

# Separate & Deadly:

## Segregation of 911 Emergency Services in the Arizona Borderlands EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



*Separate & Deadly* examines the complicity of local, county-level law enforcement agencies and emergency services in exacerbating a crisis of mass death and disappearance in the US-Mexico borderlands through the discriminatory practice of segregating 911 calls on the basis of presumed citizenship status. The report focuses on Pima County, Arizona, one of the deadliest migration corridors in the United States, where 911 dispatchers receive approximately 1,500 migration-related distress calls annually.

In Pima County, as in other counties in the border zone, 911 calls from people assumed to be migrants are directed to Border Patrol, while callers who are assumed to be US citizens or foreign tourists are directed to the Pima County Sheriff's Department (PCSD)'s Search and Rescue team and local emergency services. The very existence of this segregated 911-response system, which profiles callers based on perceived immigration status, is unconstitutional. This system is not only separate; it is also unequal: Callers presumed to be crossing the border receive a systematically diminished emergency response, if they receive any response at all. This separate and unequal treatment causes many people to die and disappear every year.

### Data Sources

*Separate & Deadly* analyzes findings from a review of 2,193 911 calls (representing approximately 683 individual callers) received by Pima County dispatchers and transferred to Border Patrol between 2016 and 2018. To add to our analysis, volunteers also reviewed 64 audio recordings of 911 calls transferred to Border Patrol in June 2022, 65 "Lost Person" incident reports from June 2022, 171 audio files of 911 calls handled by Pima County's Search and Rescue team (calls from



presumed US citizens), along with humanitarian aid volunteer testimonies and official Pima County rules and regulations.

## Profiling and Discrimination

*In May 2019, 17-year-old Daniel fell ill while crossing the border through the Arizona desert. He fainted and was not able to continue walking. His traveling companions left him within a 10-15 minute walk from a paved road near Marana, AZ, a suburb of Tucson, and contacted his relatives to tell them what had happened. His family contacted Border Patrol, who declined to respond, and also called 911 and spoke with Pima County dispatchers. His cousin relayed his condition and his location, as his companions had sent a screenshot of the nearest cross street. Initially, she was told that the fire department and two sheriff's deputies were en route to the location. However, the search efforts were called off when a PCSD Search and Rescue deputy decided the case should be transferred to Border Patrol because Daniel was a "known illegal immigrant."*

*The sheriff's deputies told Daniel's family that they had transferred the case to Border Patrol, but were unable to provide any contact information or way to follow up with the agency about the case. They attempted to contact someone at the Border Patrol station, but were unable to find anyone who could tell them whether or not anyone was searching for Daniel. Three days after they had called 911, the Mexican consulate contacted Daniel's family and informed them that he had been found dead in the location described by his traveling companions.*

**PCSD claims that they do not make decisions on how to respond to a call based on immigration status, but rather on the location of the caller. Our analysis finds this to be blatantly false.** We find cases of Spanish-speaking callers close to urban centers who are presumed to be undocumented and are immediately transferred to Border Patrol. We also find cases of English-speaking callers presumed to be US citizens calling from the same geographical regions who are responded to in-house. In most cases, Pima County 911 dispatchers make a rapid determination of a caller's immigration status based on the caller speaking Spanish and stating that they are "lost."

**In some recordings, this discrimination is stated outright.** In one 2018 recording, Maricopa County 911 dispatchers attempted to transfer a caller to Pima County, explaining that the caller was "lost in the desert." In response, the Pima County dispatcher asked, **"So he's an illegal as far as you can tell?"** He then explained, "actually we're not going to deal with it," and instructed the Maricopa dispatcher to transfer the caller straight to Border Patrol.

**Of the 2,193 calls we analyzed, not a single call was conveyed to Pima County Search and Rescue deputies,** even when the person continued to call for hours saying that no one had rescued them, and even when Border Patrol had not answered the transfer. Despite PCSD's robust Search and Rescue resources and near 100% success rate in searches for lost citizens, none of these resources are deployed in the vast majority of cases involving undocumented callers. This segregated and diminished response based on a caller's presumed citizenship status not only violates PCSD's own internal policies, but is a violation of Equal Protection under the 14th Amendment.

## 911 Dispatcher Misconduct

*In a 911 call from June 2022, a Spanish-speaking caller is heard attempting to describe his dire situation and his location to a Pima County dispatcher, saying that he was wet and cold, and he was near antennas. The dispatcher interrupted him saying "I don't understand, un momento" and transferred the call to Border Patrol. The caller can be heard asking for help, describing his clothing, and saying his cell phone battery was low. Rather than anyone explaining what was happening to the caller or taking note of what he was saying, Border Patrol told the caller to shut up ("cállate, cállate!"). The dispatcher relayed the caller's GPS coordinates, which were highly inaccurate, then hung up. The corresponding incident report reads: "Border Patrol was not able to locate the caller and without a name they cannot check their database. The location was Phase 1 and plotted within 5384 meters. No additional calls have come from the subject... At this time the caller has not been identified and not located. NFI [No further involvement]."*

**Lack of Language Fluency: In 68% of the 911 calls reviewed, the dispatcher lacked sufficient fluency in Spanish to be able to effectively communicate with a caller in distress.** Given the volume of life-threatening emergencies being reported in the borderlands by monolingual Spanish speakers, Pima County 911 dispatchers are not equipped to provide the services they are mandated to, if they are not qualified to respond to a Spanish-speaking caller.

