was the case of a young man who was arrested in the Arizona borderlands while looking for help for his friend, Erwin. Erwin was ill and unable to continue walking. His friend told the arresting Border Patrol agent about Erwin and drew the agent a map of where he had last been seen. The agents promised that they would search for Erwin and entered the man into rapid deportation proceedings. However, there was no evidence that Border Patrol had made any effort to find Erwin. Eight days after he had last been seen, Border Patrol said that they had gathered information from an agent who had “overheard [a] conversation” about Erwin’s case, and that they had located the map but deemed it to be “unhelpful.” Erwin’s whereabouts are still unknown.<sup>28</sup>

## Border Patrol Calls Emergencies “Give Ups”

According to promotional material created by Border Patrol regarding their handling of 911 calls, the agency classified only 1% of emergency calls they received between March and September of 2015 as “Search and Rescue” calls, while 80% were classified as “Give Ups.”

In an interview, BORSTAR Supervising Agent John Redd describes 911 calls from migrants as “just people quitting.”<sup>92</sup> Another former Border Patrol agent echoes this language: “Migrants in distress seeking to turn themselves in were referred to as ‘give-ups.’”<sup>100</sup> Border Patrol’s protocols for distinguishing between a “medical emergency,” a “search and rescue,” and a “give up,” are unknown. The presumption appears to be that people calling 911 in desperate need of rescue are merely “quitting.”

Any person who is crossing the border on foot and “giving up” is likely to be lost, disoriented, in rugged and remote terrain, dehydrated, and exhausted, if not severely injured or ill.<sup>101</sup> In other words, they are experiencing a crisis that, in the case of presumed US citizens, would merit a rapid emergency response from a medically-equipped search and rescue team. But, in such cases, rather than dispatching medically trained search teams, Border Patrol sends regular field agents, the majority of whom have no medical or search and rescue training whatsoever.<sup>102</sup> Border Patrol is thus dismissing people as “give ups” who are in the midst of acute situations of danger in desolate regions of the desert where people die and go missing every day.



Border Patrol infographic for calls recieved between March and September of 2015.<sup>104</sup>

## Unaccountability & Misinformation: Lack of Tracking & Transparency

A central challenge to assessing Border Patrol’s qualification as emergency responders is the agency’s persistent unwillingness to release any records of their search efforts or search and rescue policies and protocols. In 2017, Congress mandated that Border Patrol report on its search and rescue activities for the previous year. However, the report that Border Patrol released contained only a number of “rescues,” without any data on the number of emergency reports they received, nor the number of searches they performed.<sup>103</sup> Since then, Border Patrol has not released any further information regarding their search and rescue efforts, and has yet to clarify how the agency defines a “rescue.”

Tucson Sector	
Number of searches	N/A
Number of rescues	1,409
Cost associated for search and rescue efforts	Not Tracked

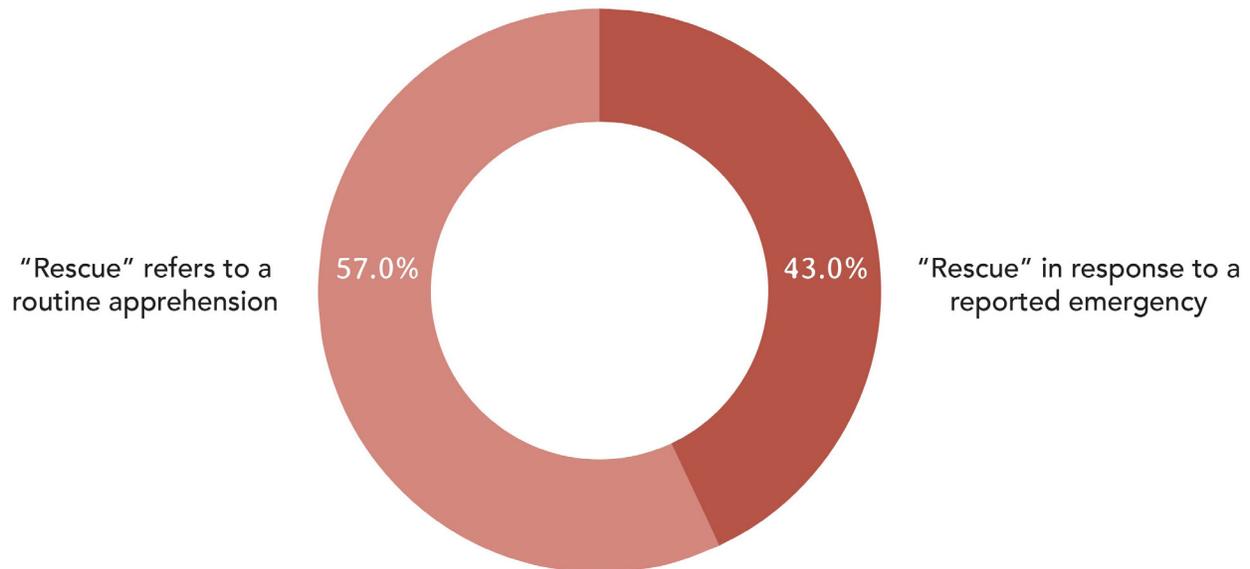
From “Search and Rescue Efforts by Sector, FY2016,” a Department of Homeland Security report submitted to US Congress in 2017. Rio Grande Valley Sector also neglected to track the number of searches and associated costs, but claimed 1,377 “rescues.”

Border Patrol is a notoriously opaque and unaccountable organization with a poor record of complying with Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. If recorded at all by the federal agency, the details of these cases are inaccessible to the public.<sup>105</sup> Without knowing the number of requests for emergency assistance received by Border Patrol, it is not possible to determine their rate of mobilization, success, or failure; in short, without transparent tracking and reporting, Border Patrol's "rescue" data is meaningless.

### **Arrest as "Rescue": Border Patrol Humanitarian Propaganda**

Although Border Patrol does not provide public statistical information and guidelines regarding search and rescue efforts, the agency constantly extols its own capacity as a search and rescue organization in the media. Along with holding press events where Border Patrol agents demonstrate their emergency response techniques, Customs & Border Protection issues regular press releases touting the "rescues" carried out by agents.<sup>106</sup> In a 21-month period from 2015–2016 coincident with our data from the Derechos Humanos database, Border Patrol released at least 157 rescue-related press statements.<sup>107</sup> Upon closer examination, however, many of these press releases describe scenarios in which Border Patrol "rescued" people from life-threatening circumstances that were in fact created by the agency's own enforcement operations.

For instance, a December 2018 press release titled "Agents Rescue Man From Drowning" states: "Tucson Station Border Patrol agents rescued an illegal alien [sic] Sunday night who nearly drowned after running into a cattle pond while trying to evade arrest." Agents chased the 18-year-old through wilderness terrain with a helicopter, before he nearly drowned in the cattle pond.



In our review of these press releases, we found no clear or consistent definition of a Border Patrol "rescue" as distinct from a routine arrest. Instead, many of the press releases appear to contort the daily policing activities of Border Patrol agents in order to portray them as "rescues." For

our analysis, a “routine apprehension” refers to an interaction in which agents on patrol for the purpose of immigration enforcement encountered a person they determined to have crossed the border without authorization and took them into custody, as opposed to a rescue that was the result of a deliberate response to a request for emergency assistance.

Reasons for categorizing apprehensions as rescues range from a detained person appearing dehydrated to an individual being found in the trunk of a car during inspection at a checkpoint. In one press release from August 2018 titled, “Laredo Sector Border Patrol Agents Rescue 62 Illegal Aliens [sic] from a Refrigerated Tractor-Trailer,” all of the 62 men from Mexico were found to be in good health.<sup>108</sup> In designating these 62 apprehensions as “rescues,” Border Patrol can add 62 more people to their total “rescue” count for the sector.<sup>109</sup> If apprehending people in a vehicle who are in good health can be considered a rescue, it is hard to imagine what arrest would not be considered one.

- **57%** of all Border Patrol press releases announcing a “rescue” actually describe a routine arrest, meaning that Border Patrol encountered and arrested the individual(s) in the course of their daily enforcement duties.
- **44%** of all Border Patrol press releases announcing a “rescue” had no mention of an agent providing medical aid, or claim that medical attention was deemed unnecessary.
- **55%** of all Border Patrol press releases announcing a “rescue” described urban scenarios, meaning that the majority of cases Border Patrol branded in the media as “rescues” were not for people in distress in remote terrain.<sup>110</sup>
- **15%** of all Border Patrol rescue-related press releases reported agents assisting with locating distressed US citizens and not about life-saving measures to mitigate the crisis of migrant deaths.

The language of equating apprehensions with rescues perpetuated by Border Patrol’s public relations office has also filtered into the discourse of its field agents as a matter of jest. When one Crisis Line volunteer spoke with two Border Patrol agents about a group of people who the agents had chased and scattered into the wilderness, the Border Patrol agents laughingly referred to those who were dispersed, disoriented, and unaccounted for in the desert as having “absconded from their attempts to rescue them.”<sup>111</sup>

These over-inflated rescue counts contrast sharply with Border Patrol’s notorious undercounting of migrant deaths. In their official counts, the agency is known to only include human remains

when they are found by their own agents, and leaving out the numerous remains recovered by civilians or other government agencies.<sup>112</sup> In a 2015 press release announcing the creation of the Joint Intelligence and Operations Center (JIOC) to receive 911 calls transferred from local dispatch centers, Border Patrol claimed that, as a result of their new initiative, “agents report finding fewer deceased migrants as calls for assistance hit new highs.”<sup>113</sup> The agency further reported that “statistics show that Border Patrol agents located 68 deceased suspected migrants in Arizona during fiscal 2015, compared to 110 in FY14. That is a drop of 38 percent and includes Tucson and Yuma Border Patrol Sectors.” In fact, official counts of recovered remains in Arizona increased from 2014 to 2015, and again in 2016.<sup>114</sup> However, by citing the vague criteria of deaths “reported by agents,” Border Patrol makes the incredible claim that the creation of the JIOC immediately reduced migrant deaths by nearly 40%.

## Border Patrol “Rescue” Beacons as Humanitarian Propaganda

*“In the summer of 2017, I was out in the desert south of Ajo. After walking around seven miles, on a 120 degree day, we heard someone call ‘ayuda’ from nearby. We looked over and saw two people slumped under a tree. They had been walking for days and had gotten sick from the heat. They walked to the road looking for help. At the road they came across a [Border Patrol] rescue beacon. They pushed the button and waited and waited. They estimated that they waited for 12 hours but nobody ever came.”*

– Testimony from Humanitarian Aid Volunteer



Border Patrol beacons are metal towers ranging from 20 to 40 feet high with a blue-strobe LED light affixed at the top. The beacons have a large red button on them; some are equipped with a satellite phone.<sup>115</sup>

One of the most heavily-publicized components of Border Patrol's "humanitarian" branding in the public eye is the agency's several dozen "rescue beacons" stationed in the borderlands. However, Border Patrol rescue beacons are deeply deceptive to both the public and to those who approach them in need. There is no indication that Border Patrol rescue beacons provide a genuine lifeline to those who need it most. Rather, their few rescue beacons are another example of Border Patrol's propaganda campaign to falsely portray itself as humanitarians saving people from the crisis that they engineer.

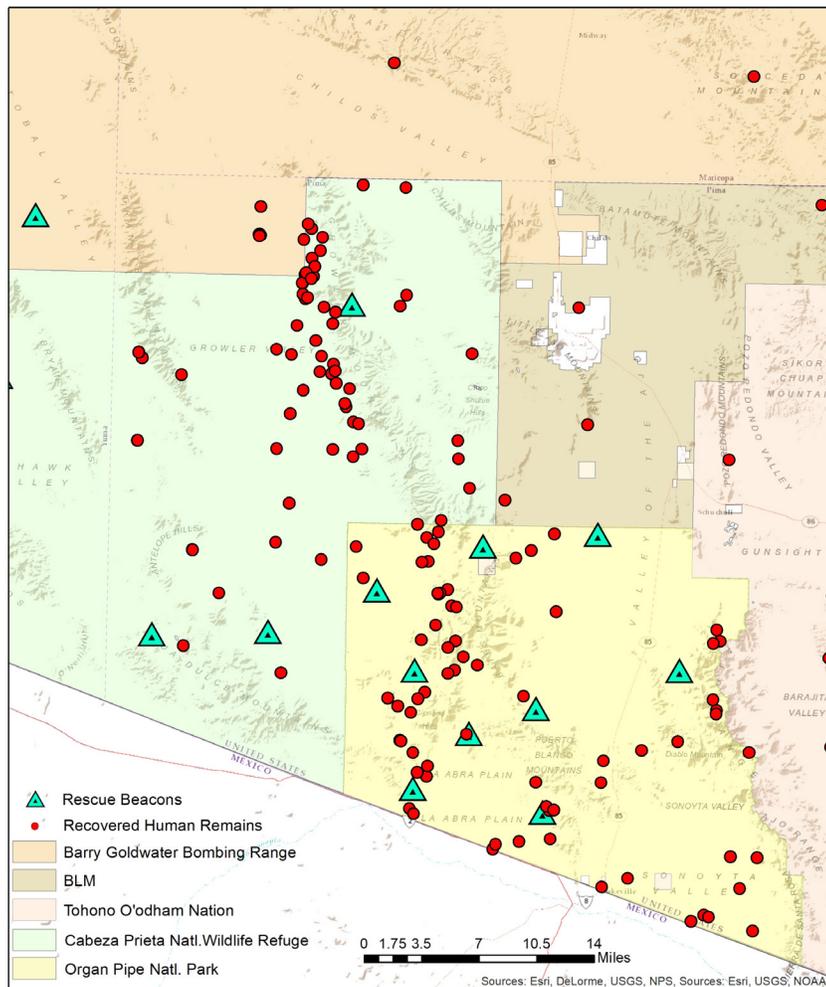
Rescue beacons are touted by government officials as the "preferred way to save lives in the desert."<sup>116</sup> However, in the 22 years since Border Patrol rescue beacons were first installed, there are only 32 rescue beacons in the entire Tucson sector—a vast corridor of remote desert that spans 262 linear miles and reaches up to 100 miles inland, which has seen at least 3,000 recorded deaths. In addition to being insignificant in number, most rescue beacons are not placed in the most remote and deadly borderlands migration trails, but on roadways where they can be easily accessed by line agents and serviced for repairs. For those who do spot a Border Patrol beacon while in need of rescue, many are in such a state of acute physical injury and exhaustion that they are unable to traverse the distance to reach them. This reality is reflected in maps of recovered human remains, which show that there are numerous deaths in close proximity to Border Patrol rescue beacons.

Publicizing Border Patrol beacons as a means of rescue is ultimately deceptive. Beacons are not equipped with water, food, or any other life-saving supplies.<sup>117</sup> Activating a beacon does not summon emergency medical services, but rather a Border Patrol response—an agency known for actively destroying water supplies and interfering with humanitarian aid.<sup>118</sup> In effect, Border Patrol "rescue beacons" primarily function as apprehension stations, and are simply another militarized form of policing technology in the borderlands.<sup>119</sup>

*"I couldn't tell you how many times groups and individuals have the opportunity to walk to the rescue beacon and push the button, but they don't because they're afraid of being apprehended."*

– BORSTAR Supervisor John Redd

### Rescue Beacons and Recovered Human Remains Deaths Occuring Between July 2013 and October 2018 Arizona West Desert



*A trail of death surrounding Border Patrol's "rescue beacons" on Organ Pipe National Monument and Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge.<sup>120</sup>*

Perhaps even more concerning, there is evidence showing that Border Patrol simply does not respond to many of those who activate their beacons while in search of rescue. In the only public report that the Department of Homeland Security has submitted to Congress on the efficacy of rescue beacons, Border Patrol reported that, in the Laredo Sector, 119 beacon activations resulted in zero rescues. In the Rio Grande Sector, 482 activations resulted in only six individuals rescued.<sup>121</sup> And, in Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, the borderlands region with highest death counts, the agency did not even track the number of times the rescue beacons were activated. Border Patrol has therefore provided no proof that its "rescue beacons" meaningfully prevent loss of life.

Rescue beacons, as well as the creation of special Border Patrol initiatives such as BORSTAR and JIOC, serve to create the impression that Border Patrol is taking substantial measures to prevent death and disappearance. No amount of "rescue beacons," however, will ever address the catastrophic loss of life created by Border Patrol's own policies and enforcement tactics. Rather than meaningfully improving the emergency response system for migrants in distress, these efforts serve above all to legitimize Border Patrol as an emergency response agency in the public eye. In light of Border Patrol's systematic non-response to reported emergencies, the agency's publicity efforts are merely an exercise in public deception.

### ***Engineering Emergencies: From Chase and Scatter to Search and Rescue***

Border Patrol policy and daily enforcement operations are responsible for creating the search and rescue crisis in the borderlands. Agents in the field routinely chase groups of migrating people through the wilderness on foot, in helicopters, on ATVs, on horseback, and with dogs. This dangerous enforcement tactic causes people migrating together to run in different directions, leaving people disoriented, exhausted, sometimes injured, and separated from their traveling companions.<sup>122</sup> In many of the emergency cases received by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line, the reported missing person had become lost as a direct result of a Border Patrol chase.



In one such case, 17-year-old Sergio became lost in South Texas after Border Patrol chased him and his traveling companions. Sergio called his dad "saying that he is alone in the desert, he has no water nor food, and he cannot see anything." In another case, a young man named Luis Ángel was separated from his group. Case notes read: "Luis was left alone and had lost sight of his group when everyone scattered" after being chased by Border Patrol agents. Luis was never found.<sup>123</sup>

Our analysis of emergency cases received by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line evidences a direct connection between Border Patrol enforcement practices and the proliferation of emergencies. At least 91 of the 456 emergency cases received by the Crisis Line over a two-year period involved a Border Patrol chase and scatter incident. **In other words, approximately one in five emergencies involved distressed individuals having been chased but not arrested by**

### **Border Patrol agents in remote areas.**

This high number of cases in which Border Patrol was documented to have directly caused a missing person emergency is especially stark when contrasted with the low number of documented cases in which Border Patrol mobilized a search and rescue mission.

**We find that Border Patrol is more than twice as likely to take part in directly causing a person to go missing by dangerous enforcement tactics than they are to participate in finding a distressed person.<sup>124</sup>**

Our data speaks to the reality that the Border Patrol's production of emergencies through daily enforcement activities greatly outpaces their so-called rescue efforts. No matter how well-positioned or resourced Border Patrol becomes when it comes to search and rescue operations, the agency will, at best, only ever be responding to a constantly growing number of emergencies of its own making.

### ***Border Enforcers are Unfit Rescuers***

*"Sometimes we need to take off our Border Patrol hat and put one on that cares about whether this person lives or dies."*

– Tucson Sector Border Patrol Agent Joseph Curran<sup>125</sup>

Border Patrol positions itself as the primary and often sole government responder to emergency situations in the borderlands. Yet, this militarized law enforcement agency consistently fails to provide timely and robust assistance to those who need it most.

We find no evidence that Border Patrol treats emergency missing persons cases with the urgency, professionalism, or transparency that those cases require. In fact, the agency regularly refuses to deploy any response at all, and when they do, their efforts are often cursory, insufficient, vague, and at times, hostile. The agency systematically refuses to allocate a fraction of the time and resources that are routinely mobilized in similar situations involving a lost or distressed US citizen. Thus it appears Border Patrol, through institutional policy and agency culture, discounts the life-threatening situations of those crossing the US–Mexico border as true emergencies.

Border Patrol was not designed to provide emergency response. Its roughly 20,000 agents are trained and equipped to carry out an aggressive enforcement mission that aims, as a matter of official strategy, to put people in harm's way. Indeed, the life-threatening situations encountered by people crossing the borderlands are often the direct result of dangerous enforcement actions taken by Border Patrol agents in the field.<sup>126</sup> An agency invested in heightening the risk of mortality as a matter of policy cannot dedicate itself to alleviating that death and suffering through the provision of emergency services. By these standards, we find the United States Border Patrol to be unfit as the borderlands' emergency responders.

# Section II: Border Patrol Obstruction of Family and Humanitarian Search and Rescue Efforts

*On June 22nd, 2015, 21-year-old Arturo's sister contacted the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line. His sister had received a call from Arturo's traveling companion, who told her that her brother had fainted while walking in the desert near Calexico, California and that he could not continue. The eyewitness described where they had last seen Arturo in hopes that someone might find and rescue him.*

*The Crisis Line volunteer called the Imperial County Sheriff's Department to ask the agency to launch a search. The sheriff then transferred the call to Border Patrol. For the next four days, Border Patrol continued to assure volunteers who contacted them that officials were conducting a search. At one point, Border Patrol even claimed that they had found and rescued Arturo, stating that they had airlifted him to a hospital and had informed Arturo's family of this. This statement later proved untrue. Arturo had not been found.*

*On June 25th, the family received another call from someone who had crossed with Arturo. This person told the family that they had carried Arturo for a long distance, but eventually he had stopped breathing. Arturo was deceased when they last saw him. The following day, a humanitarian search and rescue group mobilized a search based on Arturo's last known location. The humanitarian team located his remains in just over an hour.<sup>127</sup>*



Families of the disappeared seeking government assistance are faced with a negligent, bureaucratic, and often hostile Border Patrol-dominated emergency response system. In the absence of an adequate government response, families often turn to non-governmental humanitarian organizations for assistance. **In many of the cases we reviewed, families contacting La Coalición de Derechos Humanos had already reached out to law enforcement for help prior to calling the Missing Migrant Crisis Line.** Families were seeking additional support because they were not assured that authorities were doing all they could to locate their missing loved ones.<sup>128</sup>

Faced with a dysfunctional emergency response system, families and humanitarian organizations therefore carry much of the burden of searching for the missing. Far from cooperating, we found that Border Patrol obstructed family and humanitarian search efforts in at least 25% of all cases received by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line.<sup>129</sup>

We define cases of Border Patrol “obstruction” as documented instances of interference and/or noncooperation with family and humanitarian attempts to locate the missing. Our analysis reveals the following patterns of Border Patrol obstruction of community-based search efforts, all of which directly contribute to death and disappearance:

- Criminalizing and harrasing humanitarian search and rescue volunteers
- Denying search and rescue teams access to land jurisdictions
- Denying humanitarian parole for family members attempting to search for their loved ones
- Failing to share critical information necessary for a search
- Denying access to interview eyewitnesses being held in Border Patrol or ICE custody
- Deflection and eschewing responsibility (bureaucratic run-around)
- Providing false or misleading information to families or humanitarian search volunteers

In what follows, we explore Border Patrol's interference with family, community, and humanitarian efforts to search and rescue those in distress. We conclude that Border Patrol's inadequate, non-cooperative, and hostile responses to life-threatening emergency situations in the borderlands demonstrate a clear, agency-wide agenda to actively endanger the lives of undocumented people.

## **Families as First Responders**

*On June 5th, 2016, the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line received a call from the sister of 34-year-old Manuel, who was lost in the Arizona desert for nine days, somewhere near the town of Ajo. In his last phone call to his family, Manuel had said that he was no longer able to walk and that he was "close to Border Patrol" and wanted to turn himself in, but couldn't make it to them.*

*Manuel's family contacted Border Patrol and urged them to launch an emergency search and rescue for Manuel, and the agency said that they would "take charge of the case." However, the family reported to Crisis Line volunteers that they did not believe Border Patrol was actually searching for him. Manuel's family then took on the task of looking for him themselves, and his brother immediately left his home in Mexico to search the area of the desert that Manuel had described in his final phone call.*

*As the family urged Border Patrol to respond, agents told them that they would parole two of Manuel's traveling companions out of immigration detention to assist as eyewitnesses with the search. According to the eyewitnesses, Border Patrol did bring them to the search area, but the agents merely asked them to point to the mountain nearest to where they had last seen Manuel, and then quickly returned them both to detention. The two eyewitnesses asked to lead the agents directly to the place where they had last seen Manuel, but the agents refused.*

*Days later, a Crisis Line volunteer heard from the family that Manuel had been found dead. Based on the locational information they had, Manuel's brother had crossed the border himself and found his brother's remains in the desert. In the words of his sister, "se costó mucho." <sup>131</sup>*

When people crossing the border are in dire circumstances, they frequently use their final minutes of cell phone battery to contact family members, often imparting crucial information about their medical condition and surroundings. In at least 26% of emergency cases, a family member directly received a distress call from a loved one or an eyewitness.<sup>132</sup>

For example, in one case, a man received a call from his nephew late at night who told him he had no food or water and could no longer walk. He gave his uncle the name of the last town he

had passed while crossing through the reservation lands of the Tohono O'odham Nation in Southern Arizona. When his uncle tried to contact him again, his nephew's phone had died.<sup>133</sup> In another case, a 33-year-old from Honduras who was crossing through the desert west of Sonoyta, Sonora sent final text messages to his wife before his phone died, telling her that he was somewhere outside of the town of Ajo, and that he had "no food, no water, saying, I love you and I'm going to die, tell my kids I love them." <sup>134</sup>

**We found that Border Patrol obstructed family and humanitarian search efforts in at least 25% of all cases received by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line.**

Families receiving these phone calls then find themselves in the position of trying to enact an emergency response for their loved ones. However, when they reach out to Border Patrol or other government agencies for basic information and assistance, families are met with a system that is unresponsive, inadequate, and at times, openly hostile to their pleas for help. Thus, without support from official emergency channels, families turn to community organizations—or take on the monumental task of attempting a search and rescue effort themselves.

