

Emergency Response in the Borderlands: Separate and Unequal

There is a separate and unequal emergency response system for undocumented border crossers in need of search and rescue. In the borderlands, when a citizen or tourist is lost in a remote area and contacts 911, the case is handled by local county search and rescue teams. If 911 dispatchers profile the caller as being an undocumented border crosser, however, the call is instead transferred to Border Patrol.

What is different about the search responses for undocumented people compared to citizens?*

When US citizens and foreign tourists go missing in remote areas, dedicated local search and rescue (SAR) teams respond quickly to the scene. Responses often involve outside observers and public transparency, multiple agency participation and funding, involvement of external resources and experts, and active support for a missing person's loved ones. When Border Patrol searches for undocumented border crossers, they typically work alone and with no oversight or transparency about what steps they are taking, if any.



Our research and analysis of data indicates that Border Patrol is routinely unresponsive to requests for emergency search and rescue. **In 63% of all emergency requests made to Border Patrol, the agency did not conduct any confirmed search or rescue response for the distressed person.** In the cases in which Border Patrol *did* confirm that they mobilized search or rescue measures, we find that their searches were seriously diminished compared to those deployed for lost citizens. We found no documented cases in which Border Patrol searched for more than three days. Some searches lasted less than one hour, and the majority lasted less than a day. Border Patrol often called off searches without locating the missing individual. **27% of Border Patrol searches ended in disappearance.**



Local county search and rescue teams responding to cases involving US citizens, on the other hand, report a nearly 100% success rate. Cases are very rarely called off without accounting for the lost individual. Government officials treat missing person scenarios involving lost hikers as genuine emergencies, worthy of deploying all available resources and personnel.

*We use the term 'citizen' here as a generalization to highlight the deadly discrimination faced by undocumented border crossers. However, it is critical to acknowledge that many marginalized communities within US territory also experience diminished and discriminatory access to emergency services. Perhaps most notable is the lack of response to the ongoing crisis of missing and murdered indigenous women.

Doesn't Border Patrol have more resources than local search teams?

Border Patrol is the most heavily resourced federal law enforcement agency in the United States, with billions of dollars at its disposal. However, only .03% of this budget is dedicated to search and rescue. We document numerous cases in which Border Patrol agents claimed that they lack the resources necessary to respond to reported emergencies. In one case, Border Patrol called off a search because they didn't want to "waste any more resources on it." The reality is that Border Patrol's "resources" are almost entirely dedicated to enforcement rather than to rescue.

"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, US Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue Unit (BORSTAR)

What are some of the consequences of Border Patrol's failure to adequately respond to SAR requests?

Government agencies often fail to respond to SAR requests for people who may be actively dying. According to Border Patrol's official numbers, 7,805 remains have been recovered from the US borderlands since 1998. However, studies have shown this to be a vast undercount.



We document 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 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." **Advocates suggest that the true number of deaths is three to ten times higher than the number of recovered remains.**

What should we do about it?

Adequate and non-discriminatory search and rescue efforts will never be sufficient to address the massive loss of life caused by US immigration policy and the militarization of the US-Mexico border. Only by ending the policy of Prevention through Deterrence, which funnels people crossing the border into remote and deadly terrain, can federal agencies address the crisis they have created.

Until then, border counties must end the deadly and discriminatory practice of transferring emergency calls to Border Patrol. We call on government agencies to establish borderlands emergency response systems that are fully separate from immigration enforcement. These emergencies must always be treated with universal urgency, eliciting the dedicated and timely mobilization of resources to prevent loss of life.

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