

13 killed in deadly SUV crash near US-Mexico border in southern California

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Early Tuesday morning, a semi-truck towing two trailers slammed into a Ford Explorer SUV carrying more than two dozen people in the Imperial Valley region in Southern California just a few miles from the US-Mexico border.

The crash, which is the deadliest in the border area in many decades, has so far claimed 13 lives and left many seriously injured. The carnage, captured on traffic cameras, shows passengers being ejected from the SUV on impact, and then several trying to get out of the wreckage looking dazed. Emergency responders at the scene reported finding several victims dead inside the vehicle.

The injured were taken to the El Centro Regional Medical Center (ECRMC), Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs and Pioneers Memorial Hospital in nearby Brawley. UC San Diego Health said it received three patients transferred from ECRMC via air ambulance. According to CHP reports, the passengers ranged from ages 20 to 55, and it has been reported that the driver of the SUV was a 28-year-old from Mexicali, Mexico.

In his initial statement reported by CNN, El Centro Regional Medical Center CEO Dr. Adolphe Edward highlighted the fact that this was a major accident and that “people were going through a difficult time,” and warned reporters against categorizing the victims as “undocumented.” According to the latest reports, US Border Patrol (USBP) has stated it suspects all the victims had been part of a group of 44 migrants smuggled from Mexico into the US through a hole in the border fence near Calexico.

On Wednesday morning, USBP also released a timeline detailing the events leading up to the crash. According to the official version, agents patrolling the Calexico were notified that a “red Suburban was on

fire” near I-8 and Interstate Route 115 at 5:56 a.m.. Within 10 minutes, the agents claim they found a 10-foot hole in the border fence near Gordon’s Well exit/Schneider’s Bride area, and 19 people hiding in the bushes while trying to put out the vehicle fire.

Soon after, the agents received a call about a deadly crash. Border Patrol Search Trauma and Rescue Team (BORSTAR) agents were the first on the scene and reported that they found 12 victims dead on the spot.

The Ford Explorer SUV involved in the accident had all but the driver and front passenger seats removed, which meant none of the other passengers had access to seat belts. The vehicle, which is supposed to carry a maximum of 8 people, was carrying two dozen passengers.

This dangerous mode of transportation is not uncommon in the border areas, especially in the Imperial Valley, where agribusinesses have consistently exploited underpaid transborder farmworkers. Farms in the region have used vehicles like the one involved in the most recent deadly crash to transport migrant workers who have crossed legally into the United States.

Car crashes in the border area are not uncommon, and usually have been the result of vehicles trying to flee USBP. In what was the most recent deadly crash before Tuesday, seven people were killed when a car attempted to flee USBP vehicles giving chase in El Paso, Texas in June 2020. Prior to that, in 2019 a police chase in rural South Texas resulted in six deaths, and five people charged with migrant smuggling. In July 2012, in one of the worst border-related crashes of the last decade, a Ford pickup crammed with more than 20 undocumented adults and children struck two trees, killing 15 people, including an 8-year-old girl, in Texas.

At the time of publication, many questions raised by the most recent accident remain unanswered. The official report merely states that the SUV was hit after it apparently entered an intersection directly in front of a Peterbilt tractor trailer traveling north on Route 115 near El Centro. However, it is not quite clear whether the SUV was speeding or whether the driver ran a stop sign or for that matter what would account for it being directly in front of an oncoming vehicle. For now, USBP has claimed that none of its agents were in pursuit and the BORSTAR agents at the site had merely responded to the emergency call.

The response to such accidents from government officials and the media has taken the form of bemoaning the evils of human trafficking and a ramping up of militarized border policing. In his official statement after Tuesday's tragedy, El Centro Sector Chief Patrol Agent Gregory Bovino connected the accident to the hole in the border wall, insisting, "Human smugglers have proven time and again they have little regard for human life. Those who may be contemplating crossing the border illegally should pause to think of the dangers that all too often end in tragedy; tragedies our Border Patrol Agents and first responders are unfortunately very familiar with."

The Department of Homeland Security has also announced an investigation into the human trafficking operation that apparently brought the migrants into the country. This investigation, as others in the past, will whitewash the horrendous human costs of US immigration policy, which under the new Biden administration is not fundamentally different from what it was under Trump.

The El Centro sector employs 800 Border Patrol agents to cover 70 miles across the valley. It boasts of a new border barrier—a row of 30-foot-tall, slender steel slats with pointed edges—that Trump inspected with great fanfare. All of this is to impede the movement of workers in an area which is the agricultural heart of the region and also among the most economically depressed in California.

The unemployment rate for the valley is four times the state average, and its seasonal labor demands are met in large part through migrant labor from across the border. It is estimated that around 6000 farm workers cross the border legally during the annual harvest. However, the dire economic conditions on both sides of

the border—exacerbated by the on-going pandemic—have meant that desperate workers have been forced into looking for any means possible to eke out a living and provide for their families.

Border Patrol agents, who are usually heavily armed in these areas, have reported that the number of unauthorized immigrants arrested in January 2021 was 78,323—well over double the figure from January 2020. These numbers, which had dipped to 17,066 in April 2020 in the early days of the pandemic, reveal the growing desperation of the working class in the border regions.

The Biden administration, which supporters claimed would initiate a new chapter in US immigration policy, has done nothing of that sort. Despite the anti-immigrant ravings of Donald Trump at the recent CPAC convention, US immigration policies have continued to develop along the same trajectory he had set, including the re-opening of detention centers for children. In this context, tragedies like what unfolded in the Imperial Valley this week will sadly continue to be a fixture.



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