



A Border Patrol Riverine Unit conducts patrols in South Texas, Laredo, along the Rio Grande Valley River.

PHOTO BY DONNA BURTON, CBP PHOTOGRAPHY

On the Front Lines

Border Security, Migration, and Humanitarian Concerns in South Texas

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In December 2014, WOLA paid its third visit in two years to the Rio Grande Valley, the part of the U.S.-Mexico border closest to the Gulf of Mexico, in south Texas. This region made headlines in summer 2014 as tens of thousands of unaccompanied Central American children crossed the border here.

This crisis has declined somewhat, but 2015 is still on track to be the second-largest year on record for Central American child and family migration to the United States, most of it in the Rio Grande Valley.

But this is just one crisis that this region is suffering. The Rio Grande Valley now records the highest number of migrants dying of dehydration and exposure as they walk through its arid ranch lands. It sits across from what is today the most violent segment of Mexico's border zone. This segment receives the largest portion of Mexican citizens deported by the United States, who face acute safety concerns upon their return.

The situation on both sides of the border is extremely difficult: for migrants, for residents on the Mexican side, and for U.S. and Mexican law enforcement personnel who have to contend with it. It requires Washington and Mexico City to take bold and humane actions. This report recommends several.

Introduction

The humanitarian emergency of summer 2014 has ebbed. Images of unaccompanied migrant children packed into makeshift refugee facilities no longer dominate national and world headlines. Still, the conditions that caused the emergency have barely changed, while the easternmost segment of the U.S.-Mexico border is reeling from this and other crises.

Visit the bus terminal in downtown McAllen, Texas (population 135,000), as WOLA staff did on December 8, 2014. It is clean and unremarkable—except for every day at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m., when a bus hired by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) shows up at the front door. It unloads a group of children and parents (mostly mothers) from Central America. Looking bewildered and bedraggled, they line up to buy bus tickets to destinations throughout the United States. When WOLA visited, all adults were wearing GPS-transmitting ankle bracelets, like convicts given conditional parole.

The bus terminal's regular arrivals are coming in smaller groups than they were during March–July 2014. During those few months, nearly 100,000 parents, children, and unaccompanied children—most fleeing violence that had made conditions unlivable in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—crossed the border and turned themselves in to U.S. authorities, primarily in south Texas. They quickly overwhelmed U.S. agencies' capacities, producing heartbreaking images of hundreds of parentless children packed for weeks into Border Patrol detention facilities designed to hold adults for a day or two.

Since then, U.S. government agencies have gotten some things right. But the conditions they faced

several months ago—insufficient resources, a broken immigration system, violence in Central America and along the Mexican side of the border—remain in place. Indeed, south Texas government officials, citizen advocates, and residents are bracing for another, smaller but still historic, wave this year.

McAllen is the second-largest of a string of small cities in Texas's Rio Grande Valley region, encompassing three counties along the border with Mexico, at the state's southernmost extremity. (Other cities include Harlingen, Edinburg, Pharr, and Brownsville, which is the largest.) More than 85 percent of the 1.3 million residents of the Rio Grande Valley, or "RGV," as the area is called, are of Hispanic, mostly Mexican, descent. Across the Rio Grande—the border river that meanders and twists across a floodplain as it nears the Gulf of Mexico—are the Mexican border cities of Reynosa and Matamoros in the northeast corner of Mexico's large, embattled state of Tamaulipas.

The Unaccompanied Children Crisis of 2014

Between October 2013 and September 2014, U.S. Border Patrol apprehended a staggering 68,541 children who arrived in the United States without a parent—77 percent more than a year earlier and 330 percent more than during October 2010 to September 2011. Of these unaccompanied minors, 75 percent came from three violence-torn Central American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.¹

The Rio Grande Valley saw most of these minors. Within the 150 border miles (316 miles if one follows every curve of the river) of the Rio Grande Valley sector, Border Patrol took 49,959 unaccompanied

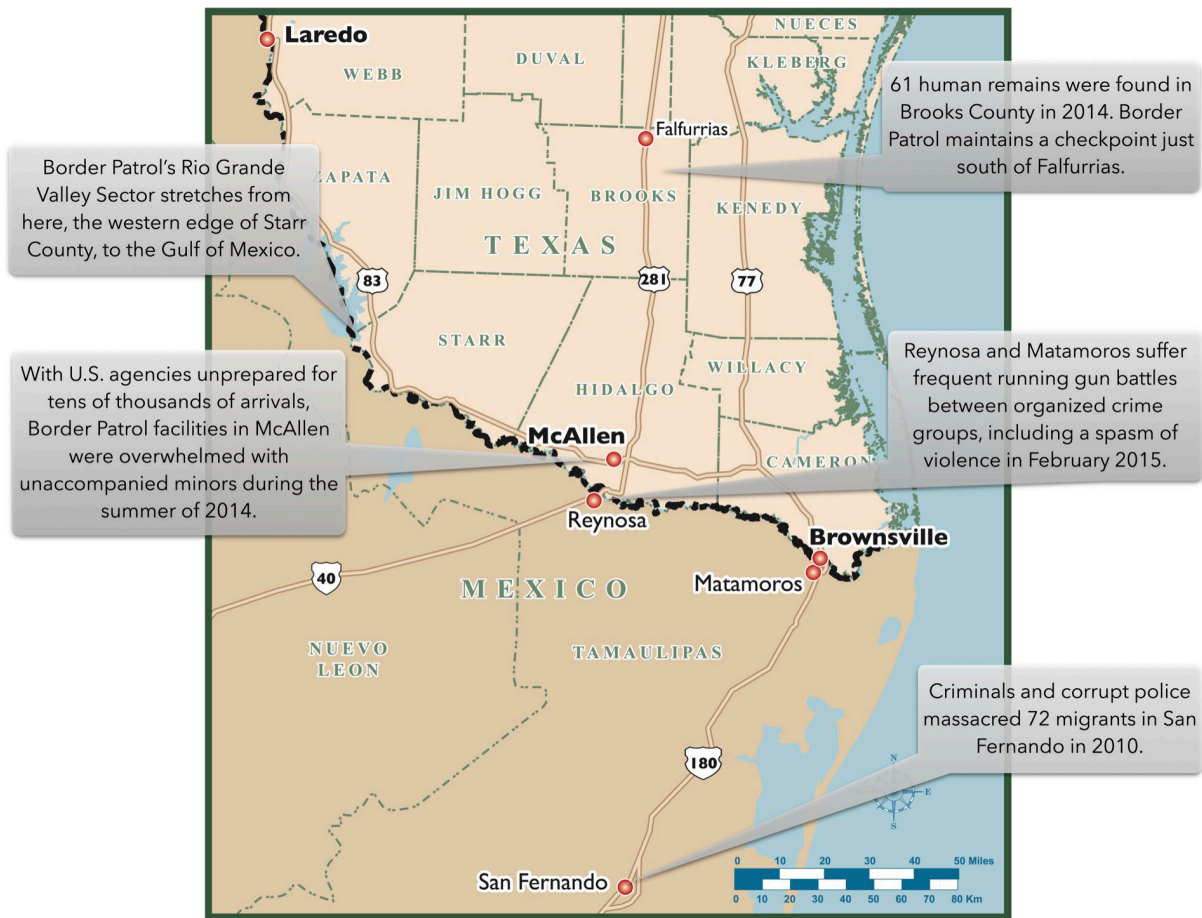
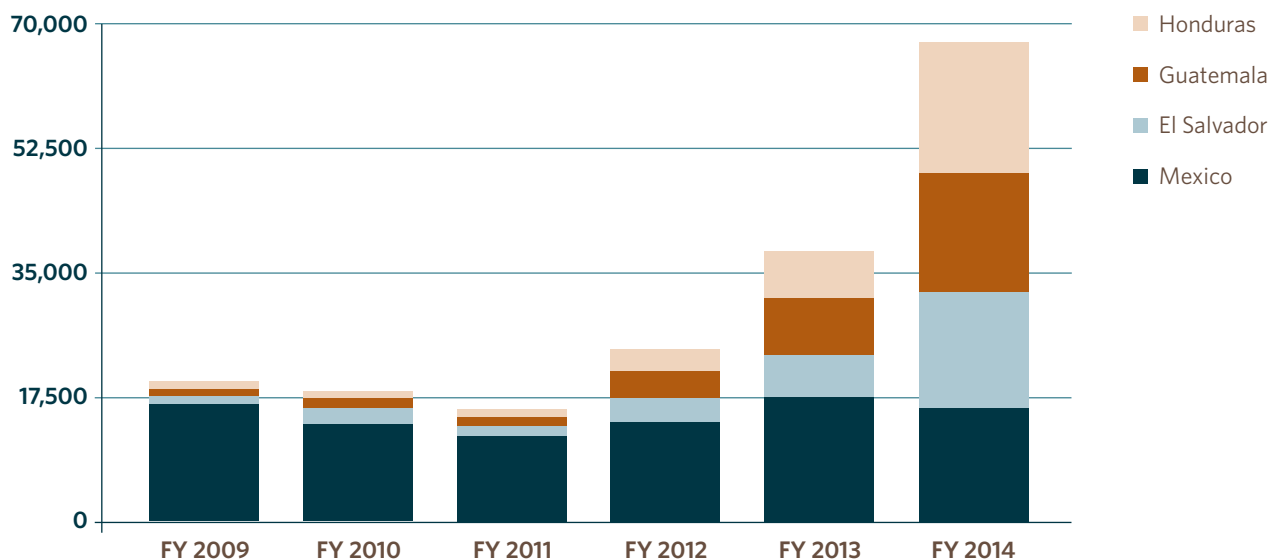


