

## Executive Summary

# Left to Die:

## Border Patrol, Search and Rescue, and the Crisis of Disappearance

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“If my dad was a different person, or a citizen, I think he would have received a different search.”

-Daughter of a 52-year old man from Honduras who disappeared after crossing the US-Mexico border

### THE SEARCH AND RESCUE CRISIS IN THE BORDERLANDS

Since 1994, the US Border Patrol policy of “Prevention Through Deterrence” has deliberately diverted migration away from relatively safe urban areas into remote wilderness regions, or what the agency itself describes as “more hostile terrain.”

This policy is directly responsible for the death and disappearance of thousands of people. Border Patrol claims that 7,805 human remains have been recovered from the Southwest borderlands since the late nineties, but studies have shown this to be a vast undercount. A 2017 investigation by USA Today, for example, found that bureaucratic inconsistencies and Border Patrol’s “lack of effort or interest in determining the actual number of dead migrants,” resulted in the agency undercounting known deaths along the border by 25% to 300%. Further, the number of recovered remains does not account for the untold thousands who are never found or counted. We estimate that the true death toll resulting from Border Patrol’s Prevention Through Deterrence strategy could be three to ten times higher than official counts, with as many as 80,000 people killed or disappeared by US border enforcement policy.

**There is an urgent and growing need for emergency search and rescue services for undocumented people in distress in the US-Mexico borderlands.** However, the same agency responsible for causing these emergencies—the US Border Patrol—has positioned itself as the primary and often sole responder to distress calls involving undocumented people. Local law enforcement agencies transfer all emergency calls regarding undocumented border crossers—whether received directly from the distressed individual themselves, or from a family member or advocate—directly to Border Patrol, an agency with an aggressive enforcement mission, notorious for its lack of accountability and public transparency. Border Patrol agents are thus positioned as ad hoc emergency responders when apprehending people in the desert. Migrants commonly present information about others who have become lost, injured, or have died on their journey. Often, it is then at the agent's discretion whether or not to search for these missing individuals.

There is no publicly available data supporting Border Patrol's ability to adequately provide search and rescue. For decades, families and communities searching for the disappeared have experienced the agency failing to treat missing persons cases with urgency, or refusing to

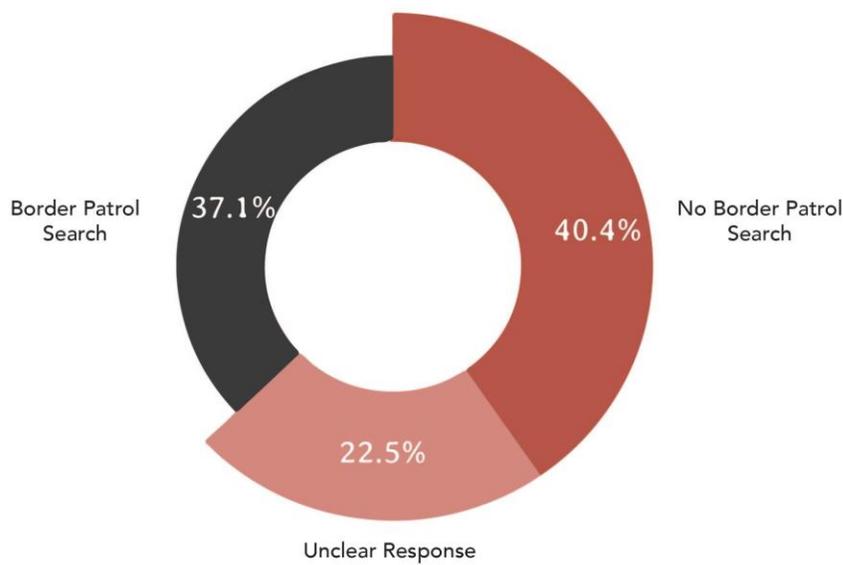
respond to emergencies at all. In our investigation into Border Patrol's handling of emergencies, we analyzed records kept by La Coalición de Derechos Humanos, a non-governmental community organization based in Tucson, Arizona that spent over a decade fielding emergency calls from individuals reporting missing loved ones in distress. Our team analyzed case notes from 456 emergency cases received by the Derechos Humanos Missing Migrant Crisis Line over a 2-year period. **Our analysis shows that Border Patrol is fatally unresponsive to emergency search and rescue requests.**