### ***The Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line: A History***

Border Patrol's deadly enforcement strategy has always placed families and communities on the front lines of the search and rescue crisis, not only as victims or survivors, but also as emergency responders. La Coalición de Derechos Humanos, a Tucson-based grassroots community organization, was among the first to publicly oppose the policy of Prevention through Deterrence and to call attention to the crisis of death and disappearance in the desert.<sup>135</sup>

**As early as 1995, Derechos Humanos began receiving calls from families requesting help with locating those who had gone missing while crossing through the Arizona desert.**

As early as 1995, Derechos Humanos began receiving calls from families requesting help with locating those who had gone missing while crossing through the Arizona desert. One Derechos founder recalls that because of their deep community ties and local Chicana/Mexicana leadership, "Derechos was a phone number that was already out there so people would call the organization when they didn't know where else to go."<sup>136</sup>

By 2003, calls about missing people were flooding the Derechos office. In response, Derechos members learned how to conduct missing persons intakes and began the work of liaising with government entities on behalf of families looking for the disappeared. Eventually, the organization established a 24-hour crisis line to receive missing persons reports.

In 2014, a coalition of non-governmental organizations responding to the missing persons crisis held a border-wide conference to coordinate their efforts and develop shared protocols and intake practices. Proactive outreach to advertise the Missing Migrant Crisis Line in Northern Mexico migrant shelters resulted in call volume tripling in a single year. As Derechos' efforts continued over the years, partnerships formed with a growing number of humanitarian organizations to provide non-governmental search and rescue efforts.

**Outreach to advertise the Missing Migrant Crisis Line in Northern Mexico migrant shelters resulted in call volume tripling in a single year.**

Today, numerous organizations carry on Derechos' legacy of responding to the crisis of death and disappearance by undertaking independent search and rescue throughout the borderlands.<sup>137</sup>

There are many barriers that prevent families of the disappeared from directly participating in a search effort. For undocumented families living within the United States, it is nearly impossible to travel to the southwestern border to search for the disappeared because of the existence of checkpoints and other immigration enforcement. Interfacing with Border Patrol agents in the course of traveling to or searching for a loved one puts family members at high risk of their own arrest, incarceration, and deportation. Relatives of a missing person living outside of the United States are rarely, if ever, granted permission to enter the US to conduct a search. Despite these realities, families often travel great distances and go to enormous lengths to try to locate the disappeared when government entities fail to provide effective emergency services.

## Humanitarian Search and Rescue

*In April 2015, a woman named Beatriz went missing in the desert while trying to cross the border on foot. She had been traveling with others, but they were chased by Border Patrol agents in a remote area. In the resulting chaos, Beatriz became lost and alone. One of her traveling companions called Beatriz's sister to report her missing, describing exactly where she was last seen. Volunteers at the Missing Migrant Crisis Line called Border Patrol to request an emergency search for Beatriz. The Border Patrol agent told the volunteer that they would "notify BORSTAR" and would call back if they had questions. The agent told the Crisis Line volunteer not to call again.*

*Because Border Patrol would not confirm any mobilization, humanitarian volunteers quickly organized a search team to deploy to Beatriz's last known location. While searching, the volunteers encountered a number of Border Patrol agents in the field who were unaware of any missing persons reports in the area. After about four hours, the volunteer team was able to locate Beatriz, who required medical care. Two days after the initial emergency search request, a BORSTAR agent contacted the Crisis Line. He was just beginning to look into the case.<sup>138</sup>*

Over the last two decades, numerous non-governmental humanitarian groups have formed to respond to the crisis of death and disappearance in the US borderlands. Humanitarian groups conduct patrols of the remote desert, placing food and water on hundreds of known migration paths in the region, and run makeshift backcountry clinics.<sup>139</sup> In addition, humanitarian volunteers routinely receive reports of distressed people while in the field, both from encounters with the traveling companions of the missing, through reports from Crisis Line volunteers, and by being contacted directly by family members attempting to locate their loved ones.

When humanitarian organizations receive emergency reports, families may request that advocates assist them in attempting to mobilize a governmental response to their emergency. Additionally, humanitarian volunteers may launch a community-based search effort to prevent loss of life. When there is enough information on the Point

Last Seen of the missing person and/or other information to sufficiently limit the search area, humanitarian teams may employ a number of tactics when conducting a search and rescue response in the desert. These include but are not limited to: driving back roads within the search area, conducting small teams on field searches to follow likely paths of travel around relevant landmarks, and/or conducting a grid search of a specific and limited search radius.

**In at least 26% of emergency cases, a family member directly received a distress call from a loved one or an eye witness.**

## ***Family Efforts to Locate Disappeared Loved Ones***

Actions taken by family members to locate their loved ones documented in emergency cases fielded by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line:

- Searching the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Detainee Locator
- Calling area hospitals
- Calling law enforcement agencies
- Calling immigration attorneys
- Calling prisons, detention centers, jails, ICE offices directly
- Traveling to meet with consulate staff directly
- Traveling to meet with Border Patrol directly
- Contacting humanitarian organizations
- Calling news outlets and doing interviews with journalists
- Contacting private helicopter companies
- Contacting private investigators
- Filing complaints with foreign embassies
- Contacting search and rescue outfits in Mexico
- Maintaining contact with eyewitnesses
- Traveling to join a humanitarian group searching for their missing relative
- Searching map/satellite databases to try to piece together their loved one's location
- Crossing the border through wilderness terrain to conduct a search themselves
- Renting ATVs and dirtbikes to search themselves
- Printing posters and taking out ads with their loved one's face and name to try to locate them
- Calling medical examiners offices, sending photos, providing DNA samples to assist with forensic identification
- Traveling to Morgues to identify loved ones' remains

Humanitarian teams operate on shoestring budgets, are run mostly by volunteers, and have only basic resources at their disposal. Unlike the government search teams that normally respond when a presumed citizen goes missing in remote terrain, humanitarian search and rescue responders do not have access to helicopters, canine teams, ATVs, drones, or cell-phone-tracing technology. Nevertheless, humanitarian organizations often play a decisive role in the rescue and recovery of people who go missing in the borderlands.

*“In the past, when we received a call concerning missing and distressed border crossers, we at Colibrí worked closely with Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue (BORSTAR). Over time, however, we learned that BORSTAR was generally unresponsive to calls for distress. Even in cases of a distressed migrant who had been seen within an hour of the rescue call, even in cases we provided BORSTAR a map of the last known location of the distressed migrant, agents at BORSTAR would not initiate search and rescue operations—at times affirmatively denying the request to us in writing and at other times simply not responding to the request . . . Colibrí now refers search and rescue calls to No More Deaths.”*

– Dr. Robin Reineke, co-founder of the Colibrí Center for Human Rights<sup>140</sup>

Families turn to non-governmental humanitarian groups because they may mobilize emergency searches when Border Patrol and other government agencies refuse. Humanitarian groups frequently dedicate much more time to an emergency case than Border Patrol. One former Derechos Humanos Crisis Line volunteer recalled that when their call volume tripled in 2014, “humanitarian volunteers on the ground were often more responsive and more willing to go out on less information than any government agency,” while Border Patrol frequently demanded exact GPS coordinates to launch an emergency response.<sup>141</sup> As emergencies pile up and law enforcement proves systematically unhelpful, families and humanitarians continue to respond to the crisis as best as they can.

## ***Modes of Obstruction: Denial of Information, Bureaucratic Run-Around, Providing False Information, Denial of Eyewitness Interview, Denial of Parole***

### ***Refusing to Share Information***

*In June 2017, Oraldo went missing near Ajo, Arizona. His two traveling companions were arrested by Border Patrol and quickly deported. Once in Mexico, one of them drew a map of where Oraldo had gone to look for water, starting from the spot where he and the others had encountered Border Patrol. In planning their search response, humanitarian volunteers requested that Border Patrol share the GPS coordinates of the location where Oraldo's traveling companions had been arrested so that volunteers would have a starting point for their search effort. Agent Mario Agundez with Border Patrol's Arizona Missing Migrant Initiative (AMMI) refused, telling volunteers, "I will refer your request to my chain in command which in turn will have to refer this request to our legal counsel. One of our team members will reach out to you with the final decision." Border Patrol never reached out and never shared the coordinates. Oraldo remains disappeared.<sup>142</sup>*

Families and humanitarian organizations must frequently turn to Border Patrol to seek information that is vital to locating a missing loved one. However, we find that Border Patrol routinely refuses to share information with family members and advocates. Numerous cases received by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line include notes that the family or volunteer attempted to contact Border Patrol, but Border Patrol refused to give them any information at all. For example:

- "Called the border communications center with Laredo and the agent said that he could not disclose any information." (Case #163)
- "They called Border Patrol but they refused to give information." (Case #114)
- "She called the Border Patrol but they did not give information." (Case #277)
- "Called McAllen Border Patrol, gave no info." (Case #239)
- "Talked to Supervisor Agent Ott. He lectured me for a bit on the dangers of drug smugglers and gave me no information." (Case #305)
- "She called immigration, they did not want to give information." (Case #311)
- "Tried to call Border Patrol in McAllen but did not give information." (Case #50)
- "CBP refused to give any info." (Case #418)
- "He said that he called Border Patrol, and that they did not give him information and said that they can not do anything." (Case #115)
- "Called BP in Roma and Laredo Sector communications. They did not want to give information." (Case #86)
- "Ajo BP didn't give info." (Case #187)
- "Called the border communications center and the agent said that he could not disclose any information." (Case #163)
- "Falfurrias station would not give info." (Case #161)<sup>143</sup>



*Humanitarian volunteers in southern Arizona*

Border Patrol agents maintain an internal database of people in their custody, and can thus verify whether a reported missing person has in fact already been encountered and apprehended by field agents. This information is not publicly accessible, and many people held in short-term Border Patrol custody are never given the opportunity to make a phone call.<sup>144</sup> Thus, families and advocates are dependent on an agent agreeing to search their records.<sup>145</sup> However, case notes from the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line include numerous examples of Border Patrol agents refusing to take this vital step. Families are then left in limbo, unsure whether or not their loved ones are still lost in the desert, or are incarcerated and unable to communicate with the outside world. Families and advocates may be searching the desert for a missing person who has in fact already been arrested and incarcerated. For families waiting to learn whether or not their loved ones are alive, these barriers to timely communication are inhumane cruelties.

In cases where Border Patrol agents did cooperate with requests from families and community groups to confirm whether or not their loved one had been arrested, agents often lacked competence when engaging with their own system. For example, in at least 15 cases from the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line, Border Patrol erroneously told advocates that a reported missing person was not in their custody, when in fact they were.<sup>146</sup> In such cases, a community search effort may be ongoing until the missing person is finally deported and able to contact their families.<sup>147</sup>

In notes from one emergency case in which four men were lost after being chased by Border Patrol, a Crisis Line volunteer indicated that they had “called Del Rio sector BP and spoke to a very unhelpful supervisor agent who didn’t even want to take down the case information and said there was nothing to be done.” The volunteer asked the Border Patrol agent if he would

## In at least 15 cases from the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line, Border Patrol erroneously told advocates that a reported missing person was not in their custody, when in fact they were.

many disoriented and unaccounted for, the GPS coordinates of arrest locations become critical in providing a Point Last Seen for the missing, and hence a starting point for an emergency search mobilization. As in the case of Oraldo, Border Patrol regularly ignores or outright refuses to provide families and humanitarians with such arrest records.<sup>149</sup> By refusing to provide basic information vital to an emergency case, Border Patrol directly impedes the ability of families and advocates to mobilize to save the lives of those in distress.

check their database to see if any of the missing people had been apprehended and the agent said no. Border Patrol also refused to search for the coordinates of the chase-and-scatter incident, or to flag the case as exigent so that, if located, the missing people would be allowed to call their families as soon as possible.<sup>148</sup>

Another vital piece of information frequently requested by community search responders from Border Patrol is the GPS coordinates of arrests made by agents in the field. In cases in which Border Patrol agents chase and scatter groups of people in the wilderness, leaving

### *Bureaucratic Run-Around*

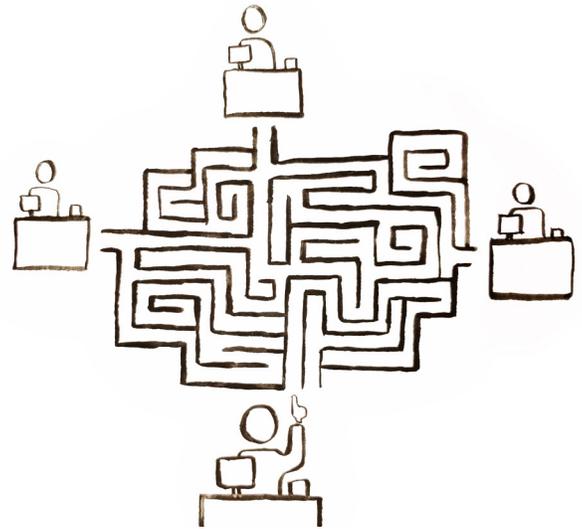
*“Called supervisor at Deming station. He said he could give no other info other than that there was an event in progress, but they were not ‘leading the event,’ they were only supporting agents. They said the Santa Teresa station was leading the event and I should call them. When I called Santa Teresa station, the agent said that they were not responding to the event because it was in the Deming area of responsibility. I called Deming back and told them this and the agent said that was not true, but said that they did have agents on the ground looking, even though they weren’t leading the event. Very confusing. He didn’t want to give his name because he didn’t want us to use it in a report.”*

– Case notes from Missing Migrant Crisis Line, Case #357

When families and humanitarian volunteers in search of lost loved ones reach out to Border Patrol and other government agencies for information or assistance, they are frequently faced with “bureaucratic run-around”—they are redirected back and forth among multiple government agencies and initiatives in their attempt to report the emergency. Making such response systems unnavigable directly obstructs families’ and advocates’ access to timely assistance for those who need it most.

For example, county 911 dispatchers may instruct families to contact Border Patrol, who then instruct families to contact 911. In effect, such run-arounds amount to government actors indefinitely deflecting responsibility for emergency response and interfering with family and humanitarian efforts to prevent loss of life. One former Crisis Line volunteer explained the harm such run-around can cause: “It’s hard enough for any family to deal with the disappearance of a loved one, but being lied to, calls getting dropped, being stonewalled, and treated rudely—being given the bureaucratic run-around when trying to get a search initiated—is such a torturous aggravation of that pain.”

The Derechos Humanos Crisis Line database contains numerous instances of volunteers being endlessly redirected between various phone numbers internal to Border Patrol. This includes volunteers being transferred to non-working numbers or unanswered public affairs lines; being transferred to message boxes with recordings indicating that the office will only accept information provided in person; being told to call back during regular business hours; and interacting with Border Patrol agents who refuse to take emergency reports or record case information.<sup>150</sup> Notes on one such emergency case read: “Called Laredo S, Laredo W, Laredo N, Cotulla—no answers. Very weird. 10/2 Laredo S told me to call Laredo N (main station). Laredo N agent asked if this was an ‘illegal alien’ [sic] and then transferred me to a voicemail box.”<sup>151</sup> Our review showed many instances of Border Patrol agents being unreachable after promising to call back volunteers and family members with critical information that would support an emergency search mobilization.<sup>152</sup>



Families’ and volunteers’ emergency requests are also routinely ping-ponged between Border Patrol and consulates. For example, Border Patrol agents often claim that they cannot share information directly with families or advocates, insisting that such requests must instead be made through the consulate of the missing person’s country of origin.<sup>153</sup> However, most consular offices are not equipped to operate as emergency response centers.<sup>154</sup> Even if accessible, consular offices may not be able to help and may not have access to the information the family needs. In one case, a consular agent frankly informed a Crisis Line volunteer that “[Border Patrol] has no legal obligation to release info to them unless the person is sick, injured, or dead. The release of info of detainees is based solely on what mood they [Border Patrol] are in.”<sup>155</sup>

## ***Border Patrol Provides False Information***

Humanitarian volunteers and families contacting Border Patrol for vital information on the whereabouts of a missing and distressed person are in some cases provided with false or misleading information, resulting in ill-fated efforts to search the desert and prolonged periods of uncertainty for families.

## **We reviewed at least 17 distinct emergency cases where Border Patrol agents gave blatantly false information to a Crisis Line volunteer or family member.**

This included providing incorrect apprehension coordinates, making false claims about missing people already being in custody, making false claims about Border Patrol activating searches, and even falsely asserting that reported missing people had been found alive.<sup>156</sup> False assurances such as these delay or outright prevent life-saving actions by non-governmental responders.

## ***Beyond Border Patrol: Disappeared Into Immigration Detention***

*“The parts of the Department of Homeland Security, as a whole, don’t communicate with each other well. There is no way to know where someone is in the system. People are lost in the system and it is outrageous. It always varied whether or not agents would do a detention search. This was a lot of resources, time, stress and trauma for the family to have people lost in detention. It is a systemic problem. You don’t know if someone is in detention, processing, or in the hospital . . . Detention searches should be available and accessible to families and consulates. This system is part of the terror of disappearance, the torture of not knowing.”*

– Founding member of the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line

### ***Lack of Access to Phone Calls***

After enduring short-term Border Patrol custody, undocumented people are either rapidly deported or transferred into Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody for long-term detention. Those held in ICE custody are frequently denied the basic right to make a phone call.<sup>160</sup> In one case, a man named Bryan was held in a detention center for two months without being allowed to make a phone call, while his family actively searched for him. Bryan was not able to contact his family until he was deported to Mexico. In another case, a young man named Josué was in ICE custody for ten days without a phone call, until he read a poster that stated that he had a right to a call and pointed it out to a guard. In the case of Cristian, his family didn’t receive a call from him until five months after receiving his frantic phone calls from the desert. Cristian’s family had already completed forensic interviews with local morgues, convinced that he was dead.<sup>161</sup>

### ***Searching the Maze of US Immigration Custody***

When detained people are unable to make a phone call, their families grow increasingly worried. They then take on the enormous task of calling detention centers, facility by facility, to locate their missing loved ones. The United States has the largest immigration detention infrastructure in the world, only a fraction of which are publicly listed facilities. In 2016, ICE publicly identified only 78 detention sites.<sup>162</sup> However, a May 2016 report by the nonpartisan research group TRAC, tallied a total of 637 facilities used during 2015, and a Freedom of Information Act request from 2013 revealed that there were 961 sites owned or contracted by the government for federal immigration detention.<sup>163</sup>

Even when calling publicly listed numbers for ICE offices, US Marshals offices, and individual detention centers, it is remarkably difficult to get detention center staff on the phone. Case notes from the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line are replete with failures of families and advocates to reach officials who would confirm whether or not a person was in custody. When families and advocates do connect with detention center staff while searching for a missing loved one, they are often faced with an insurmountable barrier: detention center employees do not generally disclose who is being incarcerated at a given facility without inquirers providing the “A-number” (Alien Registration Number) for the person that they are looking for. However, families would only know the A-number of their loved one if they had received a phone call from them. In this cruel, Catch-22 set-up, detention center officials refuse to assist with locating missing people unless their loved ones have already heard from them by phone. The frustration and near-impossibility of navigating the detention system prompted more than one family to ask if the Crisis Line recommended they try to hire a private investigator to find their missing person in ICE custody.

## Denying Access to Eyewitnesses in Immigration Detention

Traveling companions of those who go missing in the desert are often the sole eyewitnesses to another's emergency, possessing potentially vital information about where the person was last seen. However, if these eyewitnesses are arrested by Border Patrol and are being held in immigration detention, it can be difficult to impossible for families and humanitarian search teams to receive critical information that could determine the fate of those in distress. When such advocates seek to contact an eyewitness in detention to interview them for locational information, we found that Border Patrol often denies them any access, or they are unable to reach the person due to the opaque and labyrinthine nature of detention center bureaucracies.

In a case from February 2015, 16-year-old Edwin crossed the border in South Texas with his uncle. While walking, Edwin fell into a deep hole of water. His uncle went to seek help and was arrested. From a detention center, he contacted his family and informed them of Edwin's dire situation. The family then contacted the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line for help.

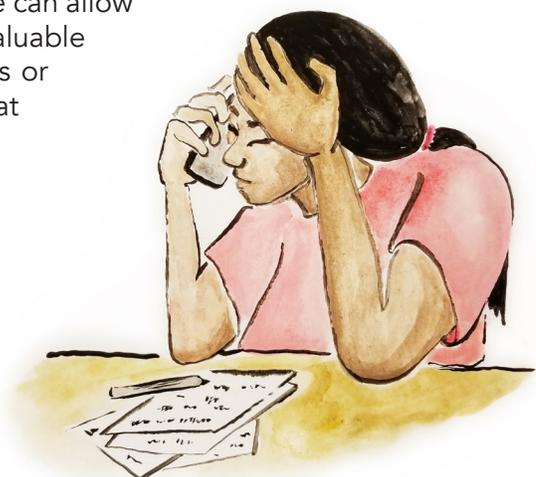
The notes from the Crisis Line volunteer read: **"For the next six hours I alternated calling the detention center with calling law enforcement agencies. I was alternately hung up on, transferred to non-working numbers, put on hold until the call dropped, or was told to call back in an hour when someone else would be available to help me."** Detention center staff said they would only grant an interview with Edwin's uncle to law enforcement, but law enforcement neglected to take action. By the time the detention center official seemed ready to grant an interview to the Crisis Line volunteer because law enforcement had not contacted them, Edwin's body had already been recovered from where he had drowned.<sup>157</sup> We cannot speculate whether Edwin would have been found alive had volunteers been able to interview Edwin's uncle sooner; however, the case illustrates how families and Crisis Line volunteers spend hours of critical time simply trying to access key information from an eyewitness in order to enact or advocate for an emergency response.<sup>158</sup>

## Border Patrol Denies Humanitarian Parole to Family & Eyewitnesses

Border Patrol has the ability to authorize "humanitarian parole," which gives permission to non-US citizens to temporarily enter the country for a humanitarian purpose.<sup>159</sup>

In the context of search and rescue, humanitarian parole can allow eyewitnesses to directly assist with a search—an invaluable tool that can prove decisive in a search effort's success or failure. Although Border Patrol agents regularly assert that they have the authority to grant such permission, and at times, claim that they will do so, **there is not a single recorded case handled by Crisis Line volunteers in which Border Patrol granted humanitarian parole to a family member or eyewitness.**

There was the case of Paolo, who passed away in the desert near Ajo, Arizona. Another member of his group, José, had activated a Border Patrol "rescue beacon" to seek help after leaving Paolo in critical condition less than two miles away. When Border Patrol



arrived, they arrested and then quickly deported José to Mexico, but never went looking for Paolo. Family members and Crisis Line volunteers working on the case were told that BORSTAR could arrange for José to be paroled into the country to help search, but the agency never followed through on this promise. A week and a half later, Paolo's remains were found in exactly the location José had described.<sup>164</sup>

Similar false promises were made by Border Patrol when the brother of a man named Reyes requested parole after being deported to Nogales, Sonora. Reyes's brother met a No More Deaths volunteer at a shelter in Nogales and explained his attempts to lead agents to his brother who had been too weak to continue walking. The brother had marked his path when he left Reyes to seek help and was convinced he could assist them in finding him. His parole was never granted. Reyes was located and hospitalized a day later.<sup>165</sup>

In another case from April 2016, Roberto fell ill while crossing through Arizona's Growler Valley and was left behind by his group. His family and several deported members of his group traveled to the border and requested entry to assist in an ongoing humanitarian search effort. Their requests were ignored. Roberto remains disappeared.<sup>166</sup>

We find that Border Patrol denies parole to eyewitnesses who could describe or lead people to the areas in which a person was last seen. Moreover, the agency consistently makes false promises to authorize humanitarian parole, leaving friends and family members of the disappeared waiting for permission that never comes. This is particularly egregious considering that in many cases, eyewitnesses are arrested in the first place specifically because they went to seek help for a

companion in distress. Rather than receiving assistance in rescuing their traveling companions, however, undocumented people reporting emergencies in the field are immediately funneled into the immigration detention system or are rapidly deported. Thus, those with the most detailed information about a missing person's Point Last Seen are unable to participate in a search effort.



