

United States Border Patrol neglects counting migrant deaths

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A 2017 *USA Today* report found that up to three times more immigrants have died crossing the US-Mexico border than officially recorded by the US Border Patrol.

Last year's report shed light on an issue which has been deliberately concealed by the US government and won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism. Following on that report this week, an investigation by CNN has revealed the extent of the neglect on part of the federal agency.

Citing records from the last 16 years, CNN identified at least 564 migrant deaths in the border region beyond the Border Patrol's official count of 5,984 over the same period, with more than half of the deaths occurring within the last four years. The deaths were identified through a review of federal, state and local records, and interviews with medical examiners, pathologists, sheriffs and justices of the peace along the border.

The data collected was still incomplete, indicating the death toll could be much higher. Obtaining a thorough count is complicated by the fact that no single governmental, academic, or non-profit entity tracks the number of deaths beyond those recorded by the Border Patrol and no efforts are made by state governments to comprehensively track migrant deaths in California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, the four states which border Mexico.

In fact, the number of uncounted deaths in the past five years surpasses official estimates by anywhere from 25 percent to 300 percent in the border states. Many migrant deaths in Texas are never counted, meaning there is no well-grounded estimate of the death toll. According to local authorities, many of those who die crossing into Texas are simply buried in mass graves and therefore go uncounted.

The obscene death toll is a direct result of policies carried out by Democratic and Republican administrations over the last three decades. In the 1990s both the federal government and border states implemented measures meant to make the journey from Mexico to the US deadlier. As if the deserts between the two countries weren't hazardous enough, fascistic paramilitary forces have deployed to the border and walls have been erected in urban areas that have forced migrants to take deadlier routes.

Beginning in 1993, Democratic President Bill Clinton implemented programs which concentrated manpower in key urban crossing points in an attempt to deter immigrants with a "show of force." Under his successor, Republican President George W. Bush, fortifying US borders became a key element of the anti-democratic crackdown at home following the September 11 attacks, and was accompanied by a wave of xenophobia.

The Obama administration subsequently deported more immigrants than any administration in US history. Building on the framework erected by his predecessors Trump has directed Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to round up immigrants in ways reminiscent of the Gestapo raids of Nazi Germany, and has also revoked the protected status of hundreds of thousands of immigrants in the US, as well as DACA recipients.

The CNN report found that the Border Patrol makes little effort in recording the number of deaths beyond those that its agents physically encounter. The Border Patrol never asks local officials for death counts and does not include other deaths reported by landowners or others to local law enforcement. The agency tells Congress that it reaches out to local authorities, but its own agents and supervisors interviewed by CNN state

otherwise.

A 2006 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the number of migrant deaths doubled from 1995-2005, and criticized the Border Patrol's lackluster efforts to prevent and record deaths. In response, the Border Patrol stated it would increase efforts to communicate with local officials, but this never happened. This indicates a long-term practice of disregard for immigrant lives on part of the federal government.

In many areas, local officials are the only ones willing to make an active attempt to measure the scope of migrant deaths. In Arizona, local officials and volunteers search some of the most hazardous crossing regions and often have to wait for federal approval to do so. From September 2016 to September 2017, the Border Patrol reported 72 migrant deaths in the Tucson area. The Pima County Medical Examiner, along with volunteers, counted more than double that number, 149.

Texas, which shares a 1,241-mile border with Mexico, has become the busiest and deadliest crossing point. The true number of deaths in the Rio Grande valley is vastly under-recorded. Geography plays a role, since finding bodies in the desert is difficult. As CNN noted, it is likely that there are many sets of remains which are scattered by scavenging animals or washed away in heavy rains, and will never be discovered.

Furthermore, much of the responsibility of recording migrant deaths falls on border counties, which are some of the poorest in the nation and consequently have limited resources. Of the 21 Texas counties nearest the border, only four employ their own medical examiners. CNN spoke with 37 justices of the peace across 22 Texas counties at or near the border and only five said they keep track of migrant deaths.

Local human rights groups that offer what assistance they can to migrants crossing the desert, such as setting up water stations and performing search and rescue missions, have been subjected to harassment and detention by the Border Patrol.

This willful neglect on part of the authorities only aims to prevent Americans from seeing the true extent of US crimes at the border. The deaths of migrants are not accidents, but murders for which the US government is responsible. Immigrants attempting to flee their home countries because of violence and poverty caused in large part by US imperialism are

intentionally being placed in harm's way. The resulting atrocities are reflective of the anti-immigrant and anti-worker policy of the entire American ruling class.



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