

Unfit Responders: Border Patrol's Role in Search and Rescue

Border Patrol's enforcement priority is in direct conflict with their ability to act as a search and rescue organization. The guiding policy of the agency is designed to endanger lives, and agents' daily actions actively place people in harm's way. Border Patrol can never provide the solution to a crisis of their own making.



Border Patrol Created a Search and Rescue Crisis

There is a massive need for emergency search and rescue in the borderlands. This is a direct result of the US Border Patrol's strategy of "Prevention through Deterrence," which deliberately pushes people crossing the border into remote and dangerous terrain. As a result, untold thousands of people have lost their lives. Border Patrol officially counts 7,805 recovered remains in the borderlands since 1998, but thousands of remains are never recovered or counted. Our team estimates that the true death toll may be three to ten times as high, with as many as 80,000 people killed or disappeared by border enforcement strategy.

Left to Die: Border Patrol Emergency Non-Response

Border Patrol has monopolized emergency search and rescue services for undocumented border crossers in distress. When counties in the borderlands receive 911 calls from people perceived to be crossing the border, they do not mobilize local search and rescue resources as they would for lost hikers or US citizens. Instead, all such calls are transferred to Border Patrol.

Our team analyzed 456 emergency cases received between 2015–2016 by La Coalición de Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line, a community-based effort to help families locate their loved ones who go missing after crossing the southern border. Our data reveals Border Patrol to be fatally unresponsive to emergency search and rescue requests. **In cases where families and advocates asked Border Patrol to mobilize a search and rescue operation, the agency did not conduct a confirmed search in 63% of cases.** In the cases in which Border Patrol *did* mobilize a search or rescue mission, efforts were seriously diminished in duration and resources. Searches rarely lasted longer than a day, and **27% of Border Patrol searches ended in disappearance.**

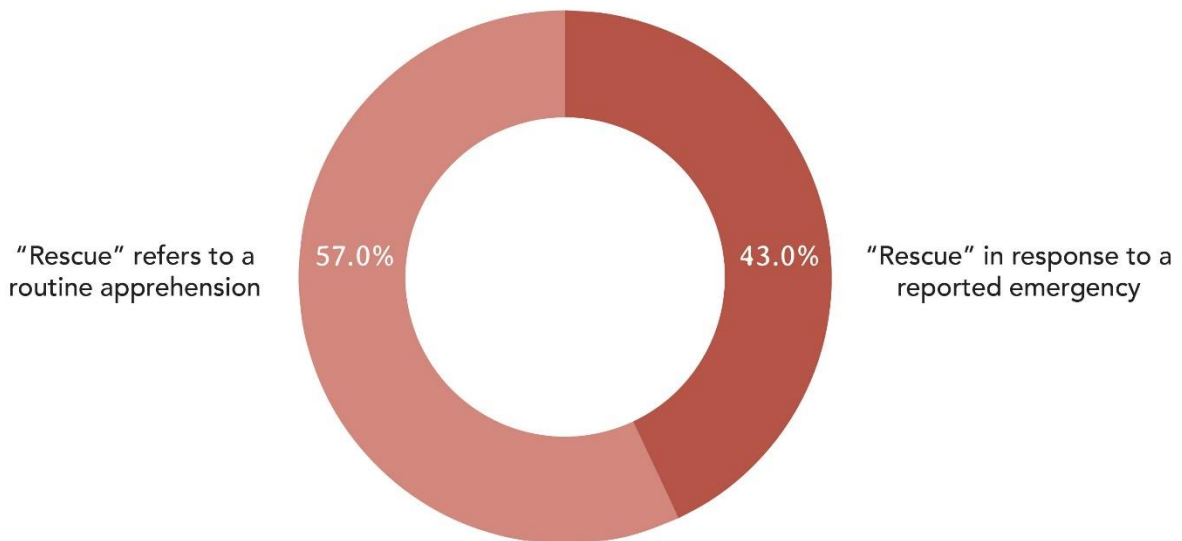
From Chase and Scatter to "Search and Rescue"

Border Patrol agents routinely chase groups of migrating people through the wilderness, causing them to scatter and become lost. **In our analysis, we find that Border Patrol is more than twice as likely to take part in *directly* causing a person to go missing by dangerous enforcement tactics than they are to participate in finding a distressed person.** No matter how well-resourced Border Patrol becomes when it comes to search and rescue operations, the agency will at best only ever be responding to a constantly growing number of emergencies of its own making.

Border Patrol's 'Rescue' Propaganda

Border Patrol carries out an aggressive public relations campaign to showcase their "humanitarian" efforts. This campaign of disinformation creates the appearance that the agency is meaningfully responding to the missing persons crisis, while denying their own role in creating it.

Our team analyzed 157 rescue-related press statements released by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) over a 2-year period. We found that many of the press releases portray Border Patrol's daily policing activities as "rescues." **57% of all Border Patrol "rescues" in fact describe a routine arrest, rather than a response to a request for emergency assistance.**



Our Demands: Decriminalize, Demilitarize, Dismantle

Ultimately, adequate search and rescue efforts will never be sufficient to prevent the loss of life caused by US border enforcement policies. We must end the policy of Prevention Through Deterrence, demilitarize the border, decriminalize migration, and dismantle the US Border Patrol.

In the meantime, we call on government agencies to establish new borderlands emergency response systems that are fully separate from immigration and border enforcement. Such response systems must be timely and well-funded, with a front line of medical responders and trained search and rescue teams who will scan the landscape with an empathetic eye rather than a punitive one.

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