## ***False Promises and Dead Ends: Border Patrol’s “Missing Migrant Initiative”***

**The Border Patrol Arizona Missing Migrant Initiative, or “AMMI,”** was launched by Border Patrol’s Tucson Sector in 2015 in response to public outcry.<sup>167</sup> In name, AMMI promises to assist family members and the public with locating missing loved ones, including during emergencies. Border Patrol claims that this “Missing Migrant Initiative” serves as a central point of contact to help families determine if their loved one is in detention, or to facilitate a search and rescue response and to keep families informed of ongoing search efforts. All third-party reporters of emergency missing persons cases are directed to contact Border Patrol via AMMI.

In reality, however, Border Patrol’s Arizona Missing Migrant Initiative does not provide any public phone number for families with missing loved ones to contact.<sup>168</sup> The only way to reach out to AMMI is by email. Border Patrol responses to these emergency reports are often seriously delayed, unhelpful, or altogether non-existent.<sup>169</sup>

For example, in November of 2019, a teenage boy named Victor was reported lost in Southern Arizona. His family contacted a humanitarian organization with precise GPS coordinates that had been texted to them by Victor before his phone died. At the family’s request,

humanitarian volunteers sought a Border Patrol search response. Volunteers emailed AMMI the case information and received back only an automated response telling them to contact the consulate. Volunteers then contacted the Border Patrol’s Joint Intelligence and Operations Center (JIOC), the Border Patrol communications center that receives 911 call transfers and was supposedly created to facilitate an emergency response from the agency. The Border Patrol agent who answered refused to give any information about any ongoing search response from Border Patrol, saying that “everything has to go through Arizona Missing Migrant [AMMI].” They gave the volunteer a phone number to call to reach AMMI. The volunteer called, but the call went to a voicemail box that was full.

Despite the fact that AMMI does not function as a means of accessing timely emergency assistance, government agencies consistently instruct families and humanitarian groups to contact them even in life-or-death situations. Far from assisting with locating the disappeared, Arizona Missing Migrant Initiative instead serves to *deflect* families and humanitarian volunteers from direct contact with government agents charged with conducting borderlands search and rescue. In effect, such “humanitarian” initiatives create the appearance of Border Patrol support for families, while in practice, they actually obstruct community-based efforts to locate those in distress.

## Good Apples in a Rotten System

*Daniel had been crossing through Texas when he was left behind by his group. He had made final phone calls to his wife before his battery died. In these calls, he said his feet were raw and hard to walk on; he was sitting down and didn't think he could move from where he was. He described his location using several landmarks, providing distances to nearby roads and specific mile markers.*

*After this phone call, Daniel's wife contacted the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line. With her permission, the Crisis Line volunteer contacted a Border Patrol agent who hastily took down case information and said he would call back soon. When the agent called back, he said he had tried to gather information from several cell companies to ping Daniel's location—a potentially life-saving action very rarely taken by Border Patrol agents in the documented Crisis Line cases—but had been unable to learn anything substantial. The agent also said that he had requested a Border Patrol ground search and air support. Daniel's family asked to be in contact with Border Patrol, and the agent began to give search updates directly to the missing individual's wife. However, after several hours of communicating directly with this unusually cooperative Border Patrol agent, the agent's shift ended. The family's next call to the same number was answered by a confused and hostile Border Patrol agent who said he knew nothing about the ongoing search for Daniel. After looking into it further, the new agent informed Daniel's family that the search would be called off. Daniel's wife's continued calls to Border Patrol went unanswered. Daniel remains disappeared.<sup>170</sup>*

Border Patrol has no known protocols for interaction with families or humanitarian volunteers reporting emergencies. Instead, the agency's behavior seems to depend largely on the personal approach of the responding agent. In rare cases, Border Patrol's follow-up communication appeared to be clear and accurately reflective of the agency's efforts on the ground. The agency allocated some resources and, at least temporarily, conducted a genuine search effort in response to a reported emergency. In these unusual cases, humanitarian advocates were able to reach an individual Border Patrol agent who was willing to listen, to take the case seriously, and to act with compassion. Such cases are the exception and not the rule—indeed, they sometimes involve Border Patrol agents breaking their own protocols to treat families with dignity and advocates with respect.

In one revealing case, a Crisis Line volunteer called Border Patrol repeatedly to try to activate a search for a missing individual. Later, the volunteer received a mysterious call from an unknown personal cell phone—the caller simply said that the lost person was safe, and then hung up. The volunteer later learned that the call had come from a sympathetic Border Patrol agent who had called in secret because she was afraid of breaking protocol by calling the volunteer back with information.<sup>171</sup> Such exceptional cases speak to how Border Patrol's standard culture is one of noncommunication, dismissiveness, and hostility—a standard that agents subvert by being responsive and timely when communicating about emergencies with family, advocates, and the public.

All of these cases illustrate how the governmental failure to provide effective search and rescue services for undocumented people in the borderlands forces family members and advocates to mobilize emergency responses on their own. These efforts must often span borders as well

**Border Patrol agents break their own protocols to treat families with dignity and advocates with respect.**

as barriers of access, resources, and knowledge. Relatives of the missing may themselves be undocumented, and many nonetheless seek help from Border Patrol and other government agencies, knowing that the cost of rescue will be incarceration and deportation for their loved ones and possibly for themselves. However, both families and humanitarian groups routinely experience not only a lack of cooperation but even outright obstruction of their own search efforts on the part of Border Patrol, federal land managers, and local law enforcement. This pattern of Border Patrol interference directly undermines the urgent efforts to locate those in distress when government actors will not mobilize, exacerbating the crisis of death and disappearance in the borderlands.

### ***Humanitarians Denied Access to Search Arizona's West Desert***

*In July 2017, a young woman named Justina received a call from her cousin. He was lost with another cousin and a friend in Arizona's Growler Valley, on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (CPNWR). After their final phone call, their phone died. Justina contacted Border Patrol and the local sheriff's office to request a search. Both agencies told her they could do nothing to help. She then contacted No More Deaths. Humanitarian volunteers responded immediately to the area. They searched on foot for several hours until the sun began to go down, and planned to return the next day.*

*As they were leaving the refuge, the volunteers were followed by a Border Patrol vehicle. At the refuge boundary, Border Patrol agents along with US Fish and Wildlife officers detained the volunteers for several hours, questioning them about their humanitarian activities. They collected identifying information from the volunteers before releasing them.*

*In subsequent days, these volunteers attempted to return to the refuge to continue the search, but were denied permission and intercepted by government officials. They learned*

*that two of the men had been found by Border Patrol agents, but another had never been found. Months later, these four volunteers and five others received court summons. Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge was pressing criminal misdemeanor charges against them for their humanitarian work.<sup>\*172</sup>*

One of the most disastrous areas along the border in the crisis of death and disappearance is the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge--the same area where government interference with family and humanitarian emergency response is the most severe. Specifically, the Growler Valley, a notorious migration corridor that runs north through Cabeza Prieta and the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range (BMGR), regularly sees some of the highest numbers of recovered human remains and reports of missing persons of anywhere along the US-Mexico border, earning it a reputation as Arizona's "trail of death."<sup>173</sup> Despite this fact, land managers, Border Patrol, and BMGR administrators have taken extraordinary measures to obstruct humanitarian efforts on the refuge and range.<sup>174</sup>

In July 2017, Cabeza Prieta and the BMGR altered the language of their entrance permits

to specifically ban the work of independent humanitarian aid groups in both land areas.<sup>175</sup> Cabeza Prieta administrators also maintain a “do not issue” list comprised of individual names of No More Deaths volunteers who are prohibited from receiving permits to enter refuge lands to leave aid, search for the missing, or recover the dead. Additionally, employees of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the main agency that manages CPNWR, have admitted that they report No More Deaths’ activities to the Border Patrol, alerting the agency each time a volunteer applies for a permit.<sup>176</sup> Only a small portion of the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range is open to the public at all—the vast majority is completely inaccessible to humanitarian groups or families searching for their loved ones.

Land management and law enforcement agencies, alongside the US Attorney’s Office for the District of Arizona, have cited and prosecuted nine No More Deaths volunteers for their search and rescue as well as other humanitarian efforts on the refuge.<sup>177</sup> They argued that when humanitarian aid groups drive on existing administrative roads they are degrading the wilderness quality of refuge

lands. This claim is at odds with the reality on the ground. The US Fish and Wildlife Service maintains numerous administrative roads within the designated wilderness of Cabeza Prieta, which are driven daily by Border Patrol and refuge employees, and the agency regularly issues special driving permits to student groups and hunters but denies them to humanitarian volunteers. The refuge itself has issued reports about the over 8,000 miles of illegal roads created in part by the US Border Patrol.<sup>178</sup>

Thus, land managers, law enforcement, and federal prosecutors use permit stipulations and the pretext of wilderness preservation to deny humanitarian volunteers road access to conduct search and rescue and other humanitarian efforts in one of the deadliest migration corridors in the country. When the government denies land access to humanitarian search and rescue groups, especially when there is an active report of a rescue or recovery, it severely limits the ability of humanitarian groups and families to effectively respond to emergencies. It also demonstrates a cross-agency disregard for the lives imperiled as a result of US border enforcement policy.

# Section III: When All Systems Fail: The Crisis of Undiscovered, Unrecovered, and Unidentified Remains

*On August 24, 2015, the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line received an emergency call from the sister of Nery, a 33-year-old woman from Guatemala. Nery had last been seen unconscious in a remote area of the Rio Grande Valley. A traveling companion of Nery's had managed to send her sister the coordinates of the place where Nery had been left. The family contacted local police, sheriffs, and Border Patrol. None of these agencies would take any action on the case. Border Patrol did, however, verify that Nery was not in their custody. Local sheriffs also confirmed that Nery's remains had not been recovered. As days passed by and the reality that Nery had likely perished began to set in, Crisis Line volunteers again contacted Border Patrol to request that they launch a search for Nery's remains because there were specific GPS coordinates indicating her last known location. The answering Border Patrol agent responded by asking if Nery was "an illegal alien [sic]," and then said, "there are lots of people lost and dead in the desert." Nery remains disappeared.<sup>179</sup>*

*"It is crucial to remember in those cases that bringing closure to an incident is very critical to the wellbeing of family members. Death is always difficult to deal with, but the unknown factors dealing with a loved one that has not been located is much more difficult."*

*– Arizona Search and Rescue Coordinators Association<sup>180</sup>*

As a result of the numerous discriminatory barriers built into the Border Patrol-dominated emergency response system, many people cannot access help in time to prevent the loss of life. Thousands of people who have come into distress while crossing through these remote areas have been found deceased.

**10%** of emergency calls received by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line resulted in the discovery and identification of the missing person's remains.

However, our data shows that, more often than confirming a missing person's death, the direct result of systemic Border Patrol non-response to emergencies is disappearance.

**17%** of reported emergency cases fielded by the Crisis Line, the result was *disappearance*, meaning that untold thousands of people who have died have been left undiscovered and unrecovered in US deserts, or unidentified in county morgues.<sup>181</sup>

The families of the unrecovered or unidentified are unable to conduct burial rites or experience any measure of closure, having no knowledge of what happened to their loved ones. When the number of individuals who died and had their remains identified is combined with those who remain missing and have not been recovered or identified, **over 25% of missing or distressed people reported to the Crisis Line died or disappeared.**<sup>182</sup>

Border Patrol's patterns of negligence and diminished emergency response directly exacerbates the crisis of mass disappearance. Unlike government search and rescue efforts for US citizens, which nearly always end in successfully rescuing or locating the remains of a reported missing person, **we find that in 27% of Border Patrol search mobilizations, the distressed person was never rescued nor were their remains ever located.**<sup>183</sup>

When it comes to "emergency" response to undocumented people crossing the border, Border Patrol's search and rescue practices normalize human disappearance as an outcome.

Disappearance is not only a result of devaluing the lives of those crossing the border; it is an indication that undocumented migrants are also devalued in death. Our research shows that, when it comes to those who perish in these remote areas, responding agencies often seriously delay, under-resource, and, as with the case of Nery, evade mobilizing search and recovery for human remains altogether. The number of reported mortalities of undocumented people in the borderlands has become so overwhelming that, in many cases, reported deaths are treated as mundane and negligible facts, rather than as emergencies necessitating immediate action by officials.

While the recovery of human remains in the United States is by definition a government function, widespread negligence toward mass death in the borderlands increasingly burdens families and humanitarian organizations with locating the deceased. With the bodies of so many people left undiscovered and unidentified, the true scale of the loss of life in the US borderlands is unknown.

## Disappearance in Death

Tracking of border deaths is neither consistent nor centralized. Instead, mortalities are differently recorded county-to-county, with many jurisdictions keeping no records that distinguish migrant fatalities from other “unknown deaths.” As a part of the Border Safety Initiative, launched by Border Patrol in 1998 in response to public outcry about the rising death toll on the border, Border Patrol announced that they would track the number of border-related deaths. Border Patrol is currently the only agency that issues a border-wide death toll annually. However, Border Patrol significantly undercounts even the number of remains that are recovered of people crossing the US–Mexico border—itsself an insufficient indicator of the true loss of human life, because it does not account for all those whose bodies are never found.

Border Patrol claims an official count of 7,805 “southwest border deaths” between 1998 and the end of 2019.<sup>184</sup> However, a 2017 investigation by USA Today found that bureaucratic

**Border Patrol systematically shrinks the death toll caused by its policies.**

inconsistencies and Border Patrol’s “lack of effort or interest in determining the actual number of dead migrants,” resulted in the agency undercounting known deaths along the border by 25% to 300%.<sup>185</sup> While Border Patrol’s so-called “humanitarian” initiatives emphasize that there is a need for life-saving intervention in the borderlands, the agency systematically shrinks the death toll caused by its policies.<sup>186</sup>

However, the actual scale of the loss of life on the border is much greater than the number of human remains that are recovered.

This truth is clearly reflected in the data from the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line, in which many of the cases that had a recorded outcome of “disappeared” were people who were known to have died, but whose remains were never recovered and identified.<sup>187</sup>

Among the disappeared cases handled by the Crisis Line, there are numerous instances in which a traveling companion witnessed the moment of the missing person’s death. There is the case of a 22-year-old who died after becoming ill from drinking contaminated water, and the case of the 26-year-old from Guatemala whose body was last seen in a ditch near a backroad on the Tohono O’odham Nation. There is the 19-year-old from Mexico who died of dehydration while crossing through the desert west of Lukeville, Arizona in the heat of summer; the 24-year-old from Honduras who lost consciousness and perished in South Texas; the 27-year-old who died in the brush after having been chased by Border Patrol agents, whose traveling companions were too frightened of law enforcement to report the location of his body to authorities. There is the case of the 19-year-old from El Salvador who became ill and then stopped breathing north of McAllen, Texas; the 30-year-old who died of apparent heart attack, whose parents hired a private helicopter so that someone would attempt to recover his remains. There are the anonymous people, whose names, ages, and nationalities were unknown by those who witnessed or reported their deaths.<sup>188</sup> Although all of these emergency cases received at the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line resulted in known mortalities, since their deaths were witnessed by their traveling companions, they are nonetheless, cases of “disappearance” because the bodies were never recovered and/or never positively linked to the identity of a reported missing person.

**There is the case of the 30-year-old who died, whose parents hired a private helicopter so that someone would attempt to recover his remains.**

Within the cases of disappeared people, there are many more that did not involve an eyewitness to the missing persons' death, but, given the last known details of the medical condition of the missing person, almost certainly ended in mortality as well. There is the case of the 18-year-old from El Salvador who could not walk, fainted, tried to get back up and fainted again—she was last seen unconscious somewhere in South Texas.<sup>189</sup> There is the person who was last seen convulsing from the heat and unresponsive in Southern Arizona; the 22-year-old woman from Guatemala who had fainted and was foaming at the mouth in South Texas; the 25-year-old from Mexico who, directly following a Border Patrol chase, was last witnessed lying “as though dead” by his traveling companions—companions who then also encountered the body of a young girl as they attempted to turn back south.<sup>190</sup> These are some of the many known cases, among many more that remain unknown.

In addition to the enormous number of emergency cases that are reported to families, humanitarian organizations, Border Patrol, and law enforcement, there are many more tragic scenarios of loss of life in disappearance that are never accounted for. For this reason, advocates suggest that when accounting for the high rate of disappearance, the true death toll on the border may be three to ten times higher than official counts, raising the potential death toll to as high as 80,000 since the adoption of Prevention Through Deterrence. Border Patrol's own number of 7,805 border deaths represents only a small fraction of the unknowable scope of the humanitarian emergency playing out every day in the US borderlands.

### ***Governmental Non-Response to Reported Fatalities***

The death of a perceived US citizen in remote areas on US soil leads to a concerted recovery effort and thorough investigation into the cause of death. However, law enforcement agencies often do not treat the deaths of undocumented people as important enough to systematically respond to or document. Although Border Patrol's militarized strategy predicts death as a logical outcome (funneling people into “mortal danger”), there is no dedicated government agency or initiative that proactively recovers the dead and investigates deaths in the remote borderlands.<sup>191</sup> The widespread lack of remains recovery and identification is not simply a tragic fact of the desert. Rather it is a direct result of discriminatory inaction by government entities to conduct timely, thorough, and respectful treatment of human remains in the borderlands.

Our data evidences numerous cases in which Border Patrol and other law enforcement refused to initiate search and recovery efforts when a person crossing the border was known or was presumed to have died. In the case of Roberto, for example, humanitarian aid volunteers who requested that Border Patrol send a helicopter to search for him, were told that his case “did not constitute an emergency” as there was “no evidence that he is alive.”<sup>192</sup> In another case, US Fish and Wildlife officials told humanitarian volunteers that Border Patrol had called off a search for a distressed person because “it's probably a mortality anyway.”<sup>193</sup> In a case in which the Colibrí Center for Human Rights requested that Border Patrol to activate a search for a reported missing

**Advocates suggest that when accounting for the high rate of disappearance, the true death toll on the border may be three to ten times higher than the number of those who have been recovered.**

person, Colibrí was told that the agency would not mobilize for a missing person who was last seen “breathing very heavily and his organs were slowing down,” because “they would have been searching for a cadaver.”<sup>194</sup> Our data contains numerous instances of inaction or massively delayed response time when government officials have knowledge of border deaths.

The dismissive attitude among law enforcement to those who have died in US deserts is not only callous, but is also itself a motor of human disappearance: The longer a person’s body is left abandoned to the elements, the less likely it is that the remains will be identifiable if they are eventually recovered. A human body, which could have been considered a known and identifiable loss of life if only it had been found in time, is instead erased by exposure to the elements; the lack of urgent remains-recovery missions directly causes disappearance. Our research thus speaks to a debased culture among the Border Patrol and local law enforcement—a culture that prejudicially treats the lives of presumed undocumented people and the wellbeing of their loved ones as fundamentally disposable.

**Colibrí was told that [Border Patrol] would not mobilize for a missing person who was last seen “breathing very heavily and his organs were slowing down,” because “they would have been searching for a cadaver.”**

### *Unidentified Recovered Remains*

Government inaction to mobilize a timely response to reported border deaths burdens county medical examiners offices, who struggle to house and identify the number of severely decomposed human remains collected from the remote borderlands. As the time between death and the recovery of human remains grows, the likelihood of positive identification of the deceased diminishes. The extreme heat of the desert, monsoon rains, and the activity of area wildlife quickly decompose and scatter the remains of the dead.<sup>125</sup> Thus, even if remains are eventually recovered, many of those people are nonetheless disappeared if their skeletal remains cannot be matched with the identity of a specific reported missing person.

In 2019, the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (OME) received the remains of at least 163 undocumented people who died while crossing the border. Of those, 115, or 71%, are unidentified.<sup>126</sup> 110, or 67%, of the remains recovered were in skeletal condition by the time they were found. Each set of unidentified remains represents someone who died but cannot be affirmatively connected to any of the thousands of missing persons cases reported by families of the disappeared. The work to identify recovered remains is ongoing.<sup>197</sup>

### *When Families and Humanitarians Search for the Dead*

*“You know, it’s common to have news stories about these bodies being found, but they’re found by us—these wacky, DIY, volunteer groups . . . There’s no systematic search, there’s no agencies out there doing any sweeps. We’re the wealthiest country in the world . . . and we just leave them out there.”*

– James Holeman, volunteer with Águilas del Desierto<sup>128</sup>

In the face of this systemic lack of proactive governmental remains recovery in the borderlands, the burden increasingly falls on families and humanitarian organizations to locate the bodies of people who have perished as a result of US Border Patrol policy. Those who have died in



A cross reading “Desconocida/o” or “Unknown” with a Border Patrol checkpoint in the background.

remote areas may be encountered by humanitarian search efforts working to locate the missing, or accidentally by border residents while going about their daily lives. One humanitarian aid worker testified in federal court that they personally encountered ten sets of human remains in a single month while volunteering in the deserts around Ajo, Arizona.<sup>199</sup> A South Texas rancher, Presnall Cage, reports having found the remains of over 100 people on his private land.<sup>200</sup> And among the cases in the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line database, there are many in which—in the face of government inaction to reported mortalities—families of the deceased are forced to take on the task of searching for remains themselves.

## ***Overlapping Emergencies & the Escalating Scale of the Disappearance Crisis***

**[Journalist]:** “So probably as we’re sitting here right now, there’s somebody out in the brush who is in their last hour maybe? Close to death or needs help or?”

**[Brooks County Sheriff Martínez]:** “I think it’s probably fair to say there’s more than one person out there.”<sup>201</sup>

“We focus on searching among the unidentified dead and we don’t even have the capacity to do that. Right now we are behind by 150 calls in Arizona alone, and 300 in Texas, some of which we refer to the South Texas Human Rights Center, but they don’t have capacity either.”

– Robin Reineke, Co-Founder of Colibrí Center for Human Rights

## Hidden Deaths on the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range

A large portion of land that lies between ports of entry in southwestern Arizona falls within the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range, a 3,000-square-mile area that is actively used for bombing practice by the US Marines and Air Force. Because of the placement of an immigration enforcement checkpoint approximately 70 miles north of the US–Mexico border on Highway 85, migrating people traveling on foot are effectively funneled into this active bombing range. There is no public access on the majority of the range, so humanitarian volunteers are generally unable to access or offer relief in this massive and deadly migration corridor. Though it is no secret that many people travel on foot through the bombing

**“There are bones all through this range... we are finding what feels like the mass graves of the border.”**

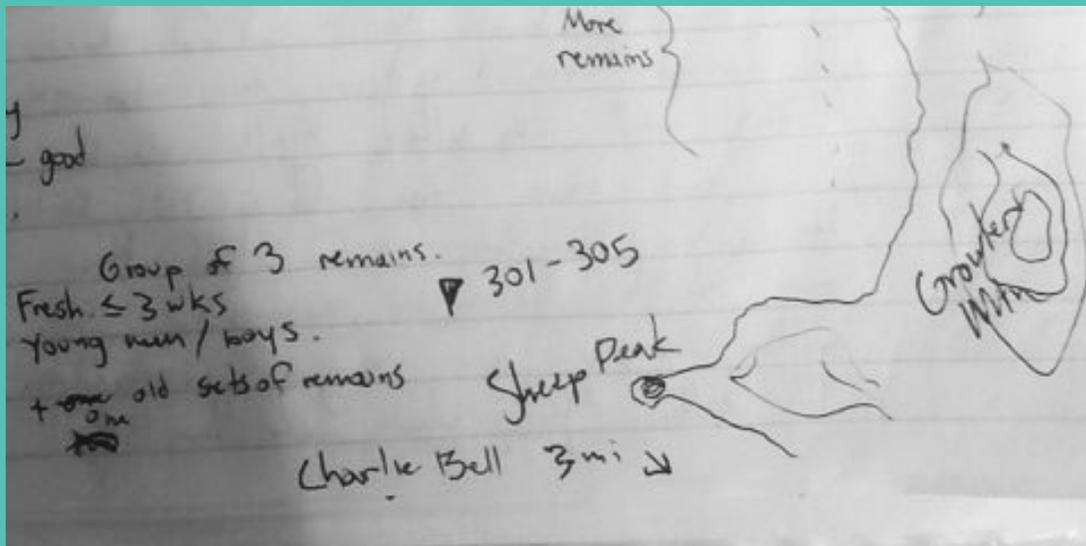
range, and many go missing, there is no known official effort to recover human remains, and no reports on the number of people who die there.