## Key Findings:

### BORDER PATROL NON-RESPONSE TO EMERGENCIES

- **In 63% of all distress calls referred to Border Patrol, the agency did not conduct any confirmed search or rescue mobilization whatsoever.**
  - In one case, an agent told a volunteer that they needed to send a formal request for Search & Rescue through postal mail. When the volunteer questioned this and pushed for a faster response, the agent said that they could not help with a faster response because, "It's a Sunday, ma'am."*
  - **In 40% of cases where a search response was requested from Border Patrol, there was clear documentation that Border Patrol did not search at all.**
  - **In another 23% of cases, it was unclear or unconfirmed whether or not Border Patrol had mobilized a search. Without confirmation, families are left not knowing what steps, if any, are being taken to locate their missing loved ones.**

Border Patrol Non-Response to  
Emergency Search and Rescue Requests



## WHEN BORDER PATROL DOES MOBILIZE, THE RESPONSE IS DIMINISHED, DISCRIMINATORY, AND DEADLY

- In the 37% of cases in which Border Patrol *did* confirm a search or rescue mobilization, we find that the quality and scope of the agency's efforts were seriously diminished in both time and resources, when compared with search and rescue protocols and resources deployed by government agencies for lost and/or distressed US citizens. **In the cases we analyzed, the longest amount of time that Border Patrol spent on a search was three days. In most of these emergency cases, however, searches lasted for less than one day, and in some cases, less than one hour.**



- **27% of all confirmed Border Patrol searches ended in disappearance, meaning that the person was never rescued, nor were their remains located, recovered, or identified.**

## BORDER PATROL OBSTRUCTION OF FAMILY AND HUMANITARIAN SEARCH EFFORTS

When government agencies fail to respond, families and community-based search and rescue groups take on the burden of searching for the missing. **Far from cooperating with these efforts, Border Patrol agents obstructed family and humanitarian search efforts in at least 25% of all emergency cases analyzed by our team.** We identified the following patterns of Border Patrol obstruction of community-based search efforts:

- Criminalizing and harassing humanitarian search and rescue volunteers
- Denying search and rescue teams access to land areas
- Denying humanitarian parole for family members attempting to search for their loved ones
- Failing to share critical information necessary for a search
- Denying access to interview eyewitnesses being held in Border Patrol or ICE custody
- Redirecting callers reporting a missing person back and forth between multiple government agencies and initiatives (bureaucratic run-around)
- Providing false or misleading information to families or humanitarian search volunteers

## BORDER PATROL TACTICS CREATE EMERGENCIES

- **Border Patrol is directly responsible for creating emergency situations in the first place.** On a daily basis, Border Patrol agents chase and scatter groups of people through rugged terrain, causing many to become injured, disoriented, and separated from guides and traveling companions.

**In the emergency cases we analyzed, we found that Border Patrol was more than twice as likely to take part in *directly causing a person to go missing through dangerous enforcement tactics* than they were to participate in locating a distressed person.**



## DEMANDS AND CONCLUSIONS: BORDER ENFORCERS ARE UNFIT RESCUERS

Far from constituting an accidental tragedy, we find that Border Patrol's practice of abandoning people to die lies at the heart of contemporary US border enforcement strategy. Adequate search and rescue services alone will never end the humanitarian emergency in the borderlands. No matter how well-positioned or resourced the US Border Patrol becomes for conducting searches and rescues, the agency will at best only ever be responding to a constantly growing number of emergencies of its own making. Our report lays out a series of interim recommendations that would help alleviate suffering, death, and disappearance in the border region.

**Ultimately, however, the only solution to the ongoing humanitarian crisis is a transformative one: *demilitarize the border, decriminalize migration, and abolish the US Border Patrol.***

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