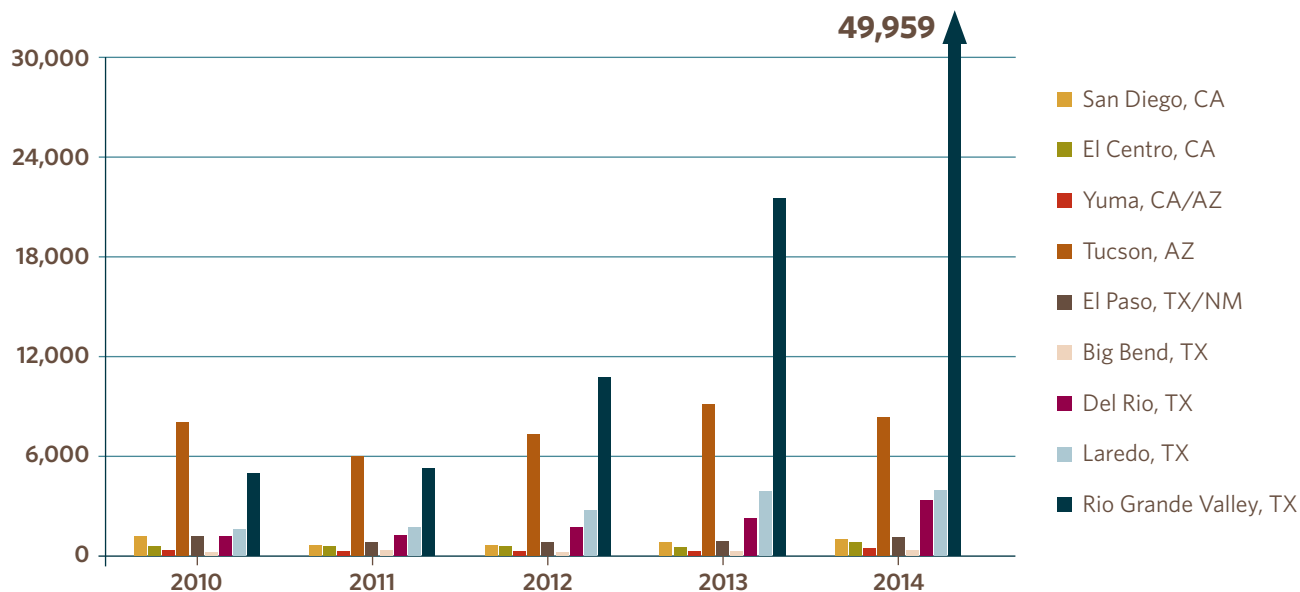
FIGURE 1: Border Patrol Apprehensions of Unaccompanied Minors



The increase in unaccompanied minor apprehensions owed entirely to arrivals from three Central American countries.

Source: <http://1.usa.gov/1j72KCR>

FIGURE 2: Unaccompanied Minors Apprehended, by Border Patrol Sector (Shown from West to East), 2010–2014



The unaccompanied minor phenomenon has been concentrated almost entirely in the Rio Grande Valley. Source: <http://1.usa.gov/1Aanzdg>

children into custody between October 2013 and September 2014, 132 percent more than in the previous 12 months. More than 7 out of every 10 unaccompanied minors found along the entire 1,960-mile U.S.-Mexico border were found in the RGV.²

During this same time period, Rio Grande Valley Border Patrol agents apprehended another 52,326 people who were members of “family units,” or parents with children, an increase of 620 percent over the previous year. These individuals, too, were mostly Central American. Between October 2013 and September 2014, more than three-quarters of all “family unit” members apprehended along the U.S.-Mexico border were detained in the Rio Grande Valley.

Border Patrol data for the first four months of FY 2015 (October 2014 through January 2015) show a 39 percent decrease in arrivals of unaccompanied minors over the same period a year earlier. Of the 10,123 unaccompanied minors apprehended so far this year border-wide, 60 percent were detained in the Rio Grande Valley—a smaller proportion than in 2014. Arrivals of family units are down 13 percent over a year ago, with 71 percent of them in the Rio Grande Valley. This pace, if sustained, would mean a smaller wave of children and families this year, but would still

make 2015 the second-largest year on record for both categories.

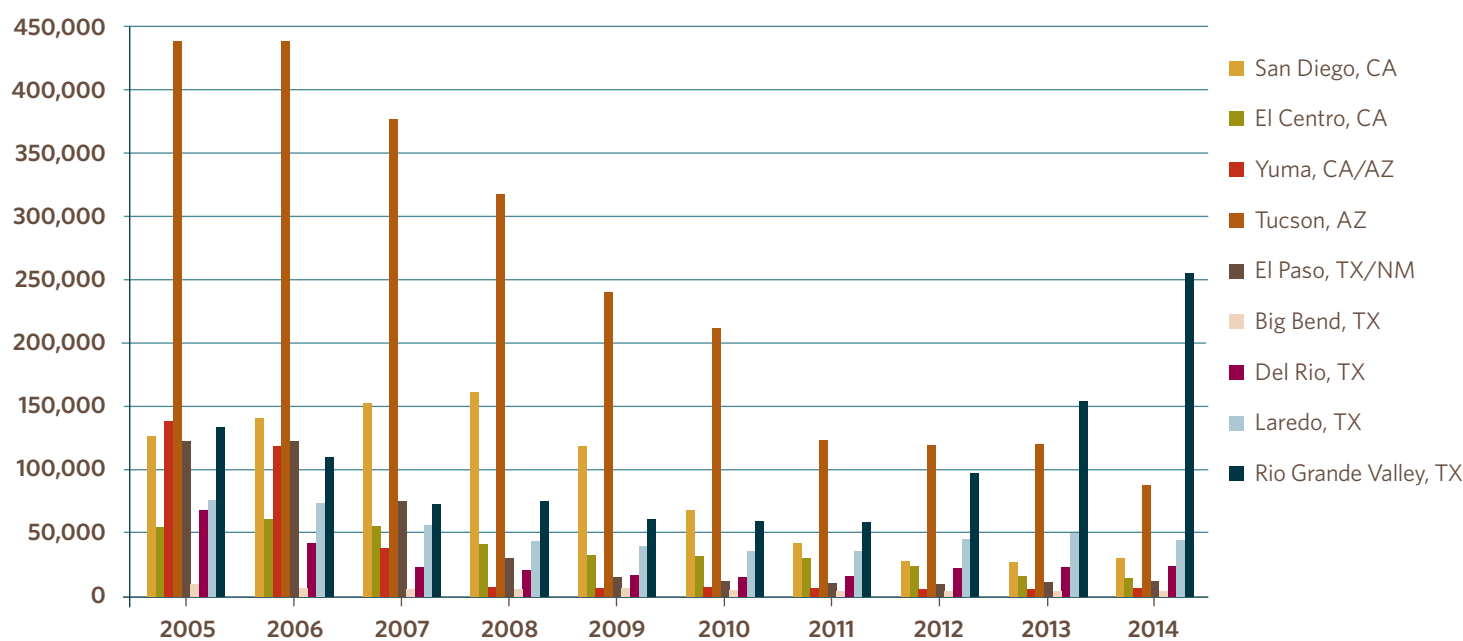
In most cases, apprehending these children and families didn’t require pursuit, as they willingly turned themselves in to U.S. authorities, often seeking them out. It became a regular practice for smugglers on the Mexican side of the river to send migrants across to waiting Border Patrol agents.

Migration is Now Concentrated in South Texas

The Rio Grande Valley was not just a destination for children and families in 2014; it also received a large number of Central American adults. Of all undocumented migrants apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border between October 1, 2013 and September 30, 2014, of any age or nationality, 53 percent (256,393 of 479,371 border-wide) were captured in this sector alone, which comprises about 10 percent of the land border. While the RGV experienced a 66 percent one-year increase in migrant apprehensions, the rest of the U.S.-Mexico border saw a 14 percent drop.³

For the first time ever, the majority of migrants whom U.S. authorities apprehended throughout the border with Mexico—53 percent in fiscal year (FY)

FIGURE 3: All Migrants Apprehended, by Border Patrol Sector (Shown from West to East), 2005–2014



The Rio Grande Valley surpassed Tucson in 2013 as the number-one sector for migrant apprehensions, and tripled Tucson in 2014.

Source: <http://1.usa.gov/1w3FEn1>

2014—were not Mexican. At 226,771, the number of Mexican citizens apprehended at the border was the least since the early 1970s. The flow of Mexican migrants, which dropped sharply with the “Great Recession” that began in 2007, continues to decrease.

On the other hand, the number of “other than Mexican” apprehended migrants—the overwhelming majority of them from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—reached a record level of 252,600 last year. Of these, more than three out of four (192,925) were apprehended in the Rio Grande Valley.