In June of 2017, a community-based search and rescue organization managed to receive permission to search for a reported missing person on the Barry M. Goldwater Range. In the course of looking for one missing person on this 110°F weekend, the search team discovered at least 11 other bodies in just one small area. The original missing person they were searching for was never found. In an account of the search, a volunteer noted finding “5 bodies in 2 hours,” writing in a logbook that they encountered the “remains of a 23-year-old from



Guatemala," "more remains," a "group of three remains less than 3 weeks old, young men/boys," "one old set of remains," and that the search team had encountered "4 migrants taking cover under a palo verde," noting that the migrants "did not notice the remains next to them." The volunteer summarizes the reality of what the search team had encountered, remarking, "there are bones all through this range . . . we are finding what feels like the mass graves of the border."

Humanitarian search teams have not been granted access to the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range since 2017, and the number of recovered remains officially reported from the federal land jurisdiction that year was only four, despite these eleven recoveries. From these statistical omissions we can only conclude that the official accounting of border death does not come close to reflecting the actual number of people who die in this military corridor.



*Humanitarian volunteer logbook notes from a search on the Barry M. Goldwater Bombing Range.*

Without systemic transformation to US border policy, the scale of borderlands death and disappearance will continue to balloon with each day that passes. This was made clear in our review of more than 2,000 audio recordings of 911 calls from people crossing the border in Pima County, Arizona, in which an already staggering volume of emergency calls skyrockets in the summer months. In one exchange between a county dispatcher and a Border Patrol agent, the dispatcher informed the agent, "I've got a lost UDA [sic], have you gotten one? I'm not sure which one this is."<sup>202</sup> The Border Patrol agent responds, exasperated, "We've gotten like 20 today . . . give me one second ma'am, we're getting another one as we speak. The county dispatcher then replies, "Yeah, my partner over here is calling you too."<sup>203</sup> Our research into the missing persons crisis in the borderlands evidences the reality that overwhelming numbers of people find themselves in very similar dire emergency situations on a daily basis.

One indication of the escalating scale of the search, rescue, and recovery crisis in the borderlands is the tendency for emergency cases to quickly grow to include more than one distressed person. While each of the case numbers in the Missing Migrant Crisis Line database represents an individual person, Crisis Line volunteers often discover during the course of an intake or a search that there are other missing people involved in the case.

**Approximately 20% of emergency cases received by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line involved multiple people from a single migrating group deceased or in need of rescue.<sup>204</sup>**

This includes cases where a missing person had reported encountering the bodies of others who had deceased in the course of their journey, cases where a distressed person reported that a traveling companion had died or gone missing, and cases in which a distressed person reported that an injured or ill traveling companion had stayed behind in hopes of being rescued.

In some cases, a person in distress may stay behind, and other members of their group choose to stay with them to help aid in their rescue, even when it means putting oneself at risk by separating from the rest of the group. In one such case, a person remained behind to call 911 for a companion who “could not walk and was vomiting.” In another case, a young man was traveling with a companion and the case notes read, “Rosa fell and was injured, and Daniel stayed behind with her to help her.”<sup>205</sup> A reporting party who calls for rescue on behalf of a sick or injured person may themselves become medically compromised and in need of life-saving assistance, quickly multiplying the number of distressed people in a given area.

**“There were twelve people and five had already died.. One had broken their leg... They have already gone six days without food and now there are seven alive... The girl broke her leg and was very bad off. Her brother went to search for help.”**

Dangerous border enforcement actions, such the continual use of Border Patrol helicopters, vehicles, dogs, and agents on foot to chase people through the remote desert, may result in multiplies missing persons cases, as traveling companions flee in various directions and become separately lost. One group of people crossing the border can thus result in several people lost, alone, and in need of help. For instance, in one case, a man named Tomás crossed the border in Arizona with a group of nine people. After Border Patrol scattered his group, however, he reported being lost with only one other person who was unconscious at the time of his call to family. In another case, notes read that a man “was separated from the group on October 25th after being chased by Border Patrol. Two other people from the group were lost as well.”<sup>206</sup> When Border Patrol disperses migrating groups, it causes many to become separated from their guide and hence lost in a foreign desert. One distressed person who contacted the Crisis Line reported being “with three others” but “without a guide.”<sup>207</sup>

The proliferation of overlapping emergencies caused by Border Patrol policy and practice in the borderlands presents unique challenges to search, rescue, and recovery operations. In the course of conducting search and rescue operations, humanitarian volunteers encounter other people in distress and in need of rescue, or learn of other people who have died in the desert. In one 2015 search conducted on Arizona's Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, for instance, volunteers looking for a reported missing person encountered three others who were lost and in need of medical assistance. In addition to needing rescue and medical care, these migrants also reported having passed "multiple remains in the Kino Peak area" of the West Desert.<sup>208</sup> Those mobilizing to locate persons reported missing frequently end up juggling multiple emergencies as they encounter people in distress and unrecovered human remains.

In some cases, migrants not only discover the bodies of those who have died, but also report members of their group dying while en route. In one case the family of a man named Paolo reported the information that a group of "five entered [the desert], two died, and Paolo stayed behind because he could not walk anymore." Paolo's body was eventually recovered and identified. In another case, the family of César called the Crisis Line to report that their uncle had entered the desert with a group of 12 "Mexicans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans." Case notes read, *"There were twelve people and five had already died . . . One had broken their leg . . . They have already gone six days without food and now there are seven alive . . . The girl broke her leg and was very bad off. Her brother went to search for help."*<sup>209</sup>

In the remote borderlands, emergencies are quickly multiplying in a context in which official emergency systems are discriminatory and largely unresponsive.

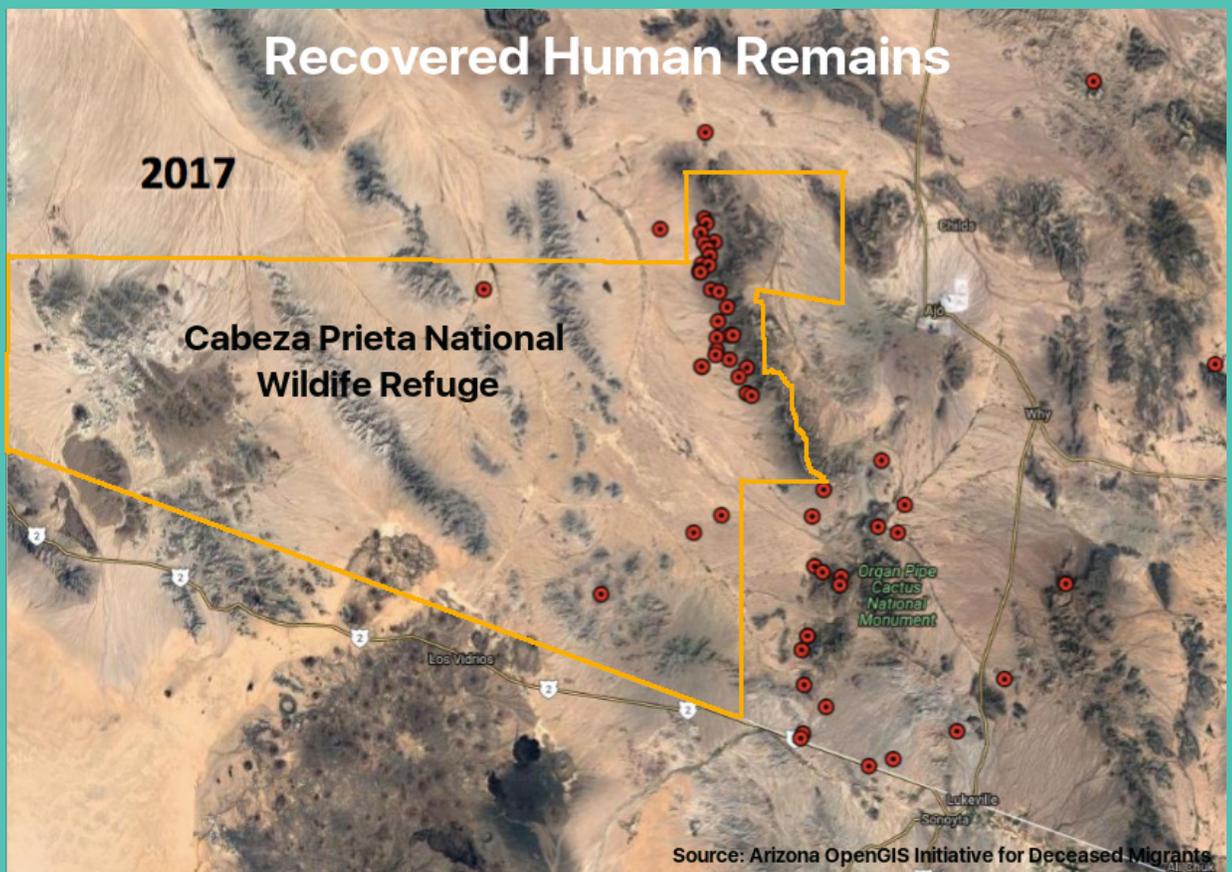
## ***A Trail of Death in Designated Wilderness on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge***

When No More Deaths began to expand humanitarian work into remote areas of the West Desert of Southern Arizona, volunteers immediately began discovering large numbers of human remains. In the first five days of exploration, the bodies of four people were found.<sup>210</sup> In 2017, humanitarian volunteers discovered 27 of the 32 sets of human remains recovered from the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge.<sup>211</sup>

In May of 2019, humanitarian volunteers responded to a search and rescue call on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge for a distressed person who reported vomiting blood and severe foot-blisters. Border Patrol had refused to launch an emergency response. While searching, the volunteers encountered at least four sets of human remains inside the search radius, including skeletal remains that had already been found by volunteers in 2017 and reported to the Pima County Sheriff's Department, but had apparently never been fully recovered.<sup>212</sup>

These remains were not encountered in otherwise untouched lands—Border Patrol maintains a massive enforcement presence across multiple land jurisdictions, including carving roads, installing substations, and deploying roving patrols throughout hundreds of thousands of acres of designated wilderness. Despite the heavy border enforcement presence in the West Desert, massive numbers of deaths remain unreported, uninvestigated, and unrecovered due to the negligence of multiple government agencies and actors.

In recent courtroom testimony, regional US Fish and Wildlife Supervisor Juliette Fernández, responsible for supervising the management of Cabeza Prieta, frankly stated that it is not within her job description to count or track the number of migrants who have died or disappeared on the land her agency oversees.<sup>213</sup> On Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, the deaths of undocumented humans inspire less concern than the survival of endangered pronghorn.





A makeshift shrine in the desert. Photo Credit: No More Deaths

## Conclusion: Left to Die

*"The reality is that there is a human cost to militarizing. To not have a proactive piece in place for missing people in the desert is part of an overall attitude of excessive criminalization. Human rights are left out of the calculation completely. The system is dysfunctional. There's no oversight, it's ineffective, and a waste of resources. It is built to terrorize people."*

– Former Derechos Humanos Crisis Line volunteer

Far from constituting an accidental tragedy, we find that Border Patrol's practice of abandoning people to die in US territory lies at the heart of contemporary border enforcement strategy. On a daily basis, agents employ deadly tactics to chase and scatter people in dangerous and remote terrain, and systematically remove and destroy critical humanitarian supplies left along the border's most deadly migration corridors. In line with the lethal approach to policing the US–Mexico border, Border Patrol has likewise engineered an ineffective emergency response system which positions an abusive enforcement agency to unilaterally respond to emergency calls from the very people their policies are designed to place in peril.

The result of local and state agencies entrusting Border Patrol with emergency response to the missing persons crisis has been disastrous. Border Patrol agents are consistently unwilling to respond effectively, if at all, to reported emergencies. Rather than preventing mortality, we find that the Border Patrol monopoly over emergency search and rescue response in the borderlands has left thousands to die, and has consigned untold numbers of people to disappear on US soil. The families of those missing are left to respond with little to no institutional support or recourse, while also facing insurmountable barriers and interference in their efforts to locate their loved ones. We conclude that the agency's systematic negligence toward emergency reports of undocumented people in distress constitutes a state crime of historic proportions.

Ultimately, search, rescue, and recovery services alone will not end the catastrophic loss of life in the US–Mexico borderlands. Only abolishing the Border Patrol policies and practices that cause people to become lost, missing, and injured in wilderness terrain in the first place will stop death on the southern border.

# Demands & Recommendations

## *Demands*

Adequate search and rescue services alone will never end the humanitarian emergency. Only dismantling the disastrous policy of Prevention Through Deterrence will begin to bring justice for those who seek safety across borders. Therefore our urgent demand is that the US Border Patrol, Customs and Border Protection, and the Department of Homeland Security immediately demilitarize the border and decriminalize migration:

- **Legalize border crossing:** repeal US § Codes 1325 and 1326, and end the system of immigration detention and deportation.
- **Dismantle all border enforcement infrastructure:** remove the checkpoints, tear down the walls, dismantle surveillance technology, and remove armed Border Patrol agents from the field.
- **Disempower, disarm, and ultimately dissolve the US Border Patrol** as the agency responsible for engineering the crisis of death and disappearance in the borderlands.
- **Recognize and accept responsibility** for the humanitarian catastrophe that has directly resulted from disastrous US border security, economic, and foreign policies which compel millions of people to leave their countries of origin and risk their lives.
- **Establish a reparations program** for the families of all people harmed, killed, and disappeared by US Border Patrol policy and discriminatory emergency services.

## *Recommendations*

Until we see comprehensive demilitarization and decriminalization, we advocate for the following immediate interim measures to reduce the ongoing harm caused by US border policy:

**1. The US Border Patrol has monopolized the emergency response to a crisis of their own creation. The agency's enforcement priority will always undermine the genuine provision of humanitarian assistance. Therefore, we do not advocate for the improvement, expansion, or reform of Border Patrol's illegitimate "humanitarian" initiatives. Instead, we call for an immediate end to Border Patrol's role as sole or**

## **primary responder to reported emergencies.**

- We call on government agencies to establish borderlands emergency response systems that are fully separate from immigration enforcement. Such response systems must be timely and well-funded, with a front line of medical responders and trained search and rescue teams who will scan the landscape with an empathetic eye rather than a punitive one.
- At all levels, government agencies must end discriminatory treatment toward undocumented people reporting emergencies in the borderlands. These emergencies must always be treated with universal urgency, eliciting the dedicated and timely mobilization of resources to prevent loss of life.
- Border counties and local law enforcement must not accept any federal funding that is contingent on cooperation with immigration enforcement when responding to search and rescue emergencies.
- Border counties and local law enforcement must immediately cease the discriminatory practice of transferring 911 calls from those perceived to be crossing the border (and their concerned loved ones) to the US Border Patrol.
- Congress must divert funding from law enforcement search and rescue response, including Border Patrol's Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit (BORSTAR), towards non-law-enforcement government search and rescue initiative(s) that do not cooperate with immigration enforcement.
- If responding to a reported emergency, Border Patrol must never act alone. Any Border Patrol involvement in emergency response must be under the direct supervision of local government search and rescue responders who maintain ultimate responsibility for case outcomes. Border Patrol must keep detailed and publicly accessible records of all emergencies reported to them, and all search or rescue efforts they undertake, including the use of resources, the duration of the mobilization, and the outcomes. All such records must be made accessible to the public.
- US Border Patrol must end its deceptive public relations campaign that poses the federal border enforcement agency as a humanitarian relief organization. Such propaganda dangerously covers up the unaddressed search and rescue emergency in the border region from the public and is no substitute for detailed record keeping and transparency.

## **2. Border Patrol impedes, demeans, and threatens family and humanitarian efforts to search for missing people in distress. We therefore demand:**

- Local law enforcement must cooperate fully and compassionately with family and other humanitarian search and rescue efforts, and in no way obligate them to be in contact with border enforcement or immigration authorities.
- US authorities must not deport, imprison, prosecute or otherwise criminalize people responding to life-or-death situations in the borderlands. This includes family members reporting missing loved ones, eyewitnesses who turn themselves into immigration authorities in order to report a traveling companion in need of rescue, and humanitarian volunteers carrying out non-governmental search and rescue operations along the border.

- Humanitarian visas must be guaranteed for family members wishing to enter the United States to search for missing loved ones and/or to visit the location where a loved one died or disappeared. Likewise, humanitarian parole should always be available to eyewitnesses who wish to enter the country to aid in a search effort.
- All people detained by Customs & Border Protection (CBP) must be provided a phone call as a matter of urgency to alert concerned loved ones of their whereabouts. A phone call to family members must be immediate upon locating an individual known to be the subject of a missing person's report.
- Customs & Border Protection must provide families and advocates uncompromised access to all information regarding missing persons cases. This includes providing relevant apprehension coordinates, conducting the hasty search of apprehension databases upon request, permitting families and advocates to directly consult eyewitnesses and reporting parties in CBP custody, and delivering timely confirmation as to whether and with what resources authorities are conducting a field search for a reported distressed person.

**3. Border Patrol policy has disappeared untold numbers in the remote borderlands, leaving the deceased undiscovered, unrecovered, and unidentified. As a consequence, families are left in grief and limbo without closure as to the whereabouts of their loved ones, and the true scale of state crime in the borderlands is unknowable. We therefore demand:**

- All border counties must specifically and thoroughly track the recovered remains of undocumented people crossing the border using inclusive and standardized criteria.
- The federal government must establish initiative(s) independent from border enforcement to centralize and publicize tracking of migration-related recovered human remains borderwide.
- Border counties, in collaboration with consular offices, must conduct thorough investigations of all migration-related deaths in the border region. Reports of any remains discovered in the borderlands must elicit a prompt and meticulous recovery from the field by the designated government agency. Best practices for identification of remains must be followed in every case, including collection of DNA samples where possible. There must be prompt contact with the families of the deceased and timely return of identified remains to families, and dignified burial of those remains that are unidentified.
- Family members contacting government authorities to report a missing loved one who may have deceased must be given the opportunity to give a full forensic interview and submit DNA samples in order to aid in the identification of remains.
- US authorities must establish a government initiative to proactively comb the remote borderlands for those who have perished as a consequence of US border policy, including on designated wilderness areas, bombing ranges, and other federal land jurisdictions.
- Government agencies must fully cooperate with all community and family-led initiatives to search for the remains of the deceased.

# Glossary of Terms

**911:** In the United States, 911 is the official 24-hour emergency response phone line. Dialing 911 connects a caller with a local dispatcher who is then tasked with dispatching the appropriate emergency services to respond.

**Search:** to seek out and locate persons known or thought to be in distress whose location is unknown or unspecified.

**Rescue:** to render aid to persons whose life or health is threatened by circumstances beyond their control and return them to a place of safety. In the context of search and rescue, a rescue refers to a person whose location is known.

**Recovery:** to relocate, under the direction of the statutory authority, a deceased person from the site of death to an appropriate location.

**SAR:** An acronym which refers to either “search and rescue” or “search and recovery.”

**Point Last Seen (PLS):** The most recently known geographical location of a missing person. PLS may be provided by the reporting party or captured through the triangulation of cell phone coordinates.

**Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line/Crisis Line Volunteer:** A crisis line run by the community organization La Coalición de Derechos Humanos, based in Tucson, Arizona. The Crisis Line received reports of migrants whose whereabouts were unknown after crossing the US–Mexico border. Crisis Line volunteers helped families search for their missing loved ones whether they were still lost in the desert, detained in Border Patrol or ICE custody, deported, or deceased.

**Emergency Case:** Calls received by La Coalición de Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line which necessitate an urgent, time-sensitive response. Primarily these were cases in which a reported missing person is possibly still alive and in distress in the desert—possible search and rescue cases—but also includes some cases in which the person is known to have recently passed away, but their remains have not been recovered or identified. The latter constitute emergency cases because the possibility that human remains can be easily recovered and identified dwindles significantly with the passing of time.

**BORSTAR:** An acronym that stands for the “Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit.” BORSTAR is a small special operations unit within US Border Patrol that was created to respond to emergency situations for both agents and civilians in the borderlands.

**Family and Humanitarian SAR:** Search and rescue or search and recovery efforts conducted by non-governmental organizations and/or families. These efforts may be enacted alongside law-enforcement resources, or when government agencies do not mobilize sufficient emergency search and rescue operations.

**JIOC:** An acronym for the Border Patrol “Joint Intelligence and Operations Center” in the Tucson Border Patrol sector. JIOC coordinates internal communications work for Border Patrol. In addition, JIOC functions as a call center that receives 911 call transfers from presumed border crossers contacting Arizona county governments for emergency search and rescue services.

**AMMI:** An acronym standing for the “Arizona Missing Migrant Initiative.” This Border Patrol initiative is an intermediary between families and humanitarian organizations reporting emergency cases.

**Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD):** Border Patrol’s enforcement strategy of heightening the risks of unauthorized entry by pushing migration into remote and rugged terrain. Border Patrol’s 1994 strategy document, which names Prevention Through Deterrence, outlines how building up the enforcement apparatus along easy-to-cross corridors will push migration into “more hostile terrain” so that those crossing the border may find themselves “in mortal danger.”<sup>214</sup>

**Medical Examiner / Office of the Medical Examiner (OME):** In Arizona, the county office that handles postmortem examinations of recovered human remains and investigates and determines the cause of death.

**Disappeared:** For the purpose of this report, the outcome of *disappeared* refers to reported missing persons cases received by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line team in which the person’s whereabouts remain unknown. A case ends in disappearance when families and volunteers are unable to locate the missing person in the field, in the immigration detention and deportation system, in a hospital, or to confirm if they were deceased through the identification of remains in medical examiner’s offices and county morgues.

# Appendix I

## Methodology

### *Missing Migrant Crisis Line Emergency Cases Database*

Our primary data sources for this report were the case notes from 456 emergency cases called into the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line in 2015 and 2016. These calls came primarily from family members reporting a missing person. Missing individuals ranged from 0 to 77 years of age. Half of all callers (50.2%) identified their country of origin as Mexico, while the majority of the remaining calls (39.5%) were from people that identified the nations of the “northern triangle” of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador) as their country of origin. The majority of missing people had either crossed the border in South Texas (47.6%) or Arizona (43.6%), though cases from New Mexico and California are also included. As discussed in the text, nearly 27% (121) of these emergency cases ended in death or disappearance. Additionally, 56% of people were found to have been detained or deported. The remaining outcomes of cases were coded as “hospitalized,”<sup>215</sup> or “outcome unknown” if the family informed the hotline they no longer needed their assistance.

Our team used Dedoose®, an encrypted qualitative and quantitative analytics program, to analyze the details of each emergency case. We created a qualitative codebook of 13 major codes with 34 subcodes. Inter-rater reliability ranged from 76.4% to 92% with the major codes. Due to the low number of cases in each sub-category, we could not test for inter-rater reliability for many of the subcodes. Featured case information and quotes were chosen based on how accurately the information represented the typical and/or the extreme coded excerpts.

### *CBP Press Releases*

Border Patrol press releases were obtained from the official US Customs & Border Protection website (cbp.gov). We searched the “Newsroom” section for articles with “rescue” in the title. We located 157 articles from 2015 and 2016 that included information on Border Patrol involvement in rescues nationwide (including the northern border, southern border, and coastal regions of the United States). Many of these press releases are no longer listed on the cbp.gov website. However, for many of these articles, we can find the archived CBP webpages by entering the exact link. We categorized the press-release content into 14 categories, including mentions of 911 calls, non-911 emergency reporting, search mobilizations, provisions of medical attention, mentions of documentation status, and remoteness.

### *Our position and perspective*

Though diverse in other ways, all authors of this report are US citizens. We are frontline workers in this crisis; our personal experiences in the borderlands have shaped this report and ourselves. We wish to acknowledge, however, the privileged position we write from: as documented US citizens detailing the experiences of generally non-documented migrating people.

