



Stop Border Deaths Now!

A project of the Border Working Group

Attn: Immigration Policy Aide

July 5, 2005

Since 1998, hundreds of migrants have died in their attempts to enter the US. Official statistics kept by the border patrol show more than 2500 deaths since they began keeping records in that year. Despite the scope of the tragedy that these numbers point to, border communities and non-governmental organizations have consistently criticized the Border Patrol for under-reporting the number of deaths in the desert in an attempt to downplay this crisis.

Last year, community activists in Arizona began to independently track migrant deaths, and the numbers that have been reported are very compelling. In 2004, the Border Patrol reported that 172 migrants died in Arizona. This number is significantly lower than the number reported by independent NGO's, which reported 221 deaths. The NGO data was compiled with reports from medical examiner's offices in Arizona and the Mexican government. A similar study, carried out by the *Arizona Daily Star*, reported 218 deaths.

Why then, does the Border Patrol not count nearly 25% of migrant deaths? In recognition of this discrepancy, recent media reports cite Border Patrol officials as pledging to cross-reference their records with local medical examiner's offices – an important step forward. However, internal record-keeping discrepancies are at the heart of the problem. To date, Border Patrol statistics only include migrants whose bodies were recovered by their own agents. Bodies recovered by local law enforcement or other agencies are not included in the tally. Furthermore, conversations with the Border Patrol show that many times, a migrant will be removed from the list if the body cannot be positively identified as that of a foreign national. Given the nature of undocumented entry into the US, many migrants do not carry identification. But the telltale signs of heat exhaustion, dehydration, clothes beaten by the desert, and little or no possessions on them identify hundreds of migrants a year, regardless of their official documentation.

As part of the Border Working Group's summer migrant death project, Border Patrol officials in Washington, DC provide us with official migrant deaths counts every two weeks. The following experience highlights some of the inconsistencies in Border Patrol statistics. From June 1 to June 15, 2005, only 2 deaths were officially reported by Washington for the El Paso Sector (the division which is responsible for all of New Mexico and the El Paso region of Texas). However, when we called the El Paso sector offices in Texas directly to distinguish which, if any, of those deaths occurred in the New Mexico part of the sector, officials there reported 3 drowning deaths in Texas and one death in New Mexico for the same time period. To further confuse the landscape, the El Paso times published 3 different articles reporting 4 drowning victims in Texas for the same time period.

One half of all migrant deaths last year occurred in Arizona. As the above story illustrates, the discrepancy in death reports most likely is not specific to Arizona alone. Without the same scrutiny that Arizona faces in its record-keeping, problems like this often go unreported and unchallenged in other parts of the border. Unfortunately, only in Arizona do we have accurate migrant death statistics kept by independent sources at this time.

On the reverse side of this page, there is the total number of deaths that occur in each two week period. These numbers are based strictly on Border Patrol statistics. Despite our serious concerns about the accuracy of these numbers, they are the only consistent border wide numbers available.

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In the first two weeks of June, 23 people died trying to enter the United States. The majority of these deaths occurred in Arizona, with California placing second for migrant deaths. Below are a few of the victims' stories.

June 16: A woman, 8 ½ months pregnant, loses her unborn baby crossing the desert due to heat related injuries. She is found in Yuma, Arizona.

June 17: An unidentified male body is found dead on the Tohona O'odham Indian Reservation in Arizona.

June 17: A male body is found on a trail south of the Silverbell Mine near Marana, Arizona. Heat exhaustion was the cause of death. The man appeared to have been dead for several days.

June 19: A man is discovered by Border Patrol near Calexico, California. While being apprehended, the man collapses and fails to respond to resuscitation. He is transported to a hospital where he later dies.

June 21: A man in his late 30's is found dead from exposure to the elements in the desert near Rancho Seco, Arizona. Another migrant passed the man sleeping along the trail and informed the Border Patrol, but it was too late.

June 23: A 40-year-old man is found dead from exposure in the desert, east of Nogales in Santa Cruz, Arizona.

June 23: A car carrying a man and a woman is pulled over around 10 pm on Arizona 90 in Cochise, Arizona. The man is unconscious and convulsing. He is flown to University Medical Center and dies the next morning.

June 25: The body of a man is found south of Interstate 8 in Yuma, Arizona. The cause of death is attributed to heat related injuries.

June 25: A woman is discovered dead on a ranch in Pima County, Arizona.

June 25: A man traveling with his cousin dies 1.5 miles south of State Route 86, near milepost 103.5 in Pima County, Arizona. His cousin told Border Patrol that they had run out of water the day before.

June 27: A man is found dead after his brother-in-law and 3 others who are rescued, tell Border Patrol that one had been left behind. The body is found on the Tohona O'odham Indian Reservation in Arizona.

June 27: A 22-year-old man from Jalisco, Mexico, drowns in the Salinity Canal between County 21st and 22nd streets, near San Luis, Arizona.

June 29: Border Patrol apprehends a group of 5 migrants who disclosed they had left another man behind in distress. The body is found dead from heat exhaustion 2 kilometers south of the Canoa rest stop on I-19 in Pima County, Arizona.

June 30: An unidentified body is found lying on its right side semi face down, three miles east of the Village of Ak Chin on the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation in Arizona. The body is found near a backpack and a small burn area in a clearing. The body appeared to have been there for several days.