Numerous researchers, including WOLA staff, have explored the reasons for the post-2011 jump in migration from Central America, which peaked (so far) in mid-2014. These include rampant violence covering much of national territory and especially targeting young people (in 2014 homicides in El Salvador increased by 57 percent largely due to the collapse of a 2012–2014 gang truce, and it currently has one of the highest homicide rates in Latin America, alongside Honduras);⁴ poverty and sluggish economic growth, aggravated by natural disasters and drought; and

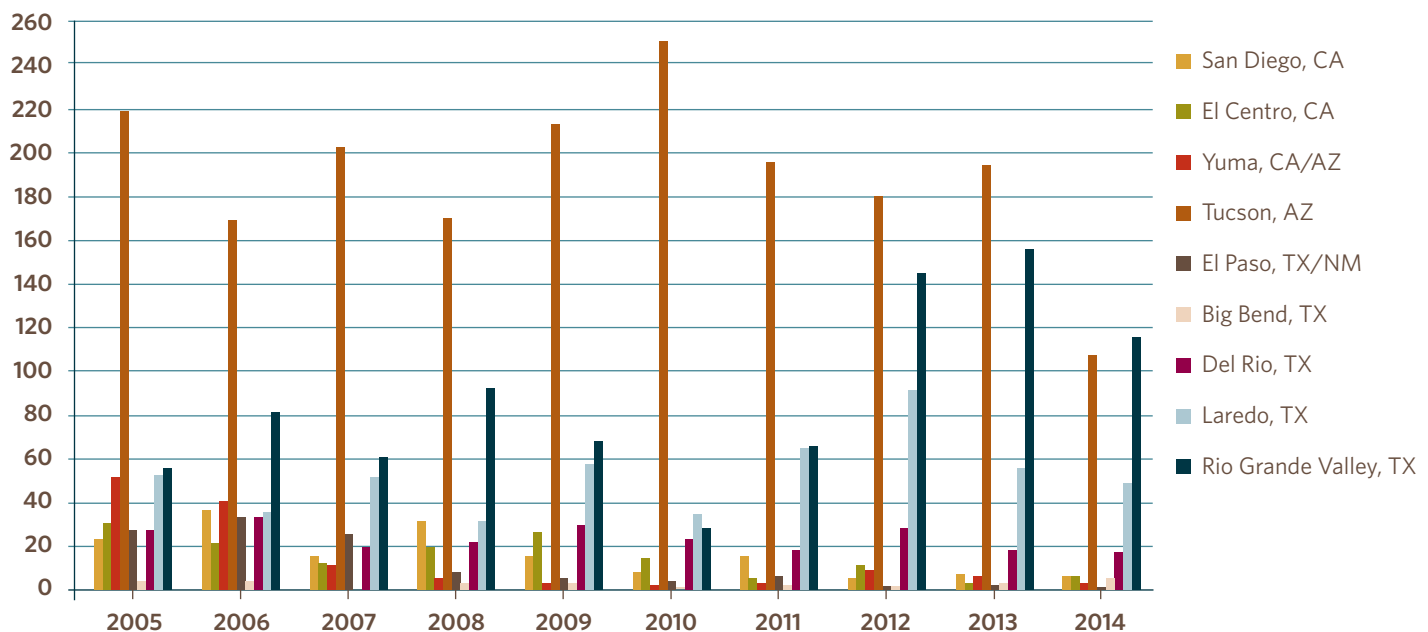
false rumors, reportedly spread by human smugglers, that the U.S. government was offering legal status documentation (“*permisos*”) to Central American parents and children.

Why, though, did three-quarters of apprehended Central Americans, and 28 percent of apprehended Mexicans, choose to cross the border into the Rio Grande Valley last year? The reasons are chiefly geography and U.S. border security policy.

Geographically, south Texas is far closer to Central America (and southern Mexico, the country’s poorest region) than are west Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, or California. Entering here minimizes the length of the dangerous trek across Mexico. Cargo train lines to Matamoros, Reynosa, and nearby Nuevo Laredo—three of ten border towns accessible from depots north of Mexico City—have promised the shortest journey atop perilous, bandit-infested rail cars, especially prior to August 2014 when the Mexican government began to curtail migrants’ ability to ride the trains.

U.S. border security policy is another key factor behind the concentration of migration in the RGV.

FIGURE 4: Migrant Remains Found, by Border Patrol Sector (Shown from West to East), 2005–2014



Though numbers are dropping overall, the Rio Grande Valley is now the sector in which authorities are finding the most remains of migrants on U.S. soil.

Source: <http://1.usa.gov/149iiVz>

The buildup of the past 20 years, during which Border Patrol has increased its staffing fivefold, focused on other border sectors that are now much quieter: San Diego, California; Tucson, Arizona; and El Paso, Texas/New Mexico. The Rio Grande Valley is not the most heavily staffed of Border Patrol's nine sectors: that is Tucson, which as of September 2014 had 4,052 agents compared to 3,064 in the RGV. Between 1998 and 2012, Tucson led all sectors in apprehensions, but by 2014 the RGV saw nearly three times as many. The buildup has shown that when Border Patrol concentrates resources in some sectors, migration shifts to other sectors more rapidly than the agency can adjust.

The RGV may also be promising to migrants (and their smugglers) because the twisting, flood-prone Rio Grande makes building hundreds of miles of fencing along its banks too costly, whether measured by construction, environmental damage, or private property infringement. With 54 miles of tall fencing on the U.S. side of the river, the Rio Grande Valley sector has the least border fencing within proximity to densely populated areas. Unlike several other sectors, meanwhile, most of the RGV's local population

staunchly opposes fencing.⁵ In 2013, according to Customs and Border Protection (CBP) data obtained through a National Security Archive FOIA request, Border Patrol estimated that 31 percent of "known illegal entries" into the RGV sector evaded capture.⁶ This proportion was higher than anywhere but the isolated, unpopulated Big Bend sector of west Texas.

Migrant Deaths

For migrants seeking to avoid capture (unlike most Central American children and families in 2014), the Rio Grande Valley may offer the greatest probability of success—but it also offers one of the highest probabilities of dying on U.S. soil. In FY 2014, Border Patrol reported finding 115 remains of migrants in the RGV, more than in any other sector. This was the first time since 1999 that the RGV (or any other sector) claimed a higher toll than the Tucson sector, with its unforgiving Arizona desert.⁷

During FY 2014, Border Patrol agents in the RGV found the remains of one migrant who died during the journey for every 2,222 living migrants they apprehended. Other sectors were even riskier. In



The Border Patrol checkpoint on US-281 in Falfurrias.

especially after revelations that many of the remains were not being adequately handled and processed. In 2014, researchers from Baylor University discovered that dozens of human remains recovered in Brooks County had been handled extremely poorly, in some cases buried in garbage bags or in a common grave.⁸ After much work, citizen organizations and the local sheriff's department were able to reach an agreement to transfer all remains found in Brooks County to the Medical Examiner's Office in Webb County (whose county seat is Laredo).

This was an important achievement, as it increases the odds that these remains might be properly handled and identified. However, it also presented an ongoing expense for Brooks County, one of the poorest in the United States. Because the remains are found in the county, the local sheriff's department is in charge of covering the costs of handling and processing the remains. In Brooks County, this means paying for a funeral home to collect and take the remains to Laredo, the fees charged by the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office, and its agents' time and travel costs.

Brooks County judicial officials documented US\$628,000 in expenses for recovering and processing migrant remains between 2009 and 2013, eating up roughly half of the portion of the sheriff's department budget raised through taxes. "The previously self-sustaining department budget for the Brooks County Sheriff's Department has been affected due to the substantial increase of deaths among undocumented immigrants with related costs," noted a December 2013 letter from a Brooks County judge to the area's congressional representatives.

Even though Brooks County hosts a busy Border Patrol checkpoint, the Department of Homeland

Security has not designated it a "border county" because it is not contiguous to Mexico. This leaves it less eligible for federal funding to deal with the problem. The Texas state government has begun to help: the lieutenant governor's office contributed US\$152,000 since 2013 for vehicles and for the recovery and autopsy of remains. Since September 2014, members of the Texas State Guard, a 2,200-person state militia separate from the Texas Army National Guard, began contributing search-and-rescue assistance.

Reimbursing local governments for handling migrant remains is only part of the story. As long as migrants continue to cross the border and seek to avoid checkpoints, some will undoubtedly continue to die in treacherous U.S. borderlands. While humanitarian organizations in Arizona's Tucson sector have maintained water stations and participated in search-and-rescue efforts for over 10 years, this phenomenon is still relatively new to the RGV.

Community organizer Eddie Canales responded to the need to prevent migrant deaths when he created the South Texas Human Rights Center (STHRC), based in Falfurrias. Now, Canales and his small staff—Sister Pam Buganski and volunteers—work to maintain 42 water stations on public and private lands in Brooks County, as well as to support search-and-rescue efforts and the identification of migrant remains. The installation of water stations on private land has involved constant negotiation with landowners who are concerned about the spike in deaths as well as the increase in migrants and smugglers crossing their territory.