We see our unique position as an opportunity to create channels of communication and solidarity between the worlds of impacted and unimpacted populations. However, we strive for a future

when impacted voices speaking to their own experiences are sought out and listened to, and the voices of the privileged are no longer prioritized. We take responsibility for ways we participate in reinforcing this structure. We feel strongly that these stories should be preserved and shared, toward the goal of holding government agencies accountable for the tragedies they have created.

Most of the case details shared in this report are public record, because government authorities were contacted for assistance by families and/or advocates at the time of the reported emergency. We made additional efforts to reach out for permission in cases where personal quotes not already in the public record were used. However, it was not always possible to contact individuals involved in cases documented in this report. All identifying information of individuals who contacted the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line have been changed in this report to maintain privacy.

## Appendix II

# Distress

Details recorded in case notes by Derechos Humanos Crisis Line volunteers reflect the severe distress of those reported missing. The 456 emergency cases analyzed for this report include people in the following life-threatening situations:

- 001: cannot walk
- 002: chest pain, cannot walk, alone and afraid, no water
- 003: lost, no food or water for three days
- 004: no water, no food, cannot walk, traveling companion unconscious
- 005: no water, no food, cannot walk, traveling companion unconscious
- 006: three-to-four days walking, lost
- 007: ill, cannot go on, alone
- 008: four days alone in the desert, disoriented, exhausted
- 009: bad physical condition, lost in the middle of the mountains
- 010: lost and alone
- 011: lost, traveling companion cannot walk, is vomiting
- 012: alone and lost
- 013: blisters on feet, cannot walk
- 014: lost without food or water
- 015: six days walking, no water or food
- 016: lost without water
- 017: fainting, cannot walk
- 018: (unknown)\*
- 019: alone and lost
- 020: lost in the desert
- 021: very ill, alone
- 022: thirsty, exhausted, vomiting, cannot walk
- 023: very ill, many days without food or water
- 024: hurt ankle, cannot walk, lost in the desert
- 025: without food or water, lost in desert, vomiting
- 026: four days walking, injured foot, alone and lost
- 027: (N/A)
- 028: alone and lost, "close to dead"
- 029: without water
- 030: five days in the desert, cannot walk
- 031: five days in the desert, cannot walk
- 032: five days in the desert, cannot walk
- 033: no water, no food, cannot go on, fainting
- 034: elderly, hurt knee
- 035: injured foot, could not walk
- 036: lost and alone
- 037: found deceased
- 038: lost in the desert, five days walking
- 039: chased, lost
- 040: kidnapped, alone in desert
- 041: lost with two children four and five years old, diabetes, injured knee
- 042: no food or water
- 043: fractured foot, lost in the desert
- 044: hurt leg without food or water, alone, exhausted
- 045: died in the desert on a bombing range
- 046: heart attack in the desert, stopped breathing, deceased
- 047: lost without food or water
- 048: seven-year-old traveling with mother, lost
- 049: seven-year-old traveling with mother, lost
- 050: lost and alone
- 051: lost without food or water, three days walking
- 052: lost without food or water, three days walking
- 053: walking for three days without food or water
- 054: walking for three days without food or water
- 055: asthma attack, cannot walk
- 056: vomiting blood
- 057: unable to walk, lost
- 058: lost in a canyon, three days walking
- 059: alone in the desert
- 060: died in brother's arms
- 061: very ill
- 062: without food or water, hurt ankle, fleeing violence
- 063: lost without food or water, fleeing immediate violence
- 064: could not go on
- 065: walking for six days without food or water
- 066: extreme exhaustion
- 067: lost from traveling companions
- 068: lost from traveling companions
- 069: bleeding and dying
- 070: alone in desert without food or water
- 071: alone without food or water, fleeing violence
- 072: unable to walk
- 073: no food or water for at least two days, walking for five
- 074: no food or water
- 075: lost
- 076: lost with companion in grave condition, vomiting and unable to walk
- 077: collapsed, unconscious, no food or water
- 078: lost
- 079: died in the desert
- 080: very ill, alone and lost
- 081: alone, searching for help
- 082: fell ill in the middle of the desert, deceased
- 083: no food or water, lost in the mountains
- 084: alone, lost
- 085: fainted and vomiting
- 086: alone and lost
- 087: walking for nine days, exhausted, lost
- 088: alone, lost
- 089: alone, lost
- 090: alone, lost
- 091: became separated from five-year-old child in the desert
- 092: five-year-old child, became separated from mother in the desert
- 093: lost
- 094: four days without food or water, pregnant
- 095: group of four to six people lost in the desert
- 096: lost and alone
- 097: cannot walk, no water
- 098: lost
- 099: lost, injured, no water
- 100: seventeen-year-old, cannot walk very well
- 101: Twelve days in desert, four days without food or water, injured knee, cannot move
- 102: no water, lost and alone
- 103: no food or water, swollen feet, very dehydrated
- 104: no food or water, lost in the mountains, cannot walk

105: hurt knee, no food, walking three days  
 106: four days walking, assaulted by Border Patrol  
 107: very dehydrated, no water or food  
 108: alone and lost, no water  
 109: Forty-one-year old saying she is dying, alone, no water or food  
 110: lost  
 111: Sixteen-year-old, four days walking, fleeing immediate violence  
 112: no water or food, lost in the mountains  
 113: lost  
 114: Forty-four-year-old, six days in desert, alone, blood pressure problems--she cannot walk  
 115: lost, hungry and cold, three days walking  
 116: lost, six days in desert  
 117: lost without water  
 118: circumstances unknown\*  
 119: circumstances unknown\*  
 120: lost  
 122: lost in the desert, separated from family member  
 123: no food, ill, dizzy, bleeding from nose, four days walking  
 124: lost, no water or food  
 125: vomiting blood, bleeding from nose, alone and lost  
 126: lost, foot pain, no water or food  
 127: fell into a ravine, cannot feel legs  
 128: lost  
 129: chased into a canal, could not swim, drowned  
 130: chased by dogs, tased  
 131: chased by dogs, tased  
 132: no water, could no longer walk  
 133: lost, alone  
 134: very ill, cannot walk, alone in the desert, no water no food  
 135: no water no food for days, lost  
 136: no water no food for days  
 137: lost without water or food  
 138: lost, alone  
 139: lost, alone  
 140: she said she cannot go on  
 141: stayed behind to help injured friend  
 142: injured, cannot walk  
 143: six days without food, cannot go on, tased while being chased  
 144: vomiting blood  
 145: chest pain, very ill, fainted, deceased  
 146: lost  
 147: lost  
 148: lost with young daughter  
 149: lost with mother in desert  
 150: lost for two days  
 151: many days in the desert, lost  
 152: freezing, not moving, 18-years-old  
 153: hallucinating, alone  
 154: alone in remote area  
 155: six-year-old child alone with mother  
 156: alone with small child  
 157: lost, injured leg, has no water  
 158: injured and alone  
 159: had a lot of blisters, difficulty eating and drinking  
 160: lost, could not walk, no food in four days, fell and could not get back up  
 161: walked four nights, no food, no water, vomiting, cannot move  
 162: seventeen-year-old, lost and alone  
 163: alone without water, too tired to go on  
 164: seen lying "as though dead"  
 165: alone, injured feet, no water, could not walk anymore  
 166: alone and lost  
 167: drank contaminated water, reported to have died but remains not found  
 168: no water  
 169: feet injured, walking for six days on active bombing range  
 170: last seen unconscious or deceased in the mountains  
 171: couldn't walk anymore  
 172: had walked for six-to-eight days, fainted twice  
 173: alone without food or water for two days  
 174: could not walk anymore, fainted, tried to get up and fainted again  
 175: injured foot  
 176: sick, cannot walk, no food for three days  
 177: suffering from illness, injured feet, has not eaten or slept  
 178: lost in desert, cannot continue  
 179: walked eight-plus days and could not walk anymore, blisters on feet, alone  
 181: ill, alone, could not walk  
 182: five days walking, blisters covering bottoms of feet, lost without food  
 183: dehydrated, most likely deceased but not recovered  
 184: had diabetes, ill  
 185: could not continue, fainted, last seen lying on ground unconscious  
 186: no food no water, alone, lost  
 187: no water and no food  
 188: injured foot  
 189: lost  
 190: injured foot  
 191: lost, cannot walk  
 192: in very bad shape, cannot walk  
 193: died in the desert  
 194: ill, dizzy, could not continue, alone  
 195: out of water, husband went to look for water  
 196: out of water  
 197: alone with child, very cold  
 198: separated from companions, lost, no water in two days  
 199: separated from companions, lost, no water in two days  
 200: no water or food, heard gunshots  
 201: lost  
 202: no food or water  
 203: lost and alone  
 204: lost and alone  
 205: no water for two days, cannot walk  
 206: alone, injured foot, no food  
 208: six-plus days walking, no water  
 209: no water, lost  
 210: could not continue, nearly unconscious  
 211: lost  
 212: could not cross river, alone  
 213: sick, alone in desert  
 214: very dehydrated and tired, couldn't walk, vomiting, cannot eat  
 215: dehydrated, several days without water and food, can barely move  
 216: died in the desert  
 217: many days without food or water, ill, with someone in worse shape  
 218: lost, no food or water, "could barely move and felt like they were dying"  
 221: alone, no food or water, injured feet  
 222: lost, three days walking, injured foot  
 223: lost in the mountains  
 224: lost and alone, seriously ill, dehydrated, nearly dead  
 225: diabetes, alone, fleeing violence  
 226: no water, could not walk anymore, alone  
 227: very ill, fainted  
 228: sixteen-year-old, alone, very ill  
 229: cannot walk, alone and lost  
 230: extremely sick, dehydrated, no water  
 231: stomach pain, lost  
 232: lost for five days, only had water for a day

233: walked for eight days, cannot walk anymore  
 234: very lost, alone  
 235: walking many days, lost  
 236: lost and alone without food or water  
 237: lost  
 238: lost, alone  
 239: alone in the mountains  
 240: fainting, vomiting  
 241: lost with brother who cannot walk  
 242: cannot walk  
 243: can't go on  
 244: diabetic, cannot walk, without food and water  
 245: lost and alone  
 246: alone in desert  
 247: lost, stomach pain, very dehydrated  
 248: fainted, foaming at the mouth  
 249: very ill, fainted  
 250: fainted and likely died  
 251a: pain in her chest  
 251b: fainted, two days walking  
 252: lost and alone  
 253: drowned in river  
 254: died in the desert  
 255: exhausted, alone and lost  
 256: lost and alone  
 257: lost in desert with others, no water for six days, one person with a broken leg, very ill, five traveling companions already died  
 258: lost  
 259: lost  
 260: lost  
 261: died in desert  
 262: lost and alone, four days in desert  
 263: fractured ankle, lost, alone in mountains  
 264: broken leg  
 265: seventeen-year-old, walked for eight days, companion injured her leg and cannot walk  
 266: fifteen-year-old, walked for eight days, injured leg, cannot walk  
 267: lost and alone in desert  
 268: in the desert, cannot go on  
 269: vomiting, drank cattle tank water  
 270: drank water from cattle tanks  
 271: lost  
 272: died in the desert  
 273: exhausted, lost in desert  
 274: lost  
 275: cannot walk  
 276: chased into canal, drowned  
 277: lost, fell into a ravine, injured, no water, no food, very cold  
 278: lost, no food or water, very cold  
 279: lost, no food or water, very cold  
 280: lost, no food or water, very cold  
 281: lost and alone  
 282: no food or water, five days walking, lost alone  
 283: mother with 13-year-old daughter, mother cannot breathe, guide has broken leg  
 284: lost, no water  
 285: lost, in bad physical shape  
 286: lost, feet badly injured, unable to walk  
 287: lost  
 288: lost  
 289: died in the desert  
 290: sick with a fever, lost in the desert  
 291: died in the desert  
 292: died in the desert  
 293: lost after being scattered by Border Patrol  
 294: lost and alone  
 295: lost and alone  
 296: lost  
 297: lost with badly injured feet  
 298: exhausted and lost in the desert  
 299: died in the desert after two traveling companions already died  
 300: lost in the desert without food or water  
 301: lost  
 302: lost, injured  
 303: disoriented, thirsty and lost alone in the desert  
 304: lost and alone with very little water after being scattered by Border Patrol  
 305: lost for seventeen days, could not continue walking because of leg pain and exhaustion  
 306: lost and alone  
 307: lost  
 308: lost, very fatigued and unable to walk  
 309: lost and alone  
 310: lost without food or water and in very bad physical shape, barely able to walk  
 311: lost after having an asthma attack in the desert  
 312: lost and unable to walk  
 313: lost  
 314: exhausted and unable to continue after six days walking  
 315: lost and dehydrated, unable to walk  
 316: lost and exhausted after running all night  
 317: lost with a very injured foot  
 318: lost after six days of walking  
 319: died in the desert  
 320: scattered from group, lost without food or water  
 321: lost without water and unable to walk anymore  
 322: lost  
 323: lost and unable to continue, two traveling companions died  
 324: died in the desert  
 325: died in the desert  
 326: head injury when scattered by Border Patrol, hadn't eaten in three days, hypoglycemic and exhausted  
 327: lost in the desert without food or water  
 328: lost and alone  
 329: lost in the desert after walking for five days  
 330: vomiting and unable to walk because of a foot and knee injury.  
 331: lost  
 332: died in the desert  
 333: died after being separated from group by Border Patrol  
 334: lost in the desert  
 335: died in the desert  
 336: lost toddler, traveling with mother  
 337: lost in the desert with her one-and-a-half-year-old son  
 338: lost in the desert, alone  
 339: lost and alone  
 340: couldn't continue walking  
 341: couldn't continue walking  
 342: twelve years old, exhausted, sick, drank dirty cattle water  
 343: traveling with 12-year-old son, drank dirty cattle water  
 344: unconscious in the desert  
 345: lost  
 346: could not walk because of fatigue  
 347: lost alone in a mountain  
 348: lost without food or water  
 349: lost without food or water  
 350: lost  
 351: lost in detention with nine-year-old cousin  
 352: lost in detention with 14-year-old cousin  
 353: lost and disoriented  
 354: lost and alone after two traveling companions died  
 355: passed out while being chased  
 356: unable to walk and lost with no food and very little water

357: lost in the desert  
 358: died in the desert  
 359: badly blistered feet, couldn't walk, carried by traveling companions for several hours  
 360: sick and lost in the desert  
 361: passed out in the desert from exhaustion, later died  
 362: fractured an ankle and could no longer walk  
 363: lost and alone, fleeing violence  
 364: lost  
 365: lost without water  
 366: traveling with mother who died on the journey, alone in the desert waiting for help  
 367: lost and alone, vomiting with a hurt knee  
 368: lost without water  
 369: lost without food or water  
 370: died in the desert  
 371: lost with eight others with no food or water  
 372: badly hurt leg, deported still needing medical care, could not walk at all  
 373: exhausted and could not walk  
 374: lost in the desert for a week  
 375: lost alone without water  
 376: exhausted, unable to continue and without water in the desert  
 377: too weak to keep walking  
 378: lost without water, collapsed trying to find help  
 379: tired and unable to walk  
 380: very dehydrated and lost  
 381: lost  
 382: badly injured knee, unable to walk  
 383: lost and traveling with a very injured companion  
 384: badly injured knee, unable to walk  
 385: lost  
 386: lost  
 387: unable to continue walking  
 388: lost  
 389: died in the desert  
 390: lost in the desert with a broken leg  
 391: lost  
 392: lost without food or water  
 393: lost without food or water  
 394: lost and alone after walking for eight days in the desert.  
 395: without food or water for three days, sick and coughing up blood  
 396: lost  
 397: lost without food or water  
 398: lost, in bad medical condition  
 399: lost without food or water  
 400: exhausted and lost  
 401: in bad medical condition  
 402: unable to continue, bad foot injuries and heart pains  
 403: having a bad allergic reaction to a bee sting and lost in the desert  
 404: fell and badly injured both ankles, possibly broke them, unable to walk  
 405: lost and alone  
 406: lost  
 407: died in the desert  
 408: lost  
 409: tired and lost  
 410: lost  
 411: lost in very bad condition  
 412: lost in the desert  
 413: lost  
 414: foot broken in three places, unable to walk and lost in the desert  
 415: exhausted and unable to continue  
 416: lost in the mountains without food or water  
 417: unable to walk because of bad blisters, lost in the desert  
 418: lost in the mountains  
 419: beaten and lost in the desert  
 420: frozen to death  
 421: badly hurt knee, unable to walk and lost in the desert  
 422: lost  
 423: too tired to keep walking, lost and alone in the desert  
 424: unconscious after walking for two days in the heat  
 425: lost in the desert without food or water  
 426: exhausted without food or water waiting for help after son was apprehended  
 427: severe heat exhaustion, convulsing and unable to continue  
 428: reported to have died in the desert, body never recovered  
 429: lost and too tired to continue  
 430: reported to have died in the desert after eight days walking in extreme heat, but never found  
 431: overheated and exhausted from extreme heat, unable to continue and lost in the mountains  
 432: reported to have died in the desert  
 433: dehydrated after walking for over a week, lost in the desert  
 434: very sick and tired, unable to breath  
 435: very sick, fainted  
 436: exhausted and sick, foaming at the mouth  
 437: lost and alone in the desert  
 438: traveling companion witnessed his death, never recovered  
 439: unable to keep walking, sick, exhausted  
 440: very sick, unconscious in the desert  
 442: lost alone in the desert without food or water for three days, very hungry, tired and cold  
 443: lost and alone with a disability in the desert  
 444: unable to walk, out of water and last seen not breathing under a tree  
 445: unable to walk, foaming at the mouth, lost and alone in the desert  
 446: unresponsive on the ground, unable to continue walking  
 447: last seen falling into a river by a traveling companion  
 448: unable to continue walking, lost in the desert  
 449: lost and alone in bad medical condition  
 450: lost and alone, feeling as though she was going to faint  
 451: lost and sick, drank water from a cattle tank, bad blisters on feet  
 452: unable to walk, foaming at the mouth and in very bad health  
 453: lost and alone with a bad fever  
 454: had a heart attack and died crossing in the desert  
 455: lost and dehydrated without food or water  
 456: lost and suffering from diabetic shock  
 457: unable to continue walking, lost in the desert

## Appendix III

# Cell Phones

For those experiencing emergencies in remote areas, access to a cell phone can be the difference between life and death. In 35% of the 456 of emergency cases fielded by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line, it was specifically noted that a distressed person experienced a cell-phone related barrier to accessing rescue.<sup>216</sup> Such barriers to contacting emergency services included the missing person not having a cell phone with them at all, being in a remote area without cell-phone reception, and/or losing battery life.

**Such barriers to using a cell phone to access rescue often prove deadly. In emergency cases in which there was a cell phone related barrier to accessing rescue, 20% ended in the death or disappearance of the distressed person.**

### Exemplary Cases of Cell Phone-Related Barriers:

- Eduardo sent a text to his mother saying he was lost and alone after his group was scattered by Border Patrol. He told her his phone was about to die. His mother immediately began making calls to seek help, but Eduardo's phone died before anyone was able to make contact again. Eduardo remains disappeared. (Case #449)
- Twenty-five-year-old Eddy was found deceased. His case notes read "no cell phone." (Case #185)
- Thirty-six-year-old Miguel Ángel was last seen badly injured somewhere in Texas. His case notes read, "he had a phone without battery." Miguel Ángel was later found deceased. (Case #035)
- Twenty-year-old Juan Carlos fell ill and became lost in the West Desert of Southern Arizona. He called 911 in the middle of the night from his Mexican cell phone and he also called his parents. Case notes read, "then his phone stopped answering, it appeared to be out of battery." After his family and humanitarians mobilized searches of the area in the absence of a government response, Juan Carlos' body was discovered. (Case #082)
- Daniel went missing in Texas after walking through the area north of El Paso/Juarez. Case notes read, "around 4am he had made a final phone call to his wife, but then his phone died." Daniel was never found. (Case #165)
- Fifty-five-year-old Jorge disappeared somewhere on the Tohono O'odham Reservation in Southern Arizona. Crisis Line volunteers noted that his mother "did not know if Jorge called 911. She was going to ask him when the call dropped. He was never heard from again." (Case #455)

### *Prohibitive Expense*

For many people, purchasing a cell phone is prohibitively expensive.<sup>217</sup> Numerous cases from the Crisis Line note that a reported missing person "did not bring cell phone."<sup>218</sup> Some who migrate lack the financial resources to purchase even the most basic supplies for the journey into the US, such as adequate food or drinking water, let alone a cellular phone. For others, they are only able to purchase low-quality phones with coverage only in Mexico, which effectively limits their functionality in US territory to making 911 calls and hence they have no ability to contact loved ones in dire scenarios.

## *Lack of Service*

Much of the remote areas of the borderlands between ports of entry have little to no cell-phone coverage; many people travel through backcountry regions that are dozens of miles from the closest cell-phone tower.<sup>219</sup> In one case, 30-year-old José Luis was reported missing by a traveling companion after being chased by Border Patrol in the Arizona desert. José Luis had carried a cell phone with him on the journey, but when his wife attempted to call, she would only hear a recording saying that “the phone is not in an available service area.”<sup>220</sup> In another case, 31-year-old Cesar became ill and stayed behind his group in the remote Growler Valley in Southern Arizona. Case notes read that Cesar had attempted to call 911, but “the call kept dropping.” Cesar was never found.<sup>221</sup> Scant service in these remote migration corridors thus deeply compromises one’s ability to contact emergency assistance.

## *Lack of Battery Life*

Cell phone batteries drain quickly when searching for meager signal in remote areas, and in the desert, most people have no way of charging their phone battery. There are many cases in the database that mention that a missing person’s cell-phone had run out of battery, making continued communication impossible. Case notes read, for example, “tiene celular sin pilas” (had a cell phone without battery), “se le descargo el teléfono” (the phone ran out of charge), “se quedó sin batería en su celular” (they were left without battery in their cell phone), or “ya se le termino la batería del teléfono” (the phone’s battery has run out).<sup>222</sup> Other cases simply state that the missing person was no longer answering their phone, or calls went straight to voicemail.

## *Failure of 911 Call-Tracing Technology*

A serious challenge to emergency response in remote areas is determining a person’s location with enough accuracy to make a search and rescue mobilization possible. Emergency (911) dispatchers have access to call-tracing technology that can derive GPS coordinates from the devices of distressed callers—for this reason, Crisis Line volunteers advise that those lost in the desert contact 911 immediately if they still have cell battery and cell service. However, the accuracy of such call-tracing by county dispatchers can also be highly imperfect, especially when emergency calls come in from remote areas. Where cellular coverage is sparse and there are few cell towers, it can be extremely difficult to derive useful locational information from a caller’s cell phone.

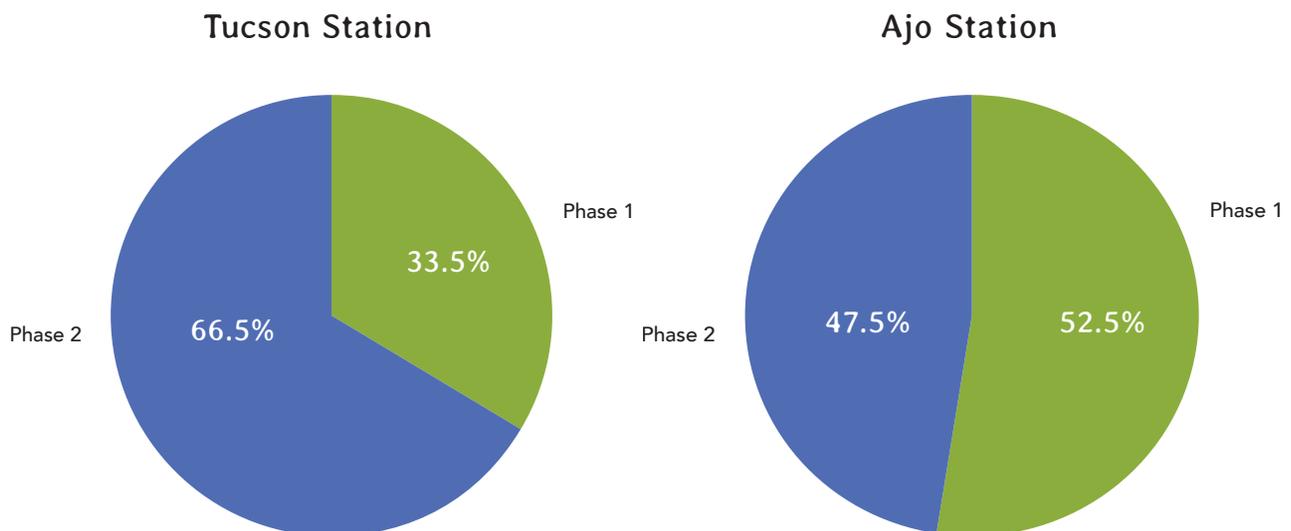
Cell-phone call tracing produces what are called “Phase 1” or “Phase 2” coordinates, which refers to the number of cell phone towers with which a device is able to connect. In Phase 1 calls, a cell phone is only able to reach one area tower, and produces only the GPS coordinates of the location of that single tower, which may be far away from the caller. In addition to the coordinates, 911 dispatchers receive a range of accuracy, or “confidence factor” for the caller’s location. In our review of over 2,000 911 calls from people crossing the border in Pima County, **the average range of accuracy for Phase 1 coordinates in the calls we analyzed was 21,813 meters, or approximately 13.5 miles.** However, there were emergency-call-produced Phase 1 coordinates that had more than a 100,000 meter margin of error, meaning that the potential search radius for the distressed person was 60+ miles.

