

## Not Getting Caught, Dying

*A recently released congressional report finds border deaths rising dramatically -- and apprehensions falling -- as enforcement pushes immigrants east from San Diego to Tucson.*

By DANIEL STRUMPF *Voice Staff Writer*

**Thursday, Sept. 21, 2006** | Hundreds of miles of mountainous terrain and sun scorched desert separate San Diego and Tucson, but evidence suggests that immigration enforcement efforts here are linked to the soaring numbers of deaths amongst illegal border crossers to the east.

Twice as many people are dying as did 10 years ago while attempting to cross from Mexico into the United States, according to a report released by the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress.

The report also found that the amount of women who have perished while crossing the border has jumped from 9 percent of all deaths seven years ago to 21 percent today.

The vast majority of border deaths occurred in the Arizona desert and, according to the report, were the result of prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures.

Local experts say that the grim findings are a result of enhanced enforcement strategies implemented in San Diego and elsewhere during the mid-1990s. Moreover, the study found that as border deaths continue to rise, the number of undocumented immigrants apprehended by the Border Patrol has decreased by nearly 25 percent in seven years.

Those who study immigration trends say further enforcement efforts won't slow the body count.

"Even though we have seen this apparent lull in apprehensions, we have seen this increase in death and it's a sign of to what extremes people are willing to go to enter this country," said David Shirk, director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego.

Shirk, other experts and the GAO attribute the increase in deaths in part to programs like Operation Gatekeeper, which the federal government launched in 1994 to dramatically increase enforcement efforts along the San Diego sector of the border -- a 66-mile section that stretches east from the Pacific Ocean.

"The strategy assumed that as the urban areas were controlled, the migrant traffic would shift to more remote areas where the Border Patrol would be able to more easily detect and apprehend migrants entering illegally," according to the GAO report. "The strategy also assumed that natural barriers including rivers, such as the Rio Grande in Texas, the mountains east of San Diego, and the desert in Arizona would act as deterrents to illegal entry."

But Operation Gatekeeper and other programs like it failed to anticipate the sheer desperation of a sizable number of migrants who continued to gain entry despite the harsh terrain, the report states.

"Migrant rights activists very cynically say that people were knowingly sending them to their deaths," said Shirk

As for the spike in deaths amongst females, experts attribute the trend to the post-9/11 strengthening of border enforcement. Clandestine crossings have become more difficult, and many male migrant workers are attempting to smuggle their families north rather than planning to work alone and temporarily in the United States.

"They figure that rather than go home to visit their families they might as well bring them here once and for all," said Shirk.

As immigrants have dispersed in hopes of finding more vulnerable points of entry to the east, the Border Patrol has also redistributed its manpower and resources eastward in an effort to head them off, said Chris Bauder, president of the National Border Patrol Council, which represents 1,500 agents in the San Diego sector.

Bauder said statistics incorporated in the report illustrate that progression eastward toward increasingly rugged and deadly terrain.

While deaths in the San Diego sector have steadily plummeted since Operation Gatekeeper was implemented in 1997, the report shows a simultaneous increase of fatalities in the El Centro sector immediately to the east. The body count continued to mount there until 1999, when El Centro received more manpower. Then deaths in the Yuma, Ariz. sector to the east spiked, Bauder said. The pattern continued to Tucson, Ariz. with deaths skyrocketing in 2000 and -- despite a slight decline in 2001 after more resources were allocated -- the sector has reported the majority of deaths ever since.

"There's 10 years of data here to prove that the strategy that we have been using since 1995 is failing and will continue to fail," Bauder said.

While he said there's "definitely a correlation" between the increased enforcement efforts and rising number of deaths, Bauder stopped short of saying that there was a causal relationship.

"The reality is it isn't the government's fault," he said. "It's Mexico's fault because they haven't been able to take care of their citizens."

Bauder also sees the dead immigrants as bearing some responsibility for their fate.

"These people are making the choice to take the risk to walk through the desert without a bottle of water," he said. "That's just plain stupidity."

Lilia Velasquez, an immigration attorney and adjunct professor at California Western School of Law, bristles at that suggestion.

"You can't expect desperate people to think rationally," she said.

Velasquez' sentiment is supported by research performed by Wayne Cornelius, the director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego, who conducted interviews with more than 1,300 recently returned migrants and their relatives in Mexico.

Cornelius found that eight out of 10 interviewees believe that it is much more dangerous to illegally cross the border today, and a substantial proportion of the migrants interviewed personally knew someone who had died trying to enter the United States clandestinely.

Cornelius also found that although more than two-thirds of interviewees had seen or heard public service announcements warning of the dangers of clandestine border crossings, fewer than one out of 10 said that such messages would affect their plans to migrate.

"It is difficult to overestimate the determination of the people who are willing to take such risks," Cornelius wrote in an e-mail message. "One of our recent interviewees, a 28-year-old Yucatec father, told us 'We don't care if we have to walk eight days, 15 days—it doesn't matter the danger we put ourselves in. If and when we cross alive, we will have a job to give our families the best.'"

What the experts all agree on is the need for realistic immigration reform that addresses the factors that compel immigrants to risk their lives sneaking into the United States.

Both Velasquez and Bauder say that the government can decrease the number of deaths by cracking down on the businesses that employ undocumented immigrants.

"If people come here to get jobs and we continue to grant them jobs then we are actually inviting them to risk their lives by crossing the border," said Velasquez.

Shirk puts more emphasis on giving immigrants a reason to stay in Mexico.

"What's really needed here is a much more comprehensive approach that addresses large scale Mexican migration at its roots," he said. "If it's not our responsibility, it's to our advantage to make Mexico a better economic partner so people aren't dying on our borders."

In the meantime, Congress continues its stalemate over two competing proposals for immigration reform.

Legislation passed by the Senate earlier this year focuses on establishing a guest worker program and a path to citizenship. The House plan would increase enforcement efforts and make illegal residency a felony.

Both proposals would require that employers use electronic systems to verify an applicant's employment eligibility and result in the addition of thousands of agents to the Border Patrol. They would also expand the current border fence by hundreds of miles, although they differ on the exact type and amount of fencing.

Congress isn't expected to make any progress on the legislation until after the November elections and many believe an agreement may not be hammered out until next year, if ever.

With that in mind, Velasquez said she expects that deaths along the border will only continue to increase.

"I think people are losing their patience and losing hope that the Congress is going to do something in the near future," she said. "When you see no hope on the horizon you take more chance with your life."

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