While the RGV ranked first among Border Patrol sectors for remains found in FY 2014, the numbers dropped significantly from 2012 and 2013—despite last year's "surge" of Central American migrants in the area. This is likely due in part to the fact that many migrants, particularly women and children, were turning themselves in rather than avoiding detection. Likewise, although Border Patrol does not release yearly data on the results of search-and-rescue efforts, one reason for the decrease in remains found may be improved search-and-rescue capability, including a greater capacity to respond to 911 calls from an increasing number of migrants carrying mobile phones. Deaths may also have dropped due to the addition of rescue beacons installed by Border Patrol, and the water stations maintained by the STHRC. U.S. border security authorities' increased focus on the

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Rio Grande Valley during the 2014 unaccompanied children crisis may also have deterred migrants from attempting the long, dangerous walk.

The frequency of migrant smuggling and rescue incidents slowed notably over the course of 2014, according to an October investigation from the *Callertimes* newspaper in nearby Corpus Christi:

Where nine out of 10 calls to the Brooks County Sheriff's Office might have been related to human smuggling at the start of the year, now [Brooks County Sheriff's Deputy Elias] Pompa estimates it's about half. The office responded to the discovery of migrants' remains on private ranches once or twice a week, he said. "All of a sudden, it just stopped," Pompa said.

The recovery of migrant bodies hit an all-time high for Brooks County in 2012 with 129 found. The death toll dropped in 2013 to 87, and the sheriff's office has responded to the discovery of 55 migrant bodies so far this year, Chief Deputy Benny Martinez said.⁹

The final 2014 count in Brooks County was 61 remains found, with 13 more found in the first six weeks of 2015.¹⁰

Canales and other Brooks County migrants' rights defenders shared an unproven but troubling hypothesis about the 2014 drop in remains recovered. They fear that the actual number of dead may have stayed the same, or possibly increased, but that weather conditions may have made too many migrants' bodies unrecoverable. They point out that 2012, the year in which numbers of remains recovered increased by over 50%, was a drought year, and 2013 was also drier than normal. As a result, the dense scrub brush that covers most of the county ranch land receded, revealing more bodies. The Rio Grande Valley had significant rain in 2014, greatly increasing foliage. This makes search-and-rescue efforts even harder and increases the odds that not all migrants who have died will quickly be discovered. The difficulty in determining the time between when a migrant may have died and when the remains are found, especially for skeletal remains, further complicates accurate yearly estimates of migrant deaths.

The challenge in locating remains was underscored during WOLA's visit to the STHRC, where staff showed us a drawing based on a migrant's account of his



Eddie Canales, Michelle Garcia and Sr. Pam Buganski of the South Texas Human Rights Center fill a water station—a barrel full of plastic gallon water jugs—in ranch land outside Falfurrias, Texas.

journey around the Falfurrias checkpoint. In this case alone, the surviving migrant reported that seven of his traveling companions had either died or were left behind.



In Reynosa, Mexico, a monument by the border bridge memorializes migrants who perished while crossing into the United States.

The Unaccompanied Minors Crisis Fades, For Now

The last several months of 2014 saw arrivals of Central American unaccompanied children and families decrease just as sharply as they had grown during the spring. After an unprecedented wave that overwhelmed U.S. authorities' capacities, the number of unaccompanied minors apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border dropped so steeply that there were fewer in August 2014 (3,138) than in August 2013 (3,718).¹¹

Of the explanations WOLA heard to explain the drop, three predominated. First, the government of Mexico, acting at U.S. officials' urging, cracked down on migration from Central America, curtailing migrants'

longstanding use of cargo trains to travel north from points near the Guatemalan border and stepping up deportations of apprehended Central Americans. (Mexico returned 104,269 citizens of Central America's "Northern Triangle" countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) in 2014, up from 77,896 in 2013.)¹²

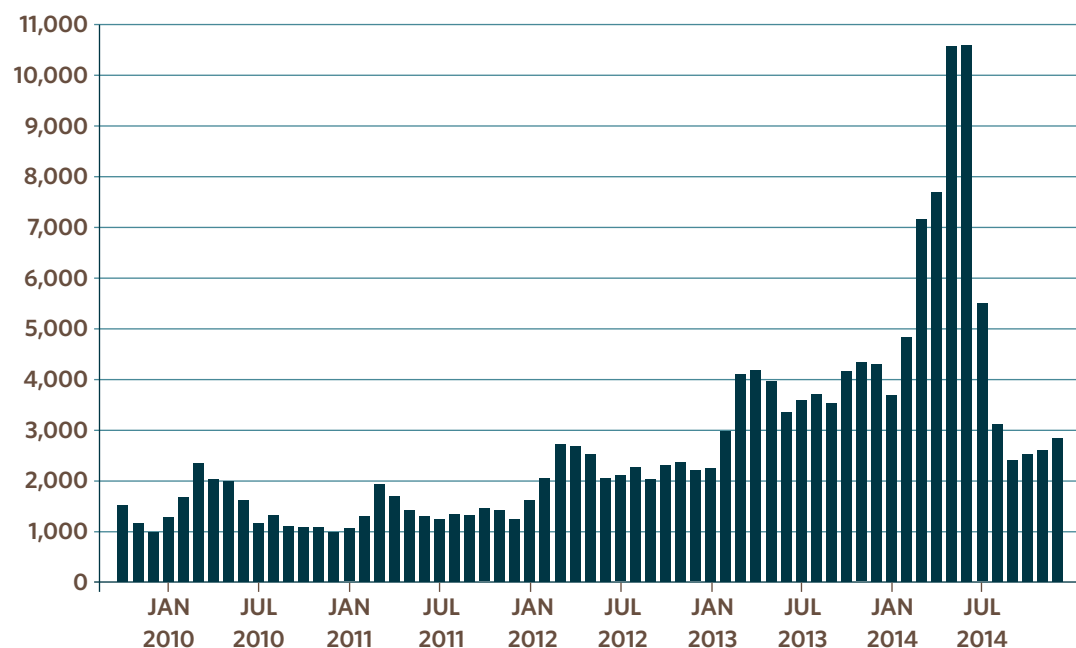
Migrant rights defenders in Mexico and organizations in Central America assisting deportees assert that, as a result of increased enforcement and Mexican migration officials' lax screening for protection concerns, Mexico's government likely deported thousands of Central American children and families with valid claims for asylum or other forms of humanitarian relief under Mexican law.¹³

A second explanation for the post-July drop is reports that migrant smugglers in Central America widely spread a false rumor that the U.S. government was offering a sort of residency permit ("*permiso*") to children, and parents with children, from Central America—and that this offer would expire at the end of June. This could explain some of the great rush to arrive in the United States by that date, and the notable decrease afterward.

And third, RGV sector Border Patrol representatives interviewed on an earlier visit (August 2014) credited modest U.S. policy changes as deterrents to further migration. They cited the Homeland Security Department's publicity campaign in Central American countries, which debunked the "*permisos*" rumor and urged would-be migrants to stay home. Agents especially emphasized a July increase in the number of Central American "family units" who, instead of being released with a requirement to appear before an immigration judge, were finding themselves held in family detention centers: first, a temporary facility in Artesia, New Mexico, and later a new 2,400-bed facility in Dilley, Texas, which opened in December 2014.

Nobody with whom WOLA spoke in the RGV could predict whether the post-July decrease in unaccompanied minor and family migration would continue. Most, in fact, expect a strong seasonal increase in new arrivals after January, as migrants and their smugglers adjust routes. Between October 2009 and September 2014, 54 percent of Border Patrol's unaccompanied minor apprehensions have occurred during five months in spring and early summer, March through July, peaking in May-June and bottoming out in December-January.¹⁴

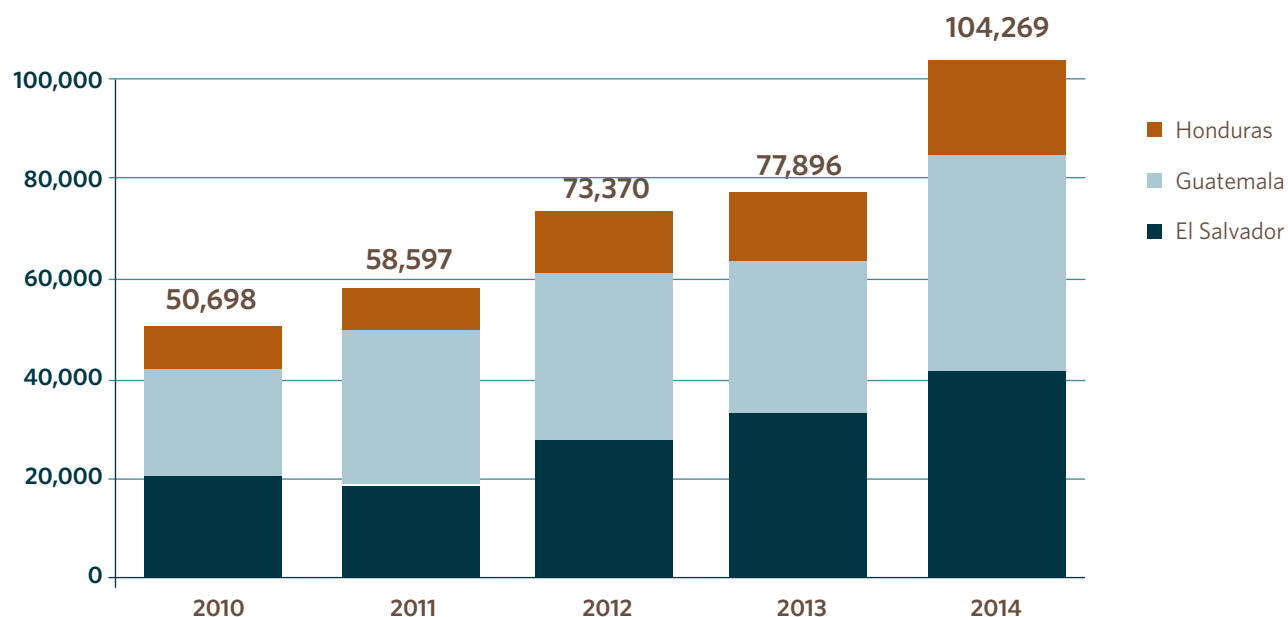
FIGURE 5: Unaccompanied Children Apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico Border, October 2009-December 2014



Arrivals of unaccompanied minors dropped precipitously after July 2014.