When 911 dispatch is only able to derive Phase 1 coordinates from a distress call, the likelihood

of rescue is seriously diminished, even for those who are able to contact 911. Such calls are often treated as futile by Border Patrol agents. For example, in one call recording, a Border Patrol agent was informed by 911 dispatch of a distressed caller with highly inaccurate Phase 1 coordinates. The agent laughed and said, “oh, this guy’s gonna stay lost.”<sup>223</sup>

Phase 2 coordinates are produced when a caller’s cell phone is able to connect with at least two cell towers. Thus, it is possible to triangulate the caller’s location with a high degree of accuracy—in some cases, within 20 feet. A caller’s ability to be rescued or even to receive any search or rescue mobilization whatsoever is greatly increased by their call to 911 producing Phase 2 coordinates. For example, in a series of emergency calls on March 27, 2017 from three lost people in distress, Pima County 911 dispatch was initially only able to derive Phase 1 GPS coordinates, with a margin of error of 103,526 meters (nearly 65 miles). In this case, however, the Pima County dispatcher stayed on the line and recycled the call-tracing technology, eventually producing Phase 2 coordinates with an accuracy of 80 meters (~262 feet). Within an instant, the 65-mile search radius shrunk to a matter of feet, transforming a nearly impossible search into a pinpointed rescue mission.

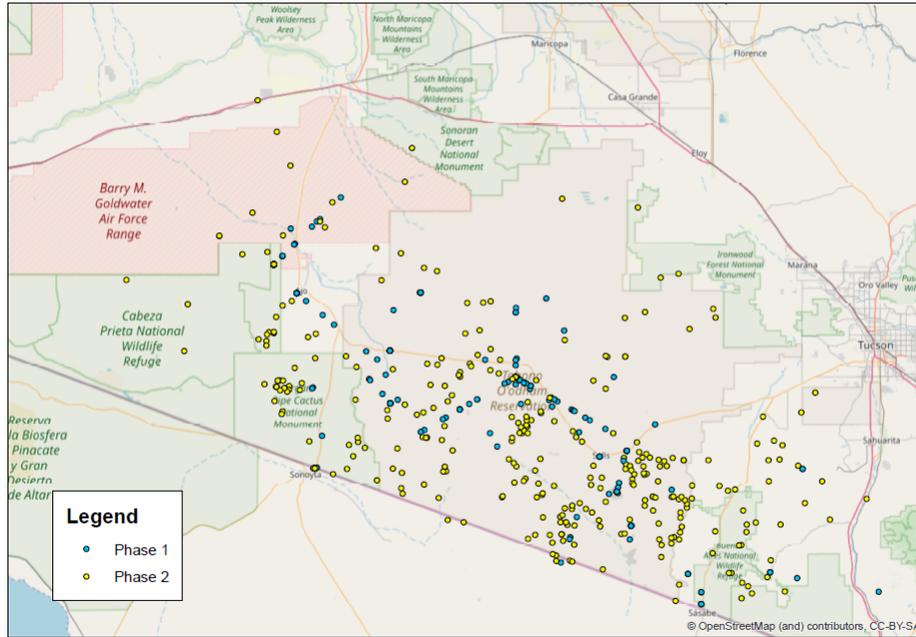
As a result of US border policy, people are typically crossing the border through extremely remote areas. Because there are fewer cell towers, it is less likely that calls to 911 will produce Phase 2 coordinates in these remote areas. A caller’s phone may be able to make contact with one tower—enough to dial 911—but there may be no other cell towers in the area to aid with the triangulation.



Other factors affecting the triangulation of a distress call include the quality of the device a caller is using, and whether or not the caller has a US phone plan. Those traveling from Central America, for example, may only be able to purchase a lower-cost flip-phone, or may not be able to purchase a plan for Mexico or the United States. These less advanced phones are more likely to only produce inexact Phase 1 coordinates. For example, in one 911 call from 2018, a Border Patrol agent states “this caller is from Guatemala, and those phones usually never get Phase 2.”<sup>224</sup> In audio recordings, Pima County 911 dispatchers can be heard saying that “nicer” phones are more likely to produce Phase 2 coordinates, while older phones are more likely to only transmit

Phase 1 data. It follows that relative access to resources, class status, and even country of origin can determine a person's chance of being rescued once lost in the US borderlands.

### 911 CALLS



25 Miles

Map of coordinates of 911 calls received by Pima County From June 2016 - July 2018. Many of the Phase 1 coordinates are simply of a cell phone tower, and thus may overlap on a single location.

## Appendix IV

# Emergency Cases Response and Search and Rescue Intake

The following is the intake form used by Crisis Line volunteers when dealing with an emergency case. Crisis Line volunteers completed this form, taking all possible measures to collect information about a missing person's location to determine if a search and rescue was possible. We hope that this form can serve as a tool for families and communities encountering potential emergencies.

**NA:**

Not Applicable to this case

*No aplica en este caso*

**NK/NS:**

Not known (was asked)

*No Sabe (apunte la persona que respondió así para saber si hay que llamar a otro familiar que sí sabe)*

**Blank space/espacio en blanco:**

Hasn't been asked

*No se ha preguntado*

**General Information:**

Fill out every time  
**Información general:**  
para llenar cada vez

**Search in Detention information**

*Información para la búsqueda en detención*

**Search and Rescue/Recovery information**

(can also be helpful for forensics or detention search  
**Búsqueda y Rescate/Recuperación**  
(también ayuda con la información forense y búsqueda en detención)

**Forensic Search Information**

(abbreviated)  
**Información forense**  
(también ayuda con búsqueda y rescate)

## A. Information of Caller

Name of person calling  
*Nombre de la persona llamando*

Relationship to missing person  
*Relación a la persona desaparecida*

Telephone Number  
*Número de teléfono*

Email  
*Correo electrónico*

Spanish, English, or other language?  
*Español, inglés, u otro idioma?*

Secondary point of contact  
*Segundo Contacto*

Relationship to missing person  
*Relación*

Telephone Number  
*Número de teléfono*

Email  
*Correo electrónico*

Spanish, English, or other language?  
*Idioma?*

Are they already in contact with  
other organizations?  
*Está en contacto con otras  
organizaciones? Nombres?*

Have they already done a forensic  
interview?  
*Ha hecho una entrevista forense?*

## B. Information of the missing person

Complete name of missing person  
*Cuál es el nombre completo de la persona desaparecida?*

Do they use a nickname or other name?  
*Apodo/Cómo se presenta?*

Date of Birth  
*Fecha de nacimiento?*

Age  
*Edad?*

Are they a minor?  
*¿Es menor de edad?*

Place of Birth (State, Country)  
*Lugar de Nacimiento (Estado, País)*

Basic Information about what happened / *Información muy básica de lo que pasó:*

Last known communication with someone, by telephone or in person. With who? When? Where? What was said? / *Última comunicación por teléfono o en persona (cuándo, en dónde, con quién) :*

Number and Company of cell phone, if they have one  
*Número y compañía de celular, si tiene*

They speak Spanish, English or another language?  
*Habla español, inglés, idioma indígena, u otro idioma?*

Is it possible that this person might still answer their phone? Try to get in contact with them immediately. Ask if they have called 911, make sure they know that only 911 services can trace their call location. They should also understand that a call to 911 means a call to Border Patrol. Advise them to conserve their battery life by turning off the phone during long periods between calls, especially if the signal is low. Gather all possible information about their location. Only ask relevant questions. If you call, and no one answers it may be because the telephone is turned off. You can send a text message with this information for them to see when they turn on their phone.

¿Es posible que esta persona siga contestando su teléfono? Trate de ponerse en contacto con él o ella inmediatamente. Pregúntele si ya ha llamado al 911, asegúrese de que sepa que sólo 911 puede rastrear la ubicación de su llamada. Pídale que no agote la pila del celular y que lo apague entre llamadas, especialmente si la señal es mínima. Si no quiere llamar al 911, obtenga toda la información que pueda rápidamente sobre su ubicación. Sólo haga preguntas relevantes. Si nadie contesta, pero si es posible que es solo porque el celular esté apagado, envíele un mensaje de texto. Si la persona llega a hablar con 911, es muy probable que se va a llamar a la patrulla fronteriza.

## C. For a Search in the Detention

1. Any plan to use false information?  
Name, date of birth, nationality.  
*¿Tenía un plan de usar un nombre falso? (Nombre, fecha de nacimiento, sexo, nacionalidad)*

2. Have they been deported from the US before?  
*¿Esta persona ha sido deportada antes de los EEUU?*  
If yes, dates of their previous deportations:  
*Si es así, fechas de deportaciones previas:*

3. Any other time they were arrested by Border Patrol or Police while within the United States?  
*¿Alguna (otra) vez fue él/ella arrestado/arrestada por los cuerpos policiales o inmigración en Estados Unidos?*

## C. For a Search in the Detention (Cont'd)

Try to get the following information for any incident in the US that ended up with them in prison or detention.

*Trate de obtener la siguiente información para cualquier incidente en los EEUU que terminó con ellos en prisión o detención.*

Arrested by which agency?  
*Arrestado por cual agencia?*

Date and place of arrest  
*Fecha y lugar del arresto*

How was their name recorded?  
*¿Cómo se registró su nombre?*

In what prison or detention center were they held?  
*¿En qué prisión o centro de detención fueron detenidos?*

Any past identification numbers assigned to them, A number or BOP number?  
*¿Algún número de identificación asignado a ellos en el pasado, un número A o un número BOP?*


## D. Medical Condition during final communication

### *Condición médica la última vez que tuvieron comunicación*

1. In General  
*En general*

2. Were they conscious?  
*¿Inconsciente?*

3. Were they able to walk?  
*¿Podía caminar?*

4. Were they sick or injured?  
*¿Enfermo o lastimado?*

5. When was the last time they drank water? Did they have water?  
*¿La última vez que bebió agua?  
¿Tenía agua?*

6. When was the last time they ate food? Did they have food?  
*¿La última vez que comió? ¿Tenía comida?*

7. Any pre-existing medical conditions? (Disability, Pregnancy, Diabetes etc...)  
*¿Condiciones médicas preexistentes? ¿Discapacitado o Embarazada?*

8. Were they taking medications? Did they have them with them?

## E. General Information About the Journey

1. How many were in the group?  
*¿Cuántas personas en el grupo?*

2. Was anyone else left behind?  
*¿Hubo alguien más que se quedó atrás?*

3. Was anyone in the group apprehended?  
*¿Hubo en el grupo alguien que fuera aprehendido?*

4. Were there friends or family of this person in the group?  
*¿Había amigos o familiares viajando con él/ella?*

5. Is there anyone in the group the family is in contact with?  
(Try to get in contact with this person immediately, directly if they are willing or through the family, to see if they can provide further information)  
*¿Había alguien en el grupo con quien la familia tenga contacto?  
(Hay que ponerse en contacto con esa persona inmediatamente porque va a tener más información acerca del viaje de la persona perdida)*

6. Were they traveling with a guide?  
Is the family still in contact with the guide?  
*¿Viajó él/ella con un coyote? ¿Se puede poner en contacto?*

7. When this person was left behind, did they mention what they planned to do next?  
*¿Cuando se quedó, dijo qué haría después?*

8. Did they ever try to call 911? /  
*¿Alguna vez intentó llamar 9-11?*

## F. More Detailed Information about the Journey

### *Información detallada del viaje*

#### **The first part *La Primera Parte***

1. Where did the group begin?  
*¿Dónde empezó el grupo?*
2. Did they leave this place on foot or in a car?  
*¿Salió de ese lugar a pie o en carro?*
3. If they started from a town, towards what side did they travel or drive? (Towards the right or left when looking northward towards the border?)  
*Si en carro, ¿hacia qué dirección? (derecha, izquierda cuando se ve la línea)*
4. How much time did they travel in a car or spend walking before they crossed the line?  
*¿Cuánto tiempo viajó en carro hasta empezar a caminar?*
5. If in a car, what kind of road was it? Paved or dirt?  
*¿Qué tipo de calle fue? (Cómo se sentía el camino si no se podía ver)*
6. Describe the moment they crossed the line, what was the area like? What was the fence like?  
*Describe el momento que cruzó la línea o el río. ¿Cómo parecía el área?*


#### **Narrative of the walk**

Initially, It is important to let the person speak without too many interruptions or questions. After they finish, pass back over the story with them and ask for further details about anything mentioned. Use the resource page at the end of this intake to assist in creating a detailed narrative.

#### **La narrativa del camino**

Es importante que usted deje que la persona le cuente la historia sin demasiadas interrupciones o preguntas. Después de que termine, vuelva a repasar la historia con ellos y pida todos los detalles acerca de cada cosa mencionada. Utilice la página de preguntas y mensajes al final de este formulario para asegurarse de que ellos no se olviden nada.

## F. More Detailed Information about the Journey (Cont'd)

### *Información detallada del viaje*

Describe the journey after crossing the line to the point last seen for the missing person

*Describe el viaje después de que cruzó la línea hasta el lugar donde se vio la última vez*

Describe the Point Last Seen or what they person saw during their final communication: Where they were left.

*El lugar donde se le vio por última vez o el lugar de la última comunicación*

Describe the area exactly, with as many details as possible. Ask in what direction each landmark lay in, you can use the face of a clock if that feels clarifying, with north at 12 o'clock. Try to determine distances (was it as far away as the length of a soccer field? Was it one city block away? Did it appear far in the distance, like a day or more's walk?) Try to determine the relationship each notable feature had to the others. (Which was the closest? Which was the furthest? Were there two features in the same direction, or in opposite directions from each other?)

*Describe el lugar exacto, con todos de los detalles que tenga. Pregunte en qué dirección se encontraban los puntos/lugares sobresalientes (es decir hacia el norte, a la derecha o a la izquierda?) Consiga distancias aproximadas (ofrecer ejemplos: ¿Como la distancia de una cancha de fútbol, o la distancia de una o más cuadras?). Haga referencia con los puntos que sobresalen y su relación entre ellos (¿lo que estaba el más cercano? Lo que se encuentra más alejado? Estaban dos cosas en el mismo sentido o en lados opuestos?)*

## F. More Detailed Information about the Journey (Cont'd)

### *Información detallada del viaje*

**For a report from someone traveling with the missing person, from the Point Last Seen to a recognizable destination.**

***Desde el lugar donde se vio por última vez hasta el destino, punto de detención, o punto de contacto de alguien que se encontró en camino que hace el reporte.***

All details of the walk until a point such as the location of arrest, identifiable cross streets or addresses. If the person arrived at a pick-up point that was unidentifiable, ask how long they drove and what was the condition of the road before arriving at a recognizable destination.

*Si la persona llegó a los EE.UU., pregunte por los detalles de la caminata hasta su punto de recogida, y a continuación, detalles del viaje en coche después (tiempo de conducción, velocidad, señales se podían ver) hasta un punto de destino como el nombre de la ciudad.*

## G. Clothing a Physical Description

### *Vestimenta y Descripción Física*

1. Clothing (including all details such as sizes, brands and colors)  
*Ropa (siempre incluya tamaños, marcas, y colores si se conocen)*

2. Shoes  
*Calzado*

3. Jewelry  
*Joyería*

4. Glasses  
*Lentes de Cualquier Tipo*

5. Identification or Documents they might have carried with them  
*Identificación o documentos*

6. Backpack and its contents  
*Mochila y su contenido*

## G. Clothing a Physical Description (Cont'd)

### *Vestimenta y Descripción Física*

7. Height  
*Estatura*

8. Weight  
*Peso*

9. Skin Color  
*Color de piel*

10. Hair Color and Style  
*Color y estilo de cabello*

11. Facial Hair  
*Vello facial*

12. Eye Color  
*Color de ojos*

13. Any tattoos or physical  
deformities  
*Tatuajes o deformidades*

14. Any other distinct physical traits  
*Otros rasgos físicos distintos*

## L. Permissions

### Permisos

Volunteer, please only ask for permission for steps that are feasible for the case.  
Voluntario, por favor solo solicite permiso para los pasos que sean factibles para este caso.

#### California

For a person possibly deceased in California, ask permission to share with Colibri, Consulado, and OMEs.

*Para una persona posiblemente fallecida en California, solicite permiso a compartir con Colibri, Consulado, y OMEs.*

For a Search and Rescue case in California, ask permission to share with Police, CBP, BORSTAR, Consulado, and other community groups (Aguilas, Armadillos, etc)

*Para un caso de Búsqueda y Rescate en California, solicite permiso a compartir con Policía, CBP, BORSTAR, Consulado, y otros grupos comunitarios (Águilas, Armadillos, etc)*

#### Arizona

For a person possibly deceased in Arizona, send the basic case info only to Colibri. No intake needed.

*Para una persona posiblemente fallecida en Arizona, envíe solo la información básica a Colibri. No necesitas hacer una entrevista.*

For a Search And Rescue in Arizona, ask for permission to share with Police, CBP, BORSTAR, Consulado, and No Mas Muertes.

*Para un caso de Búsqueda y Rescate en California, solicite permiso a compartir con Policía, CBP, BORSTAR, Consulado, y otros grupos comunitarios (No Más Muertes, Águilas, Armadillos, etc)*

#### New Mexico / Nuevo Mexico

For a person possibly deceased in New Mexico, ask permission to share with Colibri, Consulado, and OMEs.

*Para una persona posiblemente fallecida en Nuevo Mexico, solicite permiso a compartir con Colibri, Consulado, y OMEs.*

For a Search And Rescue in New Mexico, ask for permission to share with Police, CBP, BORSTAR, Consulado, and No Mas Muertes.

*Para un caso de Búsqueda y Rescate en California, solicite permiso a compartir con Policía, CBP, BORSTAR, Consulado, y No Más Muertes*

## L. Permissions (Cont'd)

### Permisos

#### Texas

For a person possibly deceased in Texas, ask permission to share with OMEs, STHRC,<sup>225</sup> and NAMUS.

*Para una persona posiblemente fallecida en Texas, solicite permiso a compartir con OMEs, STHRC, y NAMUS.*

For a Search and Rescue in Texas, ask for permission to share with Police, CBP, BORSTAR, Consulado, and STHRC

*Para un caso de Búsqueda y Rescate en Texas, solicite permiso a compartir con Policía, CBP, BORSTAR, Consulado, y STHRC.*

Permission given, for which steps, by who?  
*Permiso dado, por cuáles pasos, de parte de quien?*

Permission to share the contact information of the family? With who?  
*Permiso compartir la información de contacto del familiar? Con quien?*

## Questions to make a better narrative

### Preguntas que hacer para una mejor narrativa:

- **In a car:** If you couldn't see, could you determine based off of the sensation of the road if it was a freeway or highway? If you could see, did you see any signs, towns, or significant things?
- **On foot:** When did the group walk and when did they rest. Did they walk at a quick pace or more slowly?
- **En un carro:** Si no podían ver ¿la sensación de la carretera, viajan rápido como en una carretera o freeway? Si podían ver ¿Letreros, pueblos, cosas significantes?
- **En pie:** ¿Cuánto caminó el grupo y cuánto descansó? ¿Caminó a un ritmo constante o más lento?

## Terrain

### El terreno

- **Flat:** Were there mountains in the distance? In what direction? How did they look? (like mesas, pointy, rocky, bald, with trees, hills, with a pass in the middle, with canyons?)

**Llano:** *¿Montañas en la distancia? ¿En qué dirección? ¿Cómo se veían? (mesa, pico, picacho, peñasco, pelón, sierra, loma, con puerto, con rincón)*

- **Mountainous:** Where you in a canyon or up on a ridgeline? Where the mountains steep, did you have to climb rocks or small cliffs? Was there water in the canyons? From high points, what could you see?

**Montañoso:** *¿en cañones, en la línea de cresta, tuvo que escalar montañas/rocas, había montañas en la distancia?*

- **Vegetation:** Trees, shrubs, grasses or none? Were there cactus? (Saguaro, Cholla, Nopal?), Palo Verdes? Mesquites? Palm Trees? Pine Trees? Creosote?

**Vegetación:** *¿Saguaros, Palo Verde, Mesquite, Palmas, Carrizo?*

**Always ask: toward what side, at what distance and in what order did they pass described features.**

**Siempre pregunta: a qué lado, a qué distancia y en qué orden vio/pasó esas cosas**

- **Mountains or landmarks** with a known name

**Montañas o puntos** de referencia con nombre

- **Paved Roads:** How many lanes? Painted? With a wide or narrow shoulder? Very used? Signs?

**Calles pavimentadas:** *¿cuántos carriles, pintada, tiene arcén ancho, muy usado, letreros, nombres?*

- **Dirt Roads:** Wide or narrow? Rocky or sandy or gravel? A road or a 4x4 track?

**Calles de tierra:** *¿ancho o estrecho, muy usado, caminó por motos, de tierra o ripio?*

- **Ranches or Houses:** How many buildings? Color of walls? Color of roof? Abandoned or with people? Animals? Vehicles? Windmills? Water tanks? Corrales? Lights? Type of fence? Garden or crop fields?

**Ranchos o casas:** *¿Cuántos edificios, color de los paredes, color del techo, abandonado o alguien en casa, animales, vehículos, molinos, piletas o tanques, corrales, luces, tipo de cerca, milpa?*

- **Water stations:** Gallons on the ground or gallons in a barrel, and how many were there? Water in a barrel with a tap? Water in a large tank with a tap? Food in a bucket with socks or blankets? Any type of sign or written information? A flag?

**Estaciones de agua:** *¿Galones en el suelo, galones en un barril, cuántos había? ¿agua en un barril con un grifo? ¿Comida, una cubeta, o cobijas? ¿Números, letreros o algo escrito? ¿Bandera?*

- **Towers:** Phone towers? Surveillance towers? Border Patrol Beacons? Others?  
**Torres:** ¿de celular, de vigilancia de la migra, de rescate de la migra, otros?
- **Telephone Posts:** Wood or metal? One or two or many cables?  
**Postes de teléfono:** ¿de madera o de metal, uno o dos cables?
- **Cow tanks:** What color, above ground or in ground, was there a corral, was there a windmill? How many, what size, dirty or cleaner, any other characteristics?  
**Tanque de vacas:** ¿que color, había corral, había molino? Cuantos, de que tamaño, sucio y limpio, otros característicos?
- **Other Water:** A natural place of seasonal water pooling or a small lake? With a dam?  
**Otro agua:** ¿Pozo o tinaja (lugar natural de agua de un manantial o de lluvia), pileta o lago? ¿Con una presa?
- **Windmills:** Working, complete (with all blades) or broken, generator or solar panels, attached to a cow tank or pond, any signage or written information?  
**Molinos o papalotes:** ¿Funciona, completo (con todas las aletas) o roto, generador o paneles de sol, tanque de ganado o estanque/pileta o los dos, tiene un abrevadero, tiene un número?
- **Fences:** Barbed wire, pig wire, wooden? At what height?  
**Cercas o verjas:** ¿Tipo de púas, de cuerdas, de madera? ¿A qué altura?
- **Lights in the distance:** Of a town, a mine, a factory, house?  
**Luces en la distancia:** ¿De pueblo, mina, fábrica, casa?
- **Riverbeds:** Wide or narrow, dry, or swampy?  
Arroyos, ríos secos, ciénagas
- **Shrines**  
Capillas o santuarios
- **Factories:** Machinery, warehouses, tanks, trucks, shipping containers?  
Fábricas: ¿Máquinas, bodegas, estanque, camiones, contenedores de transporte?
- **Mines:** Active, with workers, trucks, tanks, tailing ponds, cranes?  
**Minas:** ¿Activa, con trabajadores, camiones, estanques o lagos, grullas?
- **Pipes or Gaslines**  
Tubería o gasoducto
- **Signage:** Names, street numbers, mile markers, danger or warning signs, trespassing signs?  
**Letreros, carteles, señales:** ¿Nombres, números de calles, señales de advertencia de peligro (de gasas o minas)?