**No Notice of Transfer: In 50% of cases analyzed, there was no notice given to the caller that they were about to be transferred to Border Patrol,** and 13% of the time, notice was given only in English to Spanish-speaking callers. Callers who abruptly hear a dial tone and ringing with no explanation may hang up their phone in confusion, believing their call was lost.

**Lack of Missing Person Intake and Medical Assessment: In 99% of the calls we analyzed, Pima County dispatch conducted no intake,** meaning they collected no information whatsoever about a caller's name, location, description, medical condition, etc. This routine failure to collect crucial information from callers at the first point of contact leads to a deadly

cycle: dispatch collects no information from callers, then cites the lack of information as a reason not to activate a search.

*Minimal Use of Call Tracing:* Pima County dispatchers have access to cell phone tracing technology, and Border Patrol relies on GPS coordinates obtained by dispatchers for their search efforts. The accuracy of these coordinates can vary greatly: when tracing a call's origin, dispatch either receives "Phase 1" GPS coordinates, which are highly inaccurate, or "Phase 2" coordinates, which are much more pinpointed. The accuracy of these coordinates can be a matter of life and death, as Border Patrol routinely declines to search for callers who only have Phase 1 coordinates. In a handful of the cases we analyzed, county dispatchers remained on the line after transferring a call to Border Patrol to try to obtain better coordinates. This has resulted in dispatch suddenly getting Phase 2 coordinates after several minutes of trying, massively increasing the likelihood of rescue. However, **in the majority of cases dispatch immediately hangs up after transferring a caller to Border Patrol with no further attempt to improve the accuracy of the coordinates.**

### No County Response in Absence of Border Patrol Response

*In March 2018, a man contacted 911 eleven times over the course of ten hours. He was lost and alone. As the hours passed, his condition clearly deteriorated, and his voice began to fade. It appeared that Border Patrol was not actively searching for him, despite his call having been traced within five meters of accuracy. Pima County dispatchers continued to transfer his call to Border Patrol every time he called, despite being aware that it was the same caller, still stranded in the desert. The county's own Search and Rescue team was never notified, and the county never activated a search for him. Eventually the man stopped calling. The outcome of his case is unknown.*

PCSD's official justification for the practice of transferring these calls to Border Patrol is that, because their agents are heavily present throughout the desert borderlands, they will be able to respond more quickly to the caller's location. However, the numerous documented cases in which PCSD did not deploy resources despite receiving no confirmation that Border Patrol had located the lost individuals—or even when they have direct confirmation that Border Patrol did not search or rescue the lost person—makes it clear that **the Pima County Sheriff's Department has simply washed their hands of any responsibility for emergencies involving undocumented migrants.**

Out of 64 emergency cases received by Pima County in June 2022, there were 17 cases in which the distressed person was never located, or there was no documentation on the case

outcome. In at least 10 of those cases, the Pima County Sheriff's Department took no further action at all upon learning that the 911 caller had not been located by Border Patrol. In the remaining cases there was either no documentation of measures taken, or the county took minimal action such as attempting to call the person back or geolocate their phone, but did not deploy actual resources or personnel.

## Compromised Care: EMS Collaboration with Border Patrol

Even when an undocumented person in distress is located and rescued, they continue to face a discriminatory system when seeking emergency medical care and definitive care at local hospitals. Border Patrol agents who may lack medical training are given the authority to detain or deport an individual in distress without further medical treatment. Border Patrol agents follow people in distress to hospitals, where they are often handcuffed to beds, denied phone calls and visits, and at times deported while still in critical medical condition. The infiltration of Border Patrol into emergency medical services leads to regular violations of medical ethics.

## Demands and Recommendations

Ultimately, emergency services will never be enough to end the crisis of death and disappearance in the borderlands. To truly address the suffering of migrating people in the US-Mexico borderlands, we must end the policy of Prevention Through Deterrence, demilitarize the border, and abolish the US Border Patrol. In the meantime, we must establish dedicated borderland emergency response systems that are timely, well-funded, and *fully separate from immigration enforcement*. We offer these interim demands for improving the 911 dispatch system as harm reduction measures:

- ❖ Require PCSD to maintain responsibility for the outcome of all people lost and stranded within their jurisdiction, responding to all people with the same resources regardless of immigration status
- ❖ Require 911 dispatch centers in borderland communities to employ fluent Spanish speakers
- ❖ Require 911 dispatchers to complete a full missing-persons intake for all lost callers
- ❖ Require 911 dispatchers to inform all callers, in their primary language, of any upcoming call transfers, advising the caller to not hang up. Dispatch should then remain on the line to continue to seek improved GPS coordinates.

