

FACTSHEET: CRISIS OF DISAPPEARANCE

There is a crisis of disappearance in the US-Mexico borderlands. La Coalición de Derechos Humanos and No More Deaths are publishing a report that sheds light on how - over the past 20 years and across 2,000 miles of border - tens of thousands of people have disappeared while attempting to cross into the United States.

WHO ARE THE DISAPPEARED?

The word “disappeared” refers to those people who go missing while crossing the border because of the actions of the US Border Patrol.

In the 2015 calendar year alone, the community organization La Coalición de Derechos Humanos opened over 1,200 cases of people who were reported missing by friends and family following an attempt to cross the US–Mexico border.

According to our survey, in 21.4% of the cases where people crossed through remote wilderness, they were disappeared.



WHY USE THE TERM “DISAPPEARED”?

We use the language of disappearance to name an underreported dimension of the violence in the Southwest borderlands. This violence is experienced both by those who go missing and by their loved ones, who are left wondering if they are alive. “Disappearance” is also the very language repeated by families who called Derechos Humanos’ Missing Migrant Crisis Line and frequently declared:

“Estoy buscando a una persona desaparecida.” (I’m looking for a disappeared person.)

We also use this language in order to draw parallels with historical examples of state violence and repression.

ISN’T THIS DIFFERENT FROM DISAPPEARANCES COMMITTED BY POLICE IN MEXICO, CHILE, AND OTHER COUNTRIES?

The UN provided a definition of “enforced disappearance” in a treaty ratified in 2006¹ which we believe encompasses the disappearances of people attempting to cross the US-Mexico border. As activists and human rights organizations in Mexico have pointed out, the disappearance of border crossers is indirect disappearance, i.e. no specific individuals are targeted.

In the US Southwest, the disappearance of hundreds of border crossers is not a natural or inevitable phenomenon, but rather a direct consequence of US border-enforcement policies and practices. The US government has failed to acknowledge the violent impacts of their policies on individuals and families, which effectively bars victims from seeking recourse.

1 <http://www.un.org/en/events/disappearancesday/background.shtml>

PREVENTION THROUGH DETERRENCE

WHY ARE DEATHS AND DISAPPEARANCES HAPPENING?

In 1994, the US Border Patrol implemented the policy of Prevention Through Deterrence. With a goal of controlling the Southwest border, the Border Patrol increased the risk of unauthorized entry. The agency built walls and placed more agents in urban ports in order to push migration into wilderness areas. The agency hoped that border crossers would now find themselves “in mortal danger” when attempting to enter the US.² The increased danger, and even death, was intended to deter other people from crossing, with the overall goal of preventing migration.

Twenty years later, the US Border Patrol has also put in place surveillance towers, infrared cameras, and sensors. Now, the border between the US and Mexico is not a line to cross but a vast zone of enforcement that extends into the US interior.

A STORY OF DISAPPEARANCE

The brother of Juan Manuel called the The Missing Migrant Crisis Line in November of 2015 looking for information about his brother, who had attempted to cross through South Texas. Someone from Juan Manuel’s group had called from detention to tell his family that Border Patrol agents had chased the group in the backcountry and apprehended everyone in the group except for Juan Manuel. Juan Manuel remains disappeared to this day. His family is currently working to submit a DNA sample to the national missing person’s DNA databank, so that they might be reunited with Juan Manuel’s body.



WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

Some of our recommendations:

- Abolish the strategy of Prevention through Deterrence which, since its adoption by the US Border Patrol in 1994, is responsible for pushing unauthorized border crossers into remote and deadly terrain.
- Make the preservation of human life, human rights, and human dignity the cornerstone and guiding principle of all Department of Homeland Security operations.

You can find more recommendations by reading the full report.

To download the full report: www.thedisappearedreport.org

For more information on No More Deaths: www.nomoredeaths.org

For more information on La Coalición de Derechos Humanos: derechoshumanosaz.net

2 US Border Patrol, Border Patrol Strategic Plan: 1994 and Beyond, July 1994, <http://cw.routledge.com/text-books/9780415996945/gov-docs/1994.pdf>.