## Appendix V

# Community groups responding to the missing persons crisis

La Coalición de Derechos Humanos coordinated with a number of different community-based organizations working along the US-Mexico border to address the missing persons crisis. The following list, by no means exhaustive, describes some of the non-governmental organizations that also formed in response to crisis of death and disappearance in the borderzone:

**Águilas del Desierto** is a volunteer organization founded in San Diego in 2012. They receive reports of migrants who have disappeared and enact search and rescues and search and recovery missions. The founding member of Águilas del Desierto personally recovered the remains of his brother and cousin in the Sonoran Desert in Arizona after Border Patrol declined to search for them.

**Armadillos Búsqueda y Rescate** is a non-governmental search and rescue/recovery organization based in southern California and founded in 2017. Volunteers receive reports of migrants who have disappeared crossing the US–Mexico border and enact search and rescue or search and recovery missions throughout the borderlands.

**The Colibrí Center for Human Rights** is an organization based in Tucson that works to address the missing persons crisis in the southwest borderlands. The Colibrí Center receives reports of missing migrants and focuses their searching among remains that have been recovered, collecting DNA samples from families of the disappeared and working to identify the dead. The Colibrí Center also organizes a network of families who have suffered the loss of someone who attempted to cross the border to share their stories and provide mutual support.

**No More Deaths/No Más Muertes** provides humanitarian aid and conducts search and rescue in the Southern Arizona borderlands. They operate a hotline to receive reports of missing persons and coordinate search and rescue efforts in Southern Arizona where possible. No More Deaths also runs a humanitarian aid camp in the desert and provides water, food, and medical care to people crossing through the desert.

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# Endnotes

1 See, for example: Priscilla Alvarez, "[What the Waiting List for Legal Residency Actually Looks Like](#)," *The Atlantic*, September 21, 2017. Successfully winning asylum in the United States has long been a difficult and often impossible undertaking. As the Trump administration seeks to further eliminate pathways to asylum at the southern border, this method of legal entry has become even more impractical. See, for example: Molly O'Toole, "[Trump moves to eliminate nearly all asylum claims at U.S. southern border](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 2019.

2 US Border Patrol, "[Border Patrol Strategic Plan: 1994 and Beyond](#)," July 1994.

3 See statistical analysis in Section III, "When All Systems Fail: The Crisis of Undiscovered, Unrecovered, and Unidentified Remains."

4 See, for example: Guillermo Cantor and Walter Ewing, "[Still No Action Taken: Complaints Against Border Patrol Agents Continue to Go Unanswered](#)," American Immigration Council, August 2, 2017.

5 In 40% of these reported emergencies, there is clear documentation that Border Patrol did not respond at all. In 23% of cases, it was unclear or unconfirmed whether or not there was a search response from Border Patrol.

6 9 of 33 Border Patrol searches ended in disappearance.

7 Border Patrol activated a search effort in only 33 emergency cases from the database. In contrast, Border Patrol was documented to have caused a person to go missing through chase and scatter in at least 91 emergency cases from the database. For more on Border Patrol's deadly enforcement tactics, see [Disappeared Part I: Deadly Apprehension Methods: The Consequences of Chase and Scatter in the Wilderness](#), No More Deaths, 2016.

8 These 456 emergency cases are a subset of the full database of calls received by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line. Beyond these emergency cases, the Crisis Line also received calls for those who were known to have been detained but were lost in the detention system, with families unable to locate or contact them, and cases in which people had been disappeared for so long that locating them alive in the desert was no longer a possibility—for example, cases where loved ones had been missing for months or even years. "Emergency cases" were those in which an urgent field search in the desert may have been required. Some cases of missing people known to have recently died in the desert were also classified as emergency cases, because the timely recovery of their remains could mean the difference between being able to identify the individual and thus bring closure to their family, or not. Human remains can skeletonize within a week in desert environments, and be scattered by animals and flash floods. Acting quickly on information received by the Crisis Line concerning a recently deceased individual was thus a matter of urgency.

9 An in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of this data set will appear in a supplemental follow-up report specifically examining the segregated 911 system.

10 Original Spanish case notes: "hablaron con la patrulla fronteriza y les preguntó si podían salir a buscarlo y le dijeron que no pueden ir a buscar. La familia les dijo que podían pagar por el uso del helicóptero pero la BP dijo que no buscarían aunque la familia pudiera pagar. La hermana habló al 9-11 ayer a las dos de la mañana. La persona que contestó la llamada dijo que no podían hacer nada y le dio el número de la patrulla fronteriza."

11 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #442.

12 Police Executive Research Forum, [Responding to Migrant Deaths Along the Southwest Border](#)," August, 2016. "In March of 2015 and as part of their improvement efforts, Customs and Border Patrol's (CBP) Joint Intelligence and Operations Center, or JIOC, began tracking and coordinating all local 911 calls from migrants in distress. Emergency dispatchers from all local counties—including Pima, Maricopa, Pinal, Cochise, and Santa Cruz—now transfer all 911 calls from migrants in the desert directly to the JIOC at the Tucson Sector headquarters." This report also states that Brooks County, Texas also transfers all 911 calls from distressed migrants immediately to Border Patrol.

13 Pima County is the county in southern Arizona that sees the highest number of migrant deaths.

14 Department of Homeland Security, "[Search and Rescue Efforts For FY 2016](#)," May 23, 2017.

15 Border Patrol provides little to no publicly available documentation regarding what happens when a 911 dispatcher transfers an emergency call to their agents. The agency provides public "rescue" statistics, but they do not release information on searches, or on outcomes and success rates for all reported emergencies. Whether or not Border Patrol personnel mobilize searches, rescues, and recovery efforts in response to a reported emergency is unknown to the public. Moreover, the outcomes of the thousands of cases diverted to Border Patrol each year remain unknown. See section on "Unaccountability and Misinformation" in this chapter.

16 Crisis Line volunteers requested an emergency search response from Border Patrol in 89 cases. In 36 of these cases, there was no search response. In 20 cases it was unclear or unconfirmed whether or not there was a Border Patrol response (for a total of 56 cases with no *confirmed* Border Patrol search response). There was a confirmed Border Patrol search response in 33 cases. In the remaining emergency cases received by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line, there was no sufficient locational information to request and search and rescue response.

18 Ibid.

19 Ride-along interview with BORSTAR supervisor John Redd, January 2016.

20 Testimony of humanitarian volunteer.

17 Southern Arizona and South Texas are two principal migration corridors that see the highest numbers of deaths and disappearances as a result of Border Patrol's "Prevention Through Deterrence" policy. Border Patrol's 1994 Strategic Plan predicted migration would shift into these corridors. See US Border Patrol, "[Strategic Plan](#)."

21 While large, this enforcement buffer with its patchwork of jurisdictions, is but a fraction of an ever-widening continental enforcement zone. This zone now stretches well south into Mexico, where many go missing and disappear all along their journey from the Guatemalan border in the south to the US border in the north. This continental enforcement zone has become increasingly punitive in the United States, where undocumented people lack access to many of the official agencies and systems that would otherwise assist in searching for, locating, and recovering lost or missing loved ones. Mexico's southern border with Guatemala is increasingly referred to as the "southern border of the United States," wherein US policymakers consider it a first line of defense against undocumented migration and potential asylum

seekers in their “Defense-In-Depth Strategy.” See Department of Homeland Security, “Written testimony of CBP U.S. Border Patrol Chief Mark Morgan for a House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Border and Maritime Security hearing titled ‘[Moving the Line of Scrimmage: Re-Examining the Defense-In-Depth Strategy](#),’” September 13, 2016.

22 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #397. Original Spanish case notes: “Iba a intentar a caminar a una casa que podían ver muy lejos pero estaba débil y no tenía agua ni comida.”

23 Coquitlam Search and Rescue, “[Cell Phones and Rescue](#).” Last modified October 6, 2019.

24 There are, however, significant limits to the efficacy of this technology for many people crossing through the remote borderlands. For people calling from remote areas with fewer cell towers, the coordinates obtained from a 911 call can have such a wide range of accuracy as to be virtually useless. Older and more basic phones, or phones from Mexico or Central America, often do not transmit accurate coordinates. See Appendix III for an expanded explanation of the many barriers to using a cell phone to access rescue for people crossing the border.

25 Verizon coverage map from [www.verizonwireless.com](http://www.verizonwireless.com). Map of recovered human remains from Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants, <https://humaneborders.info>.

26 See Appendix IV for full SAR intake used by Crisis Line volunteers.

27 In 36 out of 89 cases in which a family member or hotline volunteer requested a search effort from Border Patrol, Border Patrol did not search. In an additional 23% of cases, there was no confirmation that Border Patrol took any measure to search or rescue a distressed person. In sum, we find that in 63% of documented emergency cases, there was no evidence that Border Patrol took any actions to respond to an undocumented person in distress. See “Vague, Unclear, and Non-Committal Border Patrol Response to Emergencies” later in this section.

28 The Arizona Missing Migrant Initiative (AMMI).

29 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #181.

30 This number is not a direct overlap with the 40% of cases in which no Border Patrol search was enacted, for the reason that families and advocates at times received direct, outright refusals from Border Patrol agents but continued to demand a search response, often calling every possible phone number and visiting Border Patrol stations in person. In some cases a search was eventually conducted after an initial refusal, but only after continuous and diligent pressure.

31 Original Spanish: “[La familia] hablaron con la Patrulla Fronteriza y les preguntó si podían salir a buscarlo y le dijeron que no pueden ir a buscar.”

32 Emphasis added. Arizona Search and Rescue Coordinators Association, [Arizona Basic Search and Rescue, 3rd Edition](#) Hereford, AZ: Arizona Search and Rescue Coordinators Association, Ltd., 2018.

33 This challenge is explored in more depth in Section II of this report.

34 See Appendix III for detailed explanation of triangulation of emergency calls.

35 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #342.

36 Ibid., case #226.

37 Ibid., case #247. Flora stayed behind in the South Texas brush five hours (walking)

south of Carrizo Springs, Texas in a place near three large antennas and tall metal posts. Her brother had already been detained, and the guide they were traveling with was in Mexico—both were available to provide further locational details. Case notes read: “Her [Flora’s] family called many places and no one was able to search for her. They called the police and they couldn’t search. When [her sister] called Border Patrol, one time the agent asked for her driver’s license number and said he wouldn’t give her information without it.”

38 Ibid., case #310.

39 Ibid., case #87.

40 Testimony of humanitarian volunteer.

41 Ibid., case #424.

42 Testimony of humanitarian volunteer.

43 20 out of 89 cases.

44 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, cases #249, #282, #354, #452, #356, #414, #394.

45 Ibid., case #160.

46 Ibid., case #192.

48 No More Deaths’ 2011 report, [A Culture of Cruelty: Abuse and Impunity in Short Term Border Patrol Custody](#), documented patterns of abuses in Border Patrol custody including denial of water, denial of food, denial of medical care, physical abuse, psychological abuse, and dangerous or inhumane deportation practices, including separating families. More recently, a 2019 report by Physicians for Human Rights documented Border Patrol violations of the human rights of migrants in custody, especially those in need of medical care. Physicians for Human Rights, [Zero Protection: How U.S. Border Enforcement Harms Migrant Safety and Health](#), January 2019.

49 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #372.

50 Ibid., case #395

51 See, for example: Sarah Stillman, [“When Deportation is a Death Sentence,”](#) *The New Yorker*, January 8, 2018. Stillman documents the deaths of people who were killed after being deported to their countries of origin, often after having informed Border Patrol agents that they feared for their life if deported, only to have their fears ignored. See also: John Washington, [“He fled his homeland for safety in the US. After his death, who was to blame?,”](#) *Vox*, December 27, 2019 and Human Rights Watch, [“Deported to Danger | United States Deportation Policies Expose Salvadorans to Death and Abuse,”](#) February 5, 2020.

52 Ride-along interview with BORSTAR supervisor John Redd, January 2016.

47 Reporter’s Official Transcript of Proceedings, Day 6, pp. 90-191, *United States of America v. Scott Daniel Warren*, No. 17-00341MJ-001-TUC-RCC (US District Court, D. Arizona 2019)

53 Testimony of BORSTAR Agent Gerardo Carrasco. Official Transcript of Proceedings, Day 6, *US v. Scott Daniel Warren*, No. 17-00341MJ-001-TUC-RCC, 189-190.

54 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #404.

- 55 “We get a lot of bogus calls. When trying to get something through an area, they may call, [say] ‘I’m dying’ . . . We still have to treat the call as though it is real. But our guys have gotten so good to where we will make a determination if it’s bogus . . . and sometimes—we haven’t been 100%—we think they’re bogus and they’re real.” Ride-along interview with BORSTAR supervisor John Redd, January 2016.
- 56 Ride-along interview with BORSTAR supervisor John Redd, January 2016.
- 57 Recording of Pima County 911 call, January 21, 2018 19:42:32.
- 63 Ride-along interview with BORSTAR supervisor John Redd (January 2016), referring to reports of missing migrating people received by third parties, such as the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line.
- 58 See Appendix III for a more thorough explanation of cell phone triangulation.
- 59 Nicole Ludden and Julian Hernandez, “[Death of a Dream: Two Responses to Migrants who Go Missing](#),” *Cronkite News/Arizona PBS*, May 16, 2019.
- 60 Audio recording of a 911 dispatcher in Brooks County, Texas, attempting to transfer an emergency call to Border Patrol in the case of two lost and critically-ill brothers. The Weather Channel, Telemundo, & the Investigative Fund, [The Real Death Valley](#), 2014.
- 61 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #310.
- 62 In the decade following 9/11, the federal government spent over \$90 billion on border enforcement. Todd Miller, “[War on the Border](#),” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2013.
- 69 Inter-Agency Standing Committee, “[IASC Guidelines on the Use of Armed Escorts for Humanitarian Convoys](#),” February 27, 2013.
- 70 US Border Patrol, “[Border Patrol Overview](#),” last modified April 26, 2018.
- 71 “As a general rule, humanitarian convoys will not use armed escorts. However, there may be exceptional circumstances in which the use of armed escorts is necessary as a ‘last resort’ to enable humanitarian action [...] only when all of the following criteria have been met: 1) The level of humanitarian need is such that the lack of humanitarian action would lead to unacceptable human suffering, yet the transport of essential personnel and relief supplies cannot be undertaken without the use of armed escorts. 2) State authorities or local non-State actors are unable or unwilling to permit the movement of humanitarian supplies or personnel without the use of armed escorts. 3) The armed escorts utilised are capable of providing a credible deterrent necessary to enhance the safety of humanitarian personnel [...] without compromising their security or that of the affected people. 4) The use of an armed escort will not irreversibly compromise the humanitarian operating environment or the longer-term capacity of the organisation(s) to safely and effectively operate in the future.” “Before deciding on such exceptions, the consequences and possible alternatives to the use of armed escorts shall be considered.” Inter-Agency Standing Committee, “[IASC Guidelines](#).”
- 64 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #367.
- 65 *Ibid.*, case #310.
- 66 See No More Deaths, *Disappeared*, [Parts I](#) and [II](#), which document Border Patrol’s deadly apprehension techniques in remote areas and the widespread destruction of humanitarian water drops by Border Patrol agents in the field.

67 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #244.

68 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #247.

72 Unfortunately, this is not always true for all US citizens: Perhaps most notably, the negligence with which the US federal government treats the emergencies of the undocumented on its southern border is paralleled by federal and local law enforcement's negligence—or outright obstruction—in response to the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women. The testimonies of family members who must fight tooth and nail, often to no avail, to get law enforcement to search for their missing indigenous relatives are shockingly similar to many of the stories we document in this report (see, for example: US Congress: Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States—Committee on Natural Resources, "[Unmasking the Hidden Crisis of Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women: Exploring Solutions to End the Cycle of Violence](#)," March 14, 2019). It is therefore critical to note that many marginalized communities within US territory also experience diminished and discriminatory access to emergency services.

73 Devon O'Neill, "[How Backcountry Search and Rescue Works](#)," *Outside Online*, March 4, 2016.

74 Arizona state law mandates that county sheriff's offices are responsible for providing search and rescue services. Additionally, the Pima County Sheriff's own policy clearly states that they will "conduct a search when there is sufficient cause to believe that *anyone* is lost, injured, stranded, or deceased in a remote and normally inaccessible area." Pima County Sheriff's Department, "[Chapter 11: Specialized Units](#)," *Rules and Regulations*, Accessed March 21, 2019; emphasis added.

75 "SARA typically responds to more than 100 search and rescue missions each year, representing more than 4,400 hours of volunteer time at no expense to taxpayers. Whether the mission is a technical cliff rescue or a multi-day search, day or night, whatever the weather, SARA members are on call." Search and Rescue Council, Inc., "[SARA-Southern Arizona Rescue Association](#)," accessed December 27, 2019.

76 Techniques employed by SARA, for example, include not only skills for technical rescues but also methods for searching for a lost individual whose location is unknown, such as analysis of "lost person behavior" to predict where a person might have gone from their Point Last Seen; hasty searches of common routes and landmarks in the area; and more extensive grid searches to cover a larger area if a person is believed to be immobile. (Ibid.) We found no instances of Border Patrol making use of such analyses in their search and rescue efforts.

77 SRDI: Southwest Rescue Dogs, Inc. is a "K-9 search and rescue organization that serves as a resource for the Pima County Sheriff's Department to use highly trained personnel and search dogs to find lost or injured people in inaccessible desert and mountain areas." Human members are medically trained in wilderness emergency care. SAMSAR is Southern Arizona Mounted Search and Rescue, Inc. Southern Arizona Mounted Search and Rescue, Inc., [SARCI.org](#), accessed on December 27, 2019.

78 Civil Air Patrol has an entire unit dedicated to cell phone forensics for the purpose of locating a lost person based on data received from cell phone carriers. Incidentally, the headquarters for this operation is based in Southern Arizona. Civil Air Patrol has stated that the use of cell phone forensics is "a primary resource" and that "[t]he volume of incidents we work (130+ per year) gives us incredible familiarity with the records and knowing exactly what the information means." Civil Air Patrol training webinar. "[Cellular Forensics Training for Incident](#)

[Staff Members](#),” November 2015.

79 Many people crossing the border use “911-only” cell phones that are not activated with a plan from a carrier—31% of distress calls from presumed border crossers in Pima County used such 911-only phones to contact emergency services. However, many people do cross with phones activated for the United States.

80 While Arizona Statute mandates that county sheriff’s departments are tasked with conducting or coordinating SAR operations in their jurisdiction, the US Air Force has overall responsibility for inland search and rescue in the United States. The Air Force performs this duty through the Air Force Rescue Coordination Center (AFRCC) and the volunteer search and rescue team of the Air Force, the Civil Air Patrol (CAP). Among these federal resources are “over 31,000 emergency services, qualified personnel, and a fleet of 550 aircraft nationwide available for tasking, *generally with a 2-hour response time.*” These federal search and rescue outfits function around the clock; the Civil Air Patrol provides search and rescue mission coordinators, search aircraft, ground teams, personnel on alert status, and an extensive communications network. (Air Force Auxiliary, [CAPabilities Handbook: A Field Operations Resource Guide](#),” November 2013; emphasis added.) Notably, these federal offices and resources are not deployed in response to reports from presumed border crossers who are in distress on US soil.

81 Interview with Pima County search and rescue coordinators, November 2018.

82 “For actual missing hikers, hunters, that sort of thing, [the success rate] is very high.” Interview with Pima County Search and Rescue coordinators, November 2018.

83 This does not signify that in the other 73% of cases, the Border Patrol search was successful in locating a person or their remains. In many cases, Border Patrol called off their search without locating the person, but the person was later found to have already been detained or deported, or their remains were recovered through a family or humanitarian search effort.

84 Curt Pendergast, “[German hiker found dead off Ventana trail north of Tucson](#),” *Arizona Daily Star*, July 21, 2016.

85 Fred Barbash and Travis M. Andrews, “[‘100 percent avoidable’: Hiker deaths mount in blazing Arizona heat wave](#),” *The Washington Post*, June 22, 2016.

86 Humane Borders, [Arizona OpenGIS Initiative for Deceased Migrants](#), accessed on December 27, 2019.

87 Fox News, “[Intense Arizona heatwave responsible for at least 4 deaths over weekend](#),” June 20, 2016.

88 Pima County search and rescue coordinators stated that after one week of unsuccessful searching for a lost person, they may continue, but may need to call the search off if they have exhausted all options to locate the individual, or may need to apply for additional funding if they wish to continue. However, even if the search is “called off,” the case will remain open and investigation continues, so that if new information or leads arise, a search can be reactivated. In contrast, there are multiple examples of Border Patrol calling off a search and refusing to reopen the case even when there is new information. Interview with Pima County search and rescue coordinators, November 2018.

89 19 out of 33 cases, or 56% of the time, in which Border Patrol conducted a search

in response to a request from a Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line volunteer, Border Patrol's response was diminished. The remaining 44% of Border Patrol searches were generally cases in which the missing person was located quickly, either as a result of a specific Border Patrol mobilization or because they were found to have already been apprehended or deported.

90 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #383. Original Spanish case notes: "Agent Brandon Gardner dijo que mandaron agentes y 'apoyo aerial' al lugar a las dos de la mañana pero que no los encontraron. Parece que buscaron como 30 min, un hora no más."

91 Ibid., case #233.

92 This data analysis draws from the recordings of 1,464 emergency calls (representing 463 distinct cases) received by the Ajo Station of Pima County Sheriff's Department between June 2016 and July 2018.

93 The Pima County Sheriff's Department transfers emergency 911 calls from those crossing the border directly to Border Patrol, but does not verify or document Border Patrol's response to or the outcomes of these thousands of emergency cases. For this reason, we were not able to determine the full duration of cases once they are transferred to Border Patrol. However, based on the timestamps of calls received, we were able to document cases where an individual was calling in need of search and rescue for notably extended periods of time. We do not know the final outcomes or durations for cases, and we do not know that the case was actually concluded after these periods of time. It simply means that we do not have recordings of any further 911 calls placed by that person. We do not know if the person was located, deceased, or if their phone simply died and they were never found. This also means that for the remainder of cases where we do *not* have a documented duration of one hour or more, the case may not have been concluded at that time. These durations are therefore a minimum.

94 Brooks County Sheriff's Office 911 call logs for July 2013–June 2014, obtained via Freedom of Information Act request, analyzed by The Investigative Fund, and provided to No More Deaths. In 2014, The Investigative Fund published a report in partnership with The Weather Channel and Telemundo that investigates this data. See John Carlos Frey, Cecilia d'Anastasio, Esther Kaplan, Leticia Miranda, David M. Barreda, "[The Real Death Valley](#)," *Type Investigations*, November 11, 2014.

95 Interview with an anonymous former Border Patrol agent, February 2017.

96 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #426.

97 Ibid., case #234. Original case note in Spanish: "Él dice que él le dijo a migración que fuera a recogerlos y inmigración no hizo caso."

98 Ibid., case #182.

104 Promotional video received by public records request from Pima County Sheriff's Department. According to the video, Border Patrol agents at the Joint Intelligence and Operations Center "determine if we need BORSTAR to be activated, if it's a true Search and Rescue." There is no known criteria for what constitutes a "true" search and rescue.

99 Ride-along interview with BORSTAR supervisor, January 2016.

100 John Washington, "['Kick Ass, Ask Questions Later': A Border Patrol Whistleblower Speaks Out About Culture of Abuse Against Migrants](#)," *The Intercept*, September 20, 2018.

The whistleblower further elaborated, “Drug smugglers were ‘backpackers’ and migrants in distress seeking to turn themselves in were referred to as ‘give-ups.’ Mario [the whistleblower] described a sense of competitiveness: Arresting ‘give-ups’ was seen as less impressive than arresting ‘backpackers’ or seizing drugs.” This enlightening window into Border Patrol mentality shows how preventing tragedy is deprioritized in an agency that views itself as a paramilitary force.