Source: <http://1.usa.gov/1Aanzdg>

FIGURE 6: "Northern Triangle" Citizens Deported by Mexico



Mexico's deportations to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras more than doubled between 2010 and 2014.

Source: <http://1.usa.gov/1j72KCR>

Border Security in the Rio Grande Valley

At its height, the unaccompanied minors crisis was fodder for politicians who sought to portray the U.S.-Mexico border as insecure. “The crisis of unaccompanied children crossing the border [is] a result of the Administration’s lack of border enforcement,” wrote Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Texas), chairman of the House of Representatives’ Homeland Security Committee, in July 2014.¹⁵ “What it [the crisis] further illustrates is how insecure the border is,” said then Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky).¹⁶

“There can be no national security without border security, and Texans have paid too high a price for the federal government’s failure to secure our border,” then Texas Governor Rick Perry (R) said in July as he announced a deployment of 1,000 Texas National Guard troops to the border.¹⁷

But the “surge” of children at the border, which disappeared from Washington’s political discourse as quickly as it declined in the RGV, was not a border security indicator. There is no way to defend against tens of thousands of children and families seeking refuge and trying to find, rather than to avoid, U.S. authorities. Ramón García, the judge of Hidalgo County (which includes McAllen), explained to *National Public Radio*:

When these kids cross that river, nobody has to chase him. They chase the Border Patrol down. They look around—they’re looking for that man in green that is going to take them to be processed and be giving a permiso—a permit, telling him that you can go on and be free—freely travel about our country until you’re asked to appear.¹⁸

Rio Grande Valley Border Patrol agents told WOLA staff in August 2014 of sites along the river where, every evening at the height of the crisis, smugglers on the Mexican side would launch rafts full of Central American children and families, with instructions to surrender themselves to the agents awaiting them on the U.S. side.

U.S. border authorities in the RGV did not lack weapons, sensors, communication equipment, or vehicles. They did, however, lack the manpower to process such a large number of entrants, space to hold them while seeking family members or others to shelter them, and—during the initial months of the crisis—capacity to care for them at the U.S. Department

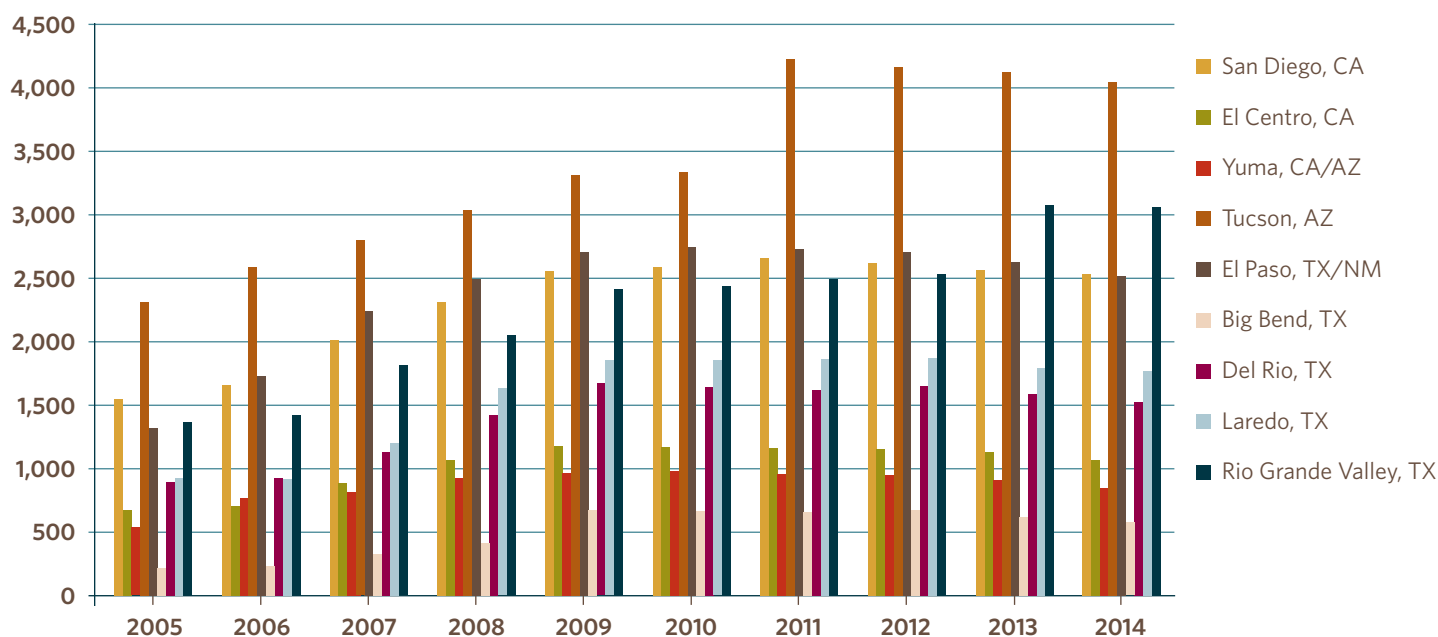
of Health and Human Services’ Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). “It is not so much a security problem as it is people showing up and saying, ‘I’m here. Take me in. Arrest me or take me into detention,’” said Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Maryland), the House Democratic whip. “That’s not a security problem. That’s a problem [of], ‘OK, what do we do?’”¹⁹

Further evidence of the lack of a “border crisis” is the relative calm everywhere else along the border. As noted previously, the other eight Border Patrol sectors along the U.S.-Mexico border saw a combined 14 percent decline in migrant apprehensions in FY 2014, with Tucson, Arizona—the number-one busiest sector between 1998 and 2012—falling below 100,000 apprehensions for the first time since 1993. Even the Laredo sector, which borders the RGV immediately to the west, saw a 13 percent drop in apprehensions last year.²⁰ Despite the humanitarian crisis of mid-2014, the undocumented migration situation is more controlled than it has been in the past 40 years.

This does not mean that the RGV sector’s border is impermeable to all who seek to cross undetected. Border Patrol in this sector seized 654,162 pounds of marijuana, down from 886,001 pounds in 2012 and 797,249 in 2013. (Only the Tucson, Arizona sector saw more marijuana seizures in these years.) The Rio Grande Valley led other sectors in Border Patrol’s modest amount (just over two tons per year border-wide) of annual cocaine seizures in 2012 and 2013, but was surpassed by the San Diego, California sector in 2014. (Border authorities in the San Diego sector, across from Tijuana, Mexico, seize much less marijuana, but have found increasing amounts of cocaine and methamphetamines. In 2014, San Diego accounted for 63 percent of all border methamphetamine seizures, which increased by 300 percent at California ports of entry between 2009 and 2014.)²¹