101 This is clearly reflected in the conditions of distress documented in missing person reports received by the Derechos Humanos Crisis Line. See Appendix II.

102 “Our agents, they embrace the humanitarian effort, but it impacts our ability to do border security versus having to do this humanitarian mission. And I would also add that most of our agents aren’t trained to do a medical evaluation.” Border Patrol agent Jeffrey Self, quoted in: Geneva Sands, “[Hundreds of migrants cross Arizona border after ‘several busloads’ dropped off in Mexico](#),” *CNN*, January 29, 2019. As mentioned, approximately 6% of agents have any certified medical training.

103 US Department of Homeland Security, “[Search and Rescue Efforts for FY 2016](#),” May 23, 2017. DHS was also mandated to report on their search and rescue efforts the previous year (report released in 2016 on data from 2015). These are the only two reports, and they differ in the information provided—for example, in the report on 2015 SAR efforts, Border Patrol included data (albeit limited) on rescues as a result of rescue beacon activations, but this information was not included in the subsequent year’s report.

105 No More Deaths has submitted multiple Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for more detailed information about Border Patrol search and rescue cases (including outcomes), as well as on how the agency defines “rescue.” We have received no response. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has filed complaints to CBP for their lack of response to FOIA requests. See also: John Washington, “[Why We Need a Whistle-Blower in US Customs and Border Protection](#),” *The Nation*, April 25, 2017.

106 Kendal Blust. “[Border Patrol Highlights Effort to Save Migrants as Temperatures Rise](#),” *Arizona Daily Star*, April 22, 2016.

107 All Customs and Border Protection press releases are archived in a searchable database on the agency’s website. See <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/media-releases/all>. For this analysis, we searched by keyword “rescue” and analyzed all relevant press releases for the time period.

108 US Custom and Border Protection press release, “[Laredo Sector Border Patrol Agents Rescue 62 Illegal Aliens from a Refrigerated Tractor-Trailer](#),” August 30, 2018.

109 Border Patrol is known for using absurdly wide parameters in tracking internal data. For example, *The Intercept* documented the liberties taken by the agency to increase numbers of “assaults” on agents. Debbie Nathan, “[How the Border Patrol Faked Statistics Showing a 73 Percent Rise in Assaults Against Agents](#),” April 23, 2018.

110 Many of these cases took place at a checkpoint or resulted from Border Patrol agents responding to a car accident.

111 Testimony of Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line worker.

115 Signage displays a message in three languages that reads, “If you need help push the red button. Rescue personnel will arrive shortly to help you. Do not leave this area.” Below the message is an illustration of a silhouetted person pressing the button and sitting down, and

then an unidentified figure arriving with a gallon of water.

112 “Despite telling Congress and the General Accounting Office it would provide comprehensive accounting of migrant deaths, [Border Patrol] has failed to do so. It has excluded fatalities reported by other law-enforcement agencies, while claiming to include them, and neglected even to count some deaths directly witnessed by Border Patrol agents.” Bob Ortega, “[Border Patrol Failed to Count Hundreds of Deaths on US Soil](#),” CNN, May 15, 2018. See further examination of Border Patrol undercounting of deaths in Section III of this report.

113 Similar claims are repeated regularly in press releases announcing new “initiatives” such as the implementation of new rescue beacons. See, for example: US Customs and Border Protection, “[CBP Advances Efforts to Rescue Migrants in 2015](#),” January 27, 2016.

114 Humane Borders, [Arizona OpenGIS Initiative](#).

120 This map only includes remains whose postmortem interval indicates the time of death occurred after the rescue beacons were installed. Many more remains have been found in close proximity to the rescue beacons with an estimated time of death prior to beacon installation. Since 2018, two more beacons have been installed.

116 Cabeza trial testimony *USA vs. Natalie Renee Hoffman, et al.* No. MJ-17-0339-TUC-BGM 2018, (US District Court, D. Arizona 2018). In this trial, United States prosecutors argued that the humanitarian aid efforts by No More Deaths volunteers on the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge were not necessary, because Border Patrol had installed rescue beacons on the refuge despite the continued high number of human remains being recovered in the desert surrounding the beacons.

117 In the past, Border Patrol rescue beacons had a red cross on them, but the International Red Cross learned of this and demanded that they be removed in 2015. Border Patrol claims that they provide water at rescue beacons in South Texas. However, water is not regularly supplied at these sites. See John Carlos Frey, Cecilia d’Anastasio, Esther Kaplan, Leticia Miranda, David M. Barreda, “[The Real Death Valley](#),” *Type Investigations*, November 11, 2014.

118 See No More Deaths, [Disappeared Part II: Interference with Humanitarian Aid](#), 2018.

119 Rescue beacons are largely indistinguishable from Border Patrol surveillance towers, which have been used to track and apprehend people crossing into the United States without permission. Surveillance towers have been shown to push people crossing the border away from population centers and into even more remote and deadly corridors (see Samuel Norton Chambers, Geoffrey Alan Boyce, Sarah Launius, and Alicia Dinsmore, *Mortality, Surveillance and the Tertiary “Funnel Effect” on the U.S.-Mexico Border: A Geospatial Modeling of the Geography of Deterrence*, *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/08865655.2019.1570861, 2019.)

121 See [Department of Homeland Security, Search and Rescue Efforts for FY 2015](#), <https://www.dhs.gov/>.

122 We explore these enforcement tactics in depth in [Part 1](#) of the *Disappeared* report series.

123 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #399 and case #449, respectively. Original Spanish case notes from case #399: “diciendo que está solo en el desierto, no tiene agua ni comida, y no pueda ver nada.”

- 124 There are 91 documented cases of Border Patrol chase and scatter in the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line Database, with only 33 documented Border Patrol search, rescue, and/or recovery mobilizations.
- 125 Nicole Ludden and Julian Hernandez, "[Death of a Dream.](#)"
- 126 See No More Deaths, [Disappeared](#), Parts I and II.
- 127 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #361.
- 128 Families or reporting parties were noted to have contacted law enforcement in 75 cases. In 54 of these cases, or 72%, it was specifically noted that this call to law enforcement had happened *before* the family or reporting party reached out to Derechos Humanos. This only includes cases where Crisis Line volunteers made a specific note in the database indicating that a call had been made to law enforcement, and should therefore be considered a minimum.
- 129 115 cases out of 456 emergency cases.
- 130 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #361.
- 131 This translates approximately to "it cost him greatly" in English. Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #72
- 132 121 cases out of 456.
- 133 Ibid., case #4.
- 134 Ibid., case #186.
- 135 Emerging from the movement to support refugees fleeing US-sponsored violence in Central America in the 1980s, Derechos Humanos has opposed militarization and police violence, speaking out on behalf of the undocumented community in Tucson since their founding.
- 136 Interview with former Crisis Line volunteer
- 137 See Appendix V for a list of community organizations responding to the missing persons crisis in the borderlands.
- 138 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #394.
- 139 See No More Deaths, [Disappeared Part II: Interference with Humanitarian Aid](#) and appendix for a list of non-governmental organizations facilitating borderlands search and rescue efforts.
- 140 Testimony of Robin Reineke in *United States of America v. Caitlin Persis Deighan, et al.*, No. MJ-17-0340-TUC-BGM (United States District Court, D. Arizona 2018).
- 141 Interview with former Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line worker.
- 142 Testimony of humanitarian volunteer.
- 143 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes. Original Spanish: "Llamaron a border patrol pero negaron dar información" (case #114); "Llamó a la patrulla fronteriza pero no le dieron información" (case #277); "Llamó a la patrulla, le negaron dar informacion" (case #239); "Llamó a inmigración, no le quisieron dar info" (case #311); "Intentó a llamar a border patrol en McAllen pero no dio información" (case #50); "Él dijo que llamó a BP, y que no le dan información y le dicen que no pueden hacer nada (case #115); "No me quisieron dar información" (case #86).

144 Although there is a publicly searchable database of detainees once they are transferred Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) custody, it is notoriously inadequate and frequently fails to yield results for people who are later confirmed to be in ICE detention centers. For example, the detainee locator only has space for two names—a first and a last—while many people detained have three or four, and it is anyone’s guess which two names Border Patrol or ICE agents chose to enter into the database. Families must search over and over with different spellings and combinations of their loved ones names to try to locate them in the system. See Claudia Valenzuela, “[Detainee Not Found](#),” *National Immigrant Justice Center*, July 25, 2012.

145 Once arrested in the desert, undocumented people crossing the border are incarcerated in Border Patrol short-term detention, an unlisted and uncontactable network of holding rooms along the border. Although Border Patrol custody is meant to be as short as possible and they are not supposed to hold people for longer than 72 hours, the agency frequently violates this standard. See US Customs and Border Protection, “[National Standards on Transportation, Escort, Detention, and Search](#),” October 2015. In 2016, The American Immigration Council revealed that the average number of hours people were held in Border Patrol custody ranged from 65 to 104 in 2014 and 2015, and also discovered alarming maximums, including people detained for over a year in Border Patrol custody. See Guillermo Cantor, “[Detained Beyond the Limit: Prolonged Confinement by U.S. Customs and Border Protection along the Southwest Border](#),” American Immigration Council, August 18, 2016. For more information on human rights abuses in short-term Border Patrol custody, see: No More Deaths, [A Culture of Cruelty: Abuse and Impunity in Short-Term U.S. Border Patrol Custody](#), 2011.

146 For example, we find multiple cases in which Border Patrol agents misspelled the names of people they took into custody, resulting in an inability to locate them by name in their database when families and humanitarians request an arrest records search. *Ibid.*, cases #231, #194, #415, and #19.

147 *Ibid.*, case #140 and #378. Case notes from case #378: “Agents searched for Raúl’s arrest record without success multiple times, leading one to say ‘it seems like he’s still out there,’ but denying a search response immediately after. The morning of May 28th, a day and a half after we had begun requesting a search, Raúl called from Mexico saying he had already been deported.”

148 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, cases #277, #278, #279, and #280.

149 Border Patrol does in some cases share this information—the decision of whether or not to do so is seemingly on the whim of the specific agent.

150 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, cases #174, #338, #380, #319, #340, #348, #305, #418, and #425.

151 All different Border Patrol substations in South Texas. *Ibid.*, case #295.

152 One Crisis Line volunteer testified that she learned never to expect a call-back, and instead always demanded to be placed on hold while waiting for information from a Border Patrol agent.

153 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, cases #425, #58, #379, and #230.

154 The Mexican Consulate is the only one with a publically accessible 24-hour office. Other consulates are under-resourced, and have sometimes gone for weeks without answering their

phone or returning calls during business hours, and are even less accessible for emergencies occurring on the weekend or during the night.

155 Ibid., case #436.

156 Ibid., cases #247, #319, #436, #447, and #361.

160 Ryan Keisel and Carl Takei, "[Forget About Calling A Lawyer Or Anyone At All If You're In An Immigration Detention Facility](#)," *HuffPost*, June 15, 2017.

161 Cases from the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line. These cases were not received in time to consider them search and rescues, and as such were not put into the category of emergency cases studied for this report. For this reason they were not assigned case numbers.

162 US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, [Detention Facility Locator](#), Accessed on April 13, 2016.

163 Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC): Immigration, "[New Data on 637 Detention Facilities Used by ICE in FY 2015](#)," April 12, 2016.

157 Ibid., case #407.

158 Similarly, in the summer of 2012, a group of humanitarian aid volunteers on patrol near the town of Arivaca, Arizona encountered a teenager on the side of the road attempting to find help. He had been traveling with a woman and an older man; all three had become very sick in the summer heat. The teenager had marked his companions' location with a piece of red cloth in a cactus and resolved to crawl down the road and seek help. The volunteers who found him provided medical care and he requested that they contact 911. When ambulance services and Border Patrol arrived, the agents put the teenager into custody and began processing him for deportation. A humanitarian search team activated what turned into a three-day-long search for the teenager's traveling companions. Volunteers also repeatedly called Border Patrol to pressure them to respond and to request that volunteers be able to speak with the teenager in custody to get more detailed information about where to search for the others. However, Border Patrol refused to allow volunteers to speak with him. One week later, a group of students hiking in the desert came across the remains of the woman. As far as we know, the older man was never found. From testimony of humanitarian aid volunteer.

159 BORSTAR supervisor John Redd explained how humanitarian parole works in an interview, "Sometimes there's people in the group who are captured and returned to Mexico, so we'll parole them in. One of our agents will pick them up at the port, they're under our custody, and we'll drive them to the area." Ride-along interview with BORSTAR supervisor John Redd, January 2016.

164 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #319.

165 Ibid., case #377.

166 Ibid., case #181.

167 A similar initiative has since been rolled out in South Texas.

168 When families have successfully contacted Border Patrol's AMMI, responding agents discouraged them from calling, saying that the Missing Migrant phone line is a "private number" and they could not keep calling it. Ibid., case #176.

169 As of the writing of this report, advocates attempting to contact Border Patrol via AMMI are met with an automated email telling them to contact 911 or the consulate of the missing person's country of origin.

170 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #165.

171 Ibid., case #404.

172 Humanitarian aid worker testimony.

173 Ryan Devereaux, "[No More Deaths Trial Opens as More Bodies Discovered Along Arizona-Mexico Border](#)," *The Intercept*, May 14 2019.

174 The Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, which is 93% Designated Wilderness, is part of the Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range and is co-administered by the Department of the Interior (through the US Fish and Wildlife Service) and the Department of Defense.

175 The Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge and Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range share an entrance permit. To obtain one, all visitors must agree to a number of stipulations that, if violated, result in their permit being revoked. In July 2017, a clause was added to the permit that reads: "I agree to remove from the BMGR/CPNWR/SDNM Area A all personal property or possessions, including but not limited to, objects, debris, water bottles, water containers, food, food items, food containers, blankets, clothing, footwear, medical supplies, garbage, or trash generated by and/or used by me and/or my group." In short, all of the humanitarian aid supplies left by volunteers attempting to mitigate death in these remote desert areas are specifically prohibited.

176 Sworn testimony of CPNWR Manager Sid Sloan, *United States of America v. Natalie Renee Hoffman, et al.*, No. MJ-17-0339-TUC-BGM (US District Court, D. Arizona 2018).

177 Nine volunteers have been prosecuted for misdemeanor charges related to humanitarian aid work on the CPNWR. Four of these volunteers later had their charges dropped to the level of citations. One other volunteer was acquitted on the charge of "Abandonment of Property," referring to clean drinking water left on the Refuge, but was found guilty of "Operating a Motor Vehicle in a Wilderness Area." The four remaining volunteers were initially found guilty on all charges, but upon appeal, the verdict was reversed. In the decision to reverse the convictions, Judge Márquez wrote, "The Government seems to rely on a deterrence theory, reasoning that preventing clean water and food from placed on the Refuge would increase the risk of death or extreme illness for those seeking to cross unlawfully, which in turn would discourage or deter people from attempting to enter without authorization. In other words, the Government claims a compelling interest in preventing Defendants from interfering with a border enforcement strategy of deterrence by death. This gruesome logic is profoundly disturbing. It is also speculative and unsupported by evidence. As discussed above, 32 sets of human remains were recovered from the Refuge in 2017 alone, and the Government produced no evidence that these fatalities had any effect in deterring unlawful entry. Nor has the Government produced evidence that increasing the death toll would have such an effect." *United States of America v. Natalie Renee Hoffman, et al.*, No. MJ-17-0339-TUC-BGM (US District Court, D. Arizona 2018).

178 United States Department of the Interior, "[Vehicle Trails Associated with Illegal Border Activities on Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge](#)," July 2011.

179 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #440

180 Arizona Search and Rescue Coordinators Association, [Arizona Basic Search and Rescue](#),

[3rd Edition](#) Hereford, AZ: Arizona Search and Rescue Coordinators Association, Ltd., 2018, p. 15. This is the search and rescue manual used by the Southern Arizona Rescue Association, an organization that deploys for searches and rescues at the request of the local sheriff's department—thus, they do not respond to cases of lost undocumented migrants, which are instead transferred to Border Patrol.

181 Crisis Line volunteers recorded a case outcome as “disappeared” when a) missing persons are never located at all, or b) missing persons are known to have perished but their remains were never located, recovered, and identified.

182 27%, or 121 out of 456 emergency cases resulted in death or disappearance.

183 Out of the 33 cases in which Border Patrol was confirmed to have activated a search or rescue response, nine cases ended in disappearance. Another five of these cases, or 15%, ended in the distressed person's remains being located with a combined outcome that 42% of all confirmed Border Patrol searches ended in the death or disappearance of missing person.

184 United States Border Patrol, “[Southwest Border Deaths by Fiscal Year \(Oct. 1st through Sept. 30th\)](#),” 2019.

185 Rob O'Dell, Daniel Gonzalez, Jill Castellano, “[‘Mass disaster’ grows at the U.S.-Mexico border, but Washington doesn’t seem to care](#),” The Arizona Republic / AZ Central, Dec 14, 2017.

186 A report from the Binational Migration Institute that examined Border Patrol's method for counting recovered human remains found that the agency uses several major exclusions to produce their lower death count. The agency categorically excludes: 1) Human remains recovered outside of border counties and without the direct involvement of Border Patrol personnel. 2) Human remains of those crossing who appear to have been smuggling drugs or guiding people through the desert. 3) Border Patrol does not count skeletal remains of migrants where cause of death cannot be determined, even when those remains are recovered from high-traffic migration routes. 4) Border Patrol does not include the deaths of migrants who were arrested while crossing the desert and then died in custody. Nor do they include deaths from “natural causes,” such as heart attacks or other pre-existing medical disorders that were aggravated by walking dozens of miles through the desert, thus resulting in death. Raquel Rubio-Goldsmith, M. Melissa McCormick, Daniel Martinez, Inez Magdalena Duarte, [The “Funnel Effect” & Recovering Bodies of Unauthorized Migrants Processed by the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, 1990-2005](#), Binational Migration Institute, October, 2006.

187 76 of 456 emergency cases reported to the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line resulted in disappearance.

188 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #167, #170, #183, #428, #434, #430, #432, respectively.

189 Ibid., case #174.

190 Ibid., cases #427, #248, and #167, respectively.

191 US Border Patrol, “[Strategic Plan](#).”

192 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #181.

193 Testimony of humanitarian volunteers.

194 Sworn declaration of Robin Reineke, co-founder of the Colibrí Center for Human Rights and Assistant Research Social Scientist in Anthropology at the University of Arizona's Southwest

Center, 2019.

195 A study on pig cadavers demonstrated that the bodies of the deceased in the Sonoran Desert can be fully skeletonized and scattered—virtually disappeared from the landscape—within one week. Jess Beck, Ian Ostericher, Gregory Sollish, and Jason De León, "[Animal Scavenging and Scattering and the Implications for Documenting the Deaths of Undocumented Border Crossers in the Sonoran Desert](#)," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 60, no. S1 (2014): S11-20.

196 Humane Borders, [Arizona OpenGIS Initiative](#).

197 The Pima County OME publicly releases information about recovered remains monthly, including how many are unidentified, but those listed as "Unidentified" are still under investigation. Painstaking work is continued by medical examiner forensic anthropologists in collaboration with forensic human rights groups such as the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, and Operation Identification in Texas who collect DNA from families of the missing to compare to the dead. Although these groups have had success in identifying hundreds of remains in this manner, there are still hundreds of cases that remain cold. One significant barrier to the timely identification of remains is that families reporting missing people who crossed the border are often turned away from local law enforcement agencies and told to contact Border Patrol instead. This means that families never have an opportunity to aid in the forensic investigation of recovered remains that may belong to their missing loved one—to answer forensic questions, for example, or to submit a DNA sample. Organizations like the Colibrí Center for Human Rights and those mentioned above work to fill this gap left by government discrimination: "[B]ecause many of these families are undocumented, fear of deportation prevents them from contacting law enforcement agencies. However, many of those who report are still being turned away. Families have reported being told that because a missing person was illegally crossing an international boundary, they must contact Border Patrol, which would mean calling the agency tasked with their removal from the country. Also, Border Patrol does not collect missing person reports unless they are search-and-rescue requests . . . In addition to being turned away, families have also reported being threatened with deportation upon contacting US police." Robin Reineke, "[Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains at the United States–Mexico Border](#)," *Fatal Journeys 2: Identification and Tracing of Dead and Missing Migrants*, International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2016.

198 Hannah Critchfield, "[Death Toll Rises as Two More Migrants' Bodies Found Outside Tucson](#)," *Phoenix New Times*, July 25, 2019.

199 Sworn testimony of Madeline Huse. *Hoffman, et al.*, No. MJ-17-0339-TUC-BGM 2018, (US District Court, D. Arizona 2018).

200 Melissa del Bosque, *The Texas Observer* and *The Guardian US* Interactive Team, "[This is Our Home](#)," *The Guardian*, August 13, 2014.

201 The Weather Channel, et al., [Real Death Valley](#).

202 "UDA" is an acronym used commonly by law enforcement for "Undocumented Alien."

203 Border Patrol: "What kind of phase?" Dispatch: "Phase 1." Border Patrol: "Ughhh." Dispatch: "I know . . ." Border Patrol: "Alright . . . what are the meters?" Dispatch: "20,474" (within ~12 mile accuracy). Border Patrol: "Go ahead with numbers." Dispatch: "31.735404, -111.126258" (north of Arivaca Road, east of Batamote Road, west of Amado, AZ). Tucson Station 911 Call, 2018, CD 6, Track 26.

204 92 out of 457 emergency cases.

205 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, cases #76 and #141, respectively. Original Spanish case notes of case #76: "un muchacho que estaba con él estaba grave, llamó a 911 en el mediodía porque el muchacho no podía caminar estaba vomitando" Original Spanish case notes of case #141: Rosa se cayó, se lastimó, y Daniel se quedó atrás con ella para ayudarlo."

206 Ibid., case #5 and #293, respectively. Original Spanish case notes of case #5: "Familia buscando a su hijo... no tenía agua ni comida, no podía caminar, dijo que ya no podía, la persona que lo acompañaba estaba inconsciente.... a las 7 am fueron correteados y botaron agua y comida... Desde Altar, Sonora eran 9. Cuando fueron correteados venían ellos 2 solamente." Original Spanish case notes of case #293: "Se separó del grupo el Oct. 25 después de ser correteados por inmigración. Dos otras personas del grupo se perdieron también."

207 Ibid., case ##417. Original Spanish case notes: "Estaba con 3 mas personas que continuaron sin guia"

208 Testimony of humanitarian volunteer and Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #319

209 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #299 and #257 respectively. Original Spanish case notes from case #299: "Una de las personas que cruzó dijo que 5 entraron, 2 murieron, y Paolo se quedó atrás porque ya no podía caminar." Original Spanish case notes from case #257: "Eran 12 personas y ya murieron 5... uno fracturó la pierna...ya tiene 6 días sin comida y ahora hay siete con vida... la muchacha se fracturó la pierna y fue muy mal. Su hermano iba a bajar para buscar ayuda."

210 No More Deaths press release, "[Five human remains found in five days by humanitarian volunteers near Ajo Arizona](#)," December 29, 2016.

211 Alex Devoid, "[Aid workers leave water for border crossers in the Arizona desert. Now, the U.S. is banning them for it](#)," *The Arizona Republic / AZ Central*, December 28, 2017.

212 Paul Ingram, "[As No More Deaths trial wraps up, aid group searches for missing man & finds remains in desert](#)," *Tucson Sentinel*. May 8, 2019.

213 Sworn testimony of Juliette Fernández. *Hoffman et al.*, No. MJ-17-0339-TUC-BGM 2018, (US District Court, D. Arizona 2018).

214 US Border Patrol, "[Strategic Plan](#)."

215 When a missing person was located in a hospital and was put in contact with family, there was generally no additional follow-up from the Crisis Line unless it was requested from the family. However, we know that when a person crossing the border is transported to the hospital, they are generally under the supervision of Border Patrol and will be detained or deported after treatment.

216 158 emergency cases.

217 The economic geography of migrating people is a complex reality encompassing those who are able to work and have savings, those who have family able to provide a loan, those who enter into exchanges that entail service or indentured servitude, and those who have no or very few resources.

- 218 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, cases #001, #100, #113, #006, #185.
- 219 See Verizon Coverage map on page
- 220 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #223
- 221 Ibid. case #176
- 222 Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line case notes, case #035, #074, #357 #282
- 223 Tucson station 911 call recording, CD 4 Track 2
- 224 Tucson station 911 call recording, CD 5 Track 20
- 225 The South Texas Human Rights Center.