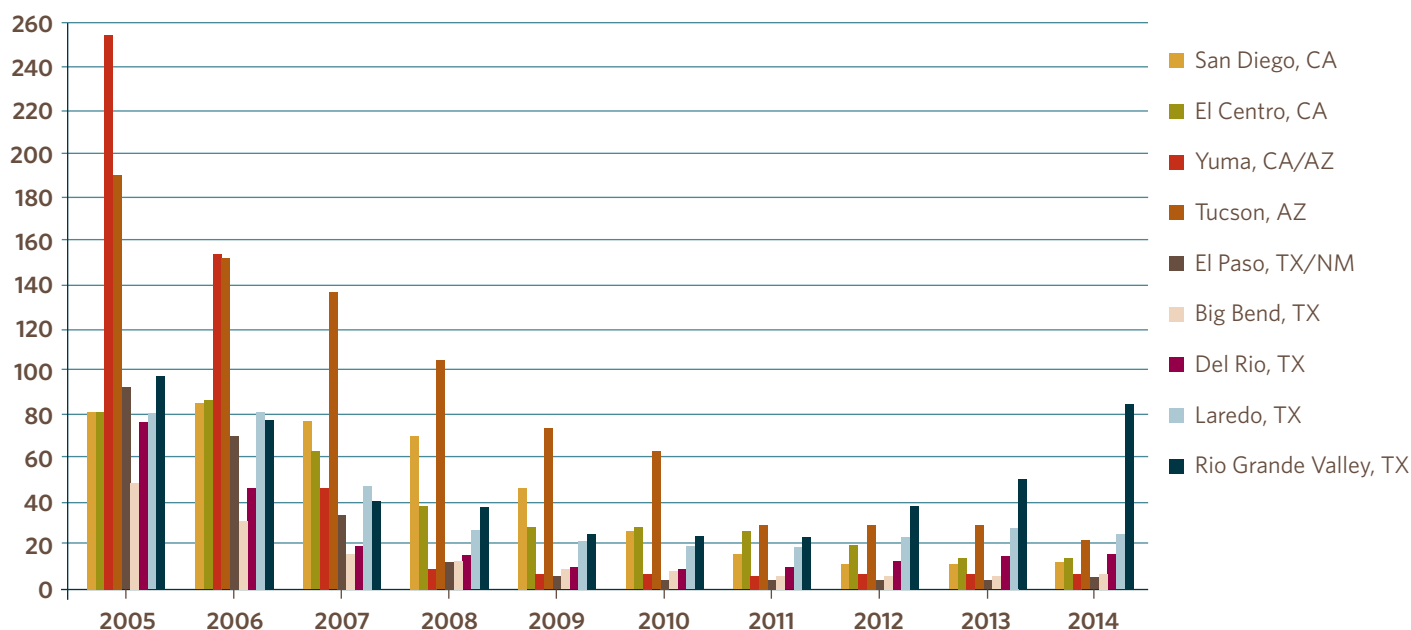
Ranchers and other landowners in the RGV sector say that they feel menaced by border-crossers on their lands, explaining that it is impossible to distinguish between harmless migrants and dangerous narcotraffickers. They suffer property damage (fences cut, water pipes or hoses left open or damaged, trash), as well as damage due to Border Patrol high-speed pursuits of traffickers. Recreational hunters use many ranch lands in the area, but this revenue source has decreased amid perceptions that migration and trafficking pose safety risks.

As of September 2014, Border Patrol’s Rio Grande Valley sector employed 3,064 agents, not including

FIGURE 7: Border Patrol Staffing, by Sector (Shown from West to East), 2005-2014

Though many of the U.S.-Mexico border's current challenges are concentrated in the Rio Grande Valley, this sector has about 1,000 fewer agents than the much quieter Tucson sector.

Source: <http://1.usa.gov/1Dk0Nhz>

FIGURE 8: Migrant Apprehensions Per Border Patrol Agent, by Border Patrol Sector (Shown from West to East), 2005-2014

The number of migrants apprehended per Border Patrol agent per year has dropped to near-record lows—everywhere but south Texas.

Source: <http://1.usa.gov/1w3FEn1> and <http://1.usa.gov/1Dk0Nhz>

about 100 agents temporarily transferred from other sectors. (Border Patrol can temporarily move agents to other sectors for up to 35 days, longer by mutual agreement, but permanent transfers must be negotiated with the National Border Patrol Council, the agents' union.) The Tucson, Arizona sector has a much greater personnel strength—4,052 agents in September—and the San Diego, California, and El Paso, Texas/New Mexico sectors are not far behind the RGV with over 2,500 agents each.²²

These other sectors, however, were much quieter than the RGV in 2014. There is a huge mismatch between supply and demand for Border Patrol presence across sectors. In FY 2014, each agent in the RGV sector apprehended an average of 84 migrants. In the other eight Border Patrol sectors, that average was 15.

Though not as robust as in the Tucson sector, Border Patrol and its parent agency, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), have a large presence in the Rio Grande Valley sector, including nine Border Patrol stations, two airfields (or “Air Branches”), and three ports (or “Marine Branches”). The sector includes 13 of the 52 land ports of entry (official border crossings) that exist between the United States and Mexico.

A document obtained from the Border Patrol RGV Sector Headquarters in August 2014 lists the following technology available to the agency in the RGV:

- ▶ Remote Video Surveillance System [cameras]
- ▶ Remote Monitoring Surveillance System [sensors]
- ▶ Night Vision Goggles
- ▶ Forward Looking Infrared (FLIR) [radar]
- ▶ Z-Backscatter [mobile x-ray machine] Van
- ▶ Global Positioning System
- ▶ Thermal Acquisition Monocular System
- ▶ FLIR Recon Handheld Camera
- ▶ Radiation Isotope Identification Device
- ▶ Personal Radiation Device
- ▶ Aerostat

The “Aerostat” refers to a Tethered Aerostat Radar System (TARS), a large helium-filled balloon holding aloft radar equipment that can “see” for about 200 miles and detect activity on the ground at closer distances. It is moored in Rio Grande City, though Border Patrol can employ aerostat platforms just west of McAllen and near Falfurrias.

Predator-B drones and manned surveillance aircraft operate from about a 2 hours' drive north of

the border, at a CBP Air and Marine base in Corpus Christi. According to a December 2014 report from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Inspector General that was quite critical of the drone program, the Rio Grande Valley sector was one of two Border Patrol sectors that saw any significant drone overflights in 2013 (the other was Tucson), and this was concentrated in about 70 miles of the border zone.²³

Together with Border Patrol's Laredo and Del Rio sectors, the RGV sector participates in the “South Texas Campaign,” a DHS plan to combine intelligence and enforcement personnel, and to collaborate more closely with Mexican government counterparts, in operations against organized crime groups operating in the area.

In addition to the federal presence, since the height of the unaccompanied minors' crisis, Texas's state government has used its own funds to maintain about 1,000 Army National Guard personnel at the border, almost entirely in the RGV sector. Then Governor Rick Perry announced the deployment, which has cost Texas taxpayers about US\$12 million per month, in July 2014.²⁴

Perry chose not to give the Guardsmen—who are soldiers with training and equipment identical to the regular U.S. Army—the power to arrest civilians; nor are they assisting the detention and processing of unaccompanied children and families. Instead, their main role is surveillance and their principal targets are migrant smugglers and organized crime. The Guard deployment is expected to end in April 2015, with a contingent of additional Texas state troopers replacing some of them.²⁵

A far smaller National Guard presence operating with federal funds—a remnant of “Operation Phalanx,” originally a 1,200-person deployment ordered by the Obama administration in 2010, now much reduced—operates aircraft that perform surveillance missions over the RGV's borderlands, passing along intelligence to Border Patrol.

U.S. Officials' Treatment of Migrants in Custody

The 2014 surge in Central American migration illustrated the infrastructure and staffing challenges CBP faces in order to quickly adjust resources to a changing scenario on the ground. It also highlighted ongoing concerns about the conditions under which migrants are held while being processed. For Mexican

One consulate representative from a Central American government spoke to WOLA about migrants' complaints regarding conditions in detention: cold rooms, insufficient food, water that tasted foul, verbal abuse, and a failure to attend to migrants' requests.

migrants, including minors, the process is short, as they are deported to Mexico as soon as possible, often with very limited screening for protection needs. For Central American and other migrants, apprehension by Border Patrol may mean several days in custody.

One consulate representative from a Central American government spoke to WOLA about migrants' complaints regarding conditions in detention: cold rooms, insufficient food, water that tasted foul, verbal abuse, and a failure to attend to migrants' requests. Media interviews with unaccompanied migrant children also revealed complaints about similar conditions and abuse.²⁶

During our visit, WOLA saw a group of approximately 20 Central American migrants—women and men with children, including a four-month-old baby with her young Salvadoran mother—dropped off at the bus station in McAllen. From there, they would travel to be reunited with family members elsewhere in the United States, where they would await their dates in court.

U.S. border security officials' involvement with these migrants ends at the bus station, where concerned members of the community—in McAllen, under the coordination of Catholic Charities and the Sacred Heart Catholic Church—have stepped in to care for this vulnerable population. After the migrant parents purchase their tickets, volunteers take them from the bus station to the church, where migrants have the chance to take a shower, eat, get clean clothes, and receive some preliminary legal advice about steps they need to take in order to have a greater chance at gaining immigration relief during their legal proceedings. For their often-long bus rides—one Honduran family was traveling all the way to New York City—the migrants are also given food, water, blankets, and toiletries.

For families that arrived in early December 2014, their stop at the church also meant a chance to charge the ankle bracelets ICE placed on them during detention. ICE began taking this step with the intent of reducing the number of migrants who fail to report back after being released into the interior of the country. While U.S. immigration authorities have used

ankle bracelets for the past decade for certain migrants apprehended in the interior of the country, these bracelets had not been placed on migrants upon their release after apprehension by Border Patrol in South Texas until December 2014, as part of a pilot program. The ankle bracelets are part of ICE's "Alternatives to Detention" (ATD) program, defined as cost-effective measures to ensure that individuals appear for their immigration hearings. While ankle monitors are more cost effective (a budget summary released in July 2014 by Senator Barbara Mikulski, then chairwoman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, affirms that ATD on average costs between pennies to \$7 per day per migrant)²⁷ and a better alternative to detention, advocates have expressed concern about stigmatizing migrants as lawbreakers when many of them are better described as refugees.²⁸

What Happens to Central American Migrants Today

Although fewer in number, Central American families and unaccompanied children continue to arrive at the border. CBP, which comprises Border Patrol and the Field Operations agents who staff official border crossings, still transfers unaccompanied migrant children from non-contiguous countries to the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), a branch of the Department of Health and Human Services. At an ORR facility, these children receive care and some legal advice and are later placed with a family member or sponsor already in the United States, with whom they live while awaiting their immigration hearing. This hearing begins a process in which they could receive asylum, special immigrant juvenile status, or a visa to stay in the United States. As WOLA highlighted in a recent video and report, the process is different for unaccompanied Mexican migrant children, who depend on CBP agents to make the first determination about any possible needs for protection before they can be referred to ORR and have the chance to make their case in court.²⁹

Many of the families currently arriving are not released, with or without an ankle bracelet. Instead,



Newly arrived Central American migrant parents and children queue for bus tickets in McAllen.

they are being detained in the South Texas Residential Center in Dilley, Texas or in the other two detention centers for immigrant families in Karnes, Texas and Berks County, Pennsylvania.³⁰ The Dilley center opened on December 15, 2014 with the capacity to hold up to 2,400 people. It is opening gradually: a January 13, 2015 visit by organizations that provide legal services and address immigration and refugee issues found that there were just 239 migrants detained in Dilley at the time.³¹ They noted, however, that the facility, administered by a for-profit corporation, the Corrections Corporation of America, is expected to reach full capacity by May or June 2015.

The opening of the Dilley center sends a clear message to possible migrants in Central America and elsewhere that parents with children will now be detained and deported more quickly from the country. It also reflects the Obama administration's current priorities on immigration and border enforcement. As was expressed by DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson on the inauguration of the Dilley center, "[t]hose who came here illegally in the past, have been here for years, have committed no serious crimes, and have become integrated members of American life, are not priorities for removal. But all those who came here illegally after Jan. 1, 2014 are now priorities for removal."³²

Advocates and lawyers for migrants have expressed serious concerns about family detention centers like

Karnes, Berks, and Dilley. Many of the families held there have valid claims for asylum in the United States, and present no public security or national security risk. Based on previous work and visits to family detention centers, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS) and the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) affirmed in a 2014 report that family detention is a situation with high potential for abuse, given the vulnerability of the detainees and "inadequate access to child care, medical and mental health care, and legal assistance."³³ The day after Dilley opened, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a class-action lawsuit challenging the family detention policy. It argues, "[t]he Obama administration's blanket no-release policy is a violation of federal immigration law and regulations, as well as the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibit the blanket detention of asylum seekers for purposes of general deterrence."³⁴ Holding families in detention is also expensive. The U.S. Senate estimates that it costs \$266 per migrant per day.³⁵

(On February 20, 2015, as this report neared final publication, a federal judge in Washington, D.C. issued a preliminary injunction ordering the Obama administration to stop detaining families apprehended by border security authorities. Lawyers told the *New York Times* that "they expected that women and children would start being released as early as next week," the week of February 23.³⁶)

Due Process Concerns

Service providers spoke to WOLA staff about problems faced by migrants currently in detention while awaiting their hearings for asylum or other forms of immigration relief. Apart from concerns about some law enforcement agents' treatment of migrants, they said that migrants often suffer depression and anxiety due to the uncertainty of their situations. Migrants are often given little information about their cases and how long their detention may last. Service providers told WOLA staff that although they are able to provide assistance, many migrants never receive "Know Your Rights" presentations after their detention, or ICE only allows providers to give such presentations after migrants have already undergone credible fear interviews—one of the moments in which knowledge gained through such presentations would have been most beneficial.

The majority of migrants never have access to a lawyer to assist them as they petition for asylum or another form of protection. Several studies point to having a lawyer as the most determining factor in whether or not a migrant is granted some form of immigration relief. Unaccompanied migrant children fare slightly better than adults, as there are more funds available to provide legal screening and “Know Your Rights” presentations to children. However, many children also face immigration proceedings without legal representation. An analysis of immigration court records for FY 2012 to FY 2014 by Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University found that, in cases of unaccompanied migrant children, almost three-fourths of those who had a lawyer were granted some form of relief, while only 15 percent of the children who did not have a lawyer were allowed to stay in the United States.³⁷ The analysis found that approximately 32 percent of all children in immigration proceedings had lawyers, with the percentage decreasing during the months of the “surge” in 2014.

Security in Mexican Border Towns

Though press coverage is often scarce, insecurity continues to be severe in Mexico’s state of Tamaulipas, which borders the RGV. Due to the high rates of kidnapping, extortion, and homicide, in May 2014 the federal government launched “Plan Tamaulipas” as a new security plan for the state. The plan divides Tamaulipas into four regions, each under the direction of an army or navy officer. The new strategy includes additional checkpoints, 24-hour patrols, and efforts to weed out corruption in local police forces.

More than nine months after the plan’s launch, Tamaulipas continues to be plagued by high levels of violence. Although it is only the 13th most populous of Mexico’s 31 states, according to a report by Mexico’s Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (*Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública*) Tamaulipas ranked first in kidnappings, fifth in intentional homicides, and seventh in extortion.³⁸ Tamaulipas is also one of the states with the highest number of disappeared persons.³⁹ Seven of the ten Mexican municipalities with the highest number of disappearances were in Tamaulipas, including Matamoros and three others that border the United States.



View of the Rio Grande and the U.S. border fence from the bridge between Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas.

Due to a lack of media reporting about violence, residents who have remained in border cities like Matamoros frequently check social media sites, like the Facebook sites “Matamoros Peligroso” and “Matamoros Zona de Peligro,” to assess the current security situation in their area.⁴⁰ Maintaining sites such as these is not without risks. The administrators of the Facebook site “Valor por Tamaulipas” received threats from criminal groups, and a woman who tweeted about violence in Reynosa and collaborated with the site was kidnapped and murdered in October 2014.⁴¹

Staff and volunteers at migrant shelters reported being under the frequent watch of the Gulf cartel, the organized crime group that currently controls these border towns’ criminal activity. (The rival Zetas cartel dominates the city of Nuevo Laredo further west in Tamaulipas.) Like other migrant defenders throughout Mexico, they are at risk because they are protecting these criminal groups’ “merchandise.” Shelter staff reported interactions with criminal group members searching for particular migrants, occasional stops and questioning about their work and their movements, and the constant need to be watchful for infiltrations of individuals claiming to be migrants, who enter the shelter with the intent of facilitating the kidnapping, recruitment, or extortion of migrants staying there.

Kidnapping remains a serious problem for deported Mexican migrants, as well as for Central American migrants in transit. Matamoros and particularly Reynosa are known areas of frequent kidnappings. Central American migrants who are kidnapped and “rescued” by Mexican authorities—primarily the army (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*, SEDENA) or navy (*Secretaría de Marina*, SEMAR)—are generally put into the custody of Mexico’s National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM) so that they can be returned to their countries of origin. Mexican migrants who are “rescued” are simply released to continue their journeys; this has meant that in some cases, Mexican migrants end up being kidnapped again.

Deported Mexicans are particularly easy prey: they are easy to identify based on their clothing and their U.S.-issued plastic bags holding their belongings and criminal groups know that many have family members in the United States who are able to pay ransoms. WOLA heard that for months, deported migrants en route from Matamoros’s port of entry to its downtown bus station were being kidnapped on the sidewalk just outside the bus station. In an attention center for migrants inside the Matamoros bus station, recently established by the Catholic church-run migrant shelter and the state government, a sign warns migrants not to arrange wire transfers from their families through Western Union. The reason is that Western Union’s check centers are too far away from the bus station. The distance substantially increases the odds that migrants will be kidnapped.

Several of the people with whom WOLA spoke in Reynosa and Matamoros expressed concerns about routine collusion between Mexican authorities and criminal groups. Indeed, recently declassified documents about the Mexican federal Attorney General’s investigation into the August 2010 murder of 72 migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, show just how closely municipal police were working with the Zetas in the area. According to testimonies from detained Zetas, the “police acted as lookouts for the group, helped with ‘the interception of persons,’ and turned a blind eye to their illegal activities.”⁴²

Deportation Practices

Violence in border cities like Reynosa and Matamoros also raise serious safety concerns for deported Mexican migrants. As noted previously, Mexican migrants

apprehended at the border are quickly deported to Mexico, along with other Mexican migrants who are apprehended in the interior of the United States, or who have been held in immigration detention or imprisoned.

In spite of the high levels of violence in Tamaulipas, this state received 32 percent of all Mexican migrants repatriated from the United States in 2014, up from 26 percent in 2013.⁴³ As WOLA has highlighted previously, returning these migrants to dangerous Mexican border cities puts them at risk of assault, kidnapping, robbery, and other crimes.⁴⁴ These migrants are easily identifiable and some, especially those who are ICE deportees, may have lived in the United States for many years and have very few ties to Mexico.

NIGHT DEPORTATIONS

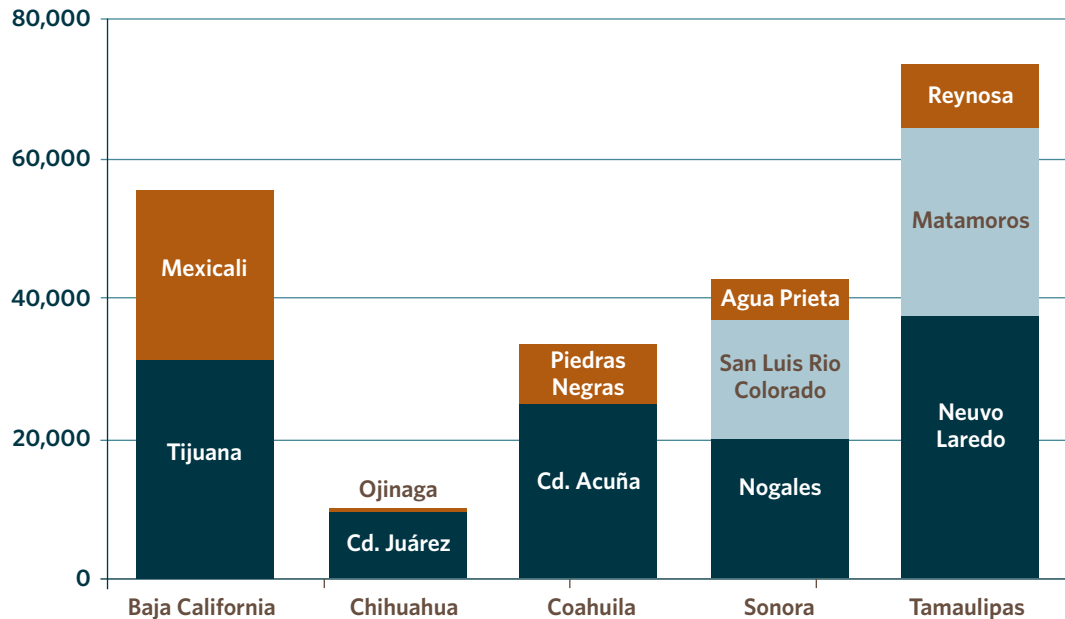
Deporting Mexican migrants at night is one of the most evident ways to increase their exposure to risks. Shelters often close their doors, no buses are running, and for migrants with little income, the only option is to stay on the street. While outside the confines of hotels, shelters, or bus stations, they are in danger of being extorted by criminal gangs or corrupt officials.

In recent months, both governments have taken steps to restrict night deportations. In July 2014, the U.S. and Mexican governments, through the Executive Repatriation Policy Steering Group, reached an agreement to deport migrants primarily during daylight hours.⁴⁵ One exception is when the number of migrants in Border Patrol’s short-term custody is too high: if space is taken up by too many migrants being held from other countries, Mexican migrants can be quickly returned to Mexico, at any hour. Still, it would appear that even in the busy RGV sector, the numbers of Central American migrants have slowed enough to make it possible to stop deporting Mexicans at night. In Reynosa, shelter staff reported very few migrants deported at night in recent months; in Matamoros, the shelter said that since October the cases have been few and far between.⁴⁶

INCREASED SERVICES FOR MIGRANTS

Oddly enough, a new Mexican government program to process migrants may present greater risks of releasing migrants after dark than does the U.S. deportation process. In July 2014, as part of the Mexican government’s new “*Somos Mexicanos*” program to provide comprehensive services to

FIGURE 9: Cities To Where U.S. Authorities Deported Mexican Citizens, 2014



Tamaulipas, with its notoriously conflictive border cities, was the number-one destination of deported Mexican citizens in 2014.

Source: <http://bit.ly/1CagPe1>

repatriated migrants, the government partnered with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) on a pilot program to provide migrants with post-arrival assistance.⁴⁷ In Tamaulipas, the *Somos Mexicanos* program operates in Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo, and in Tijuana and Mexicali in Baja California.

Together with the INM, the INM's Grupo Beta (charged with the search, rescue, and protection of migrants), and the Tamaulipas state Institute for Migrants (*Instituto Tamaulipeco para los Migrantes*), with support from local shelters, the pilot program provides migrants with food and drink upon arrival, telephone calling cards, and a bus ticket to their home town, an important measure to reduce the population of deportees stranded at the border (previously migrants had to purchase their own tickets, though often at a discount).

Although this program is undoubtedly important, WOLA heard concerns in Matamoros about the time it takes to attend to large groups of migrants, which may extend to a few hours. This means that even if Border Patrol or ICE returns a migrant during daylight hours, he or she might not get released from INM processing until very late.

Another concern heard in Matamoros is that INM agents are not always present at the port of entry to receive repatriated migrants. WOLA was told of one case in which two young men who were deported by Border Patrol in the early evening crossed into Mexico with no assistance from Mexican authorities, for example, with wire transfers or the issuing of a temporary ID document valid for travel. On their one-block journey from the port of entry to a taxi stand, both men were kidnapped by a criminal organization. They were beaten and held for several hours, only to be released because they could not provide the kidnappers with any phone numbers of family members in the United States whom the criminal group could extort for ransom money. These men were lucky, for, as WOLA has reported in the past, other deported migrants have been kidnapped and never heard from again.⁴⁸

In addition to its partnerships in the *Somos Mexicanos* program, the Tamaulipas government established the Tamaulipas Institute for Migrants in 2011, in the months after the San Fernando massacre, to provide support for repatriated Mexican migrants, migrants in transit, and migrants from Tamaulipas



To receive the 26,847 Mexican migrants whom U.S. authorities deported to Matamoros in 2014, Mexico's National Migration Institute worked out of this tiny, underfunded office. A new facility is under construction.

living outside of Mexico. In Matamoros, it was clear that the state institute works closely with the church-run migrant shelter, particularly at the bus station, to provide advice and support to the migrant population.

While these new services are important, many gaps remain. Shelter staff emphasized the need to provide adequate medical attention to deportees, many of whom have health problems such as diabetes, alcohol and other substance abuse, HIV, and mental illnesses. They told WOLA that some of the migrants

deported to this part of the border have been in the U.S. prison system, often for many years. Migrants with violent criminal records present specific challenges to Mexican authorities and society: they are stigmatized within local communities and in some cases by their families, and they face a greater risk of being recruited by criminal gangs upon their return to Mexico. The latter is especially concerning in Matamoros, which has received numerous deported felons despite the high levels of organized crime in the city.

Recommendations

This was WOLA's third visit to the Rio Grande Valley since November 2012. Based on our fieldwork there and elsewhere along the border, the following policy changes stand out as common-sense steps.

DUE PROCESS

- Recent surveys and studies by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and a coalition of universities and organizations in the region make clear that a high percentage of Central American families and unaccompanied children—perhaps a majority—are fleeing threats to their lives or safety.⁴⁹ That threat may come in the form of organized crime, gangs, human traffickers, or domestic violence. This means there is a significant probability that quickly deporting Central American children or families could endanger them. Each unaccompanied Central American child, and any family unit that expresses fear upon repatriation, deserves a proper hearing.
- At these hearings, children and families need legal representation. The presence of a legal advocate greatly increases the probability that a threatened individual will receive needed protection in the United States. Current law neither requires nor provides for representation. Central American children are routinely forced to serve as their own advocates, and many who do are unable to convince judges and avoid being sent back to possible danger.
- A portion of unaccompanied Mexican children apprehended in the United States also face grave danger if returned to their places of origin, which often suffer organized crime, gang activity, human trafficking, or domestic violence at the same intensity as Central America.⁵⁰ As Mexico is a

There is a significant probability that quickly deporting Central American children or families could endanger them. Each unaccompanied Central American child, and any family unit that expresses fear upon repatriation, deserves a proper hearing.

contiguous country, however, current law does not automatically give Mexican children the possibility to make their case before a judge: the CBP agents who apprehend and process them determine whether they are victims of trafficking and if they have a credible fear of returning home. This rarely happens, and studies indicate that CBP agents often lack the proper training to screen for vulnerable children and victims of trafficking and persecution, while screening interviews often take place in a public setting. Unaccompanied Mexican children should be held to the same standard as Central American children.

- The Department of Homeland Security needs increased funding for more immigration judges and support teams to consider the backlog of unaccompanied minors' cases. By the end of 2013, 350,330 cases were still pending in immigration courts (for minors and adults). On average, each immigration judge hears 1,400 cases per year.⁵¹ Current staffing levels are inadequate either to put the law properly into practice, or to hold hearings sufficiently thorough to guarantee children's due process. Rather than change the law to strip protections from Central American children—as legislation that passed the House of Representatives in July 2014 would have done—the beleaguered adjudication system needs more manpower and infrastructure.

Rather than expanding family detention centers, DHS should continue to implement and expand alternatives to detention, and work to release and place families with community ties in the United States.⁵²

- GPS ankle monitors are far more humane than detaining parents with children. In the United States, though, a bulky, blinking ankle bracelet is an emblem of criminal behavior: anyone wearing one may be treated, in daily interactions, including with local law enforcement, as an antisocial element. As these are mothers and fathers with potential claims

for protected status, not criminals, they deserve a device with a less conspicuous design than the bricks currently being attached to their ankles.

- Using private donations, city funds, and the efforts of volunteers, Catholic Charities in McAllen provides basic humane treatment to migrant families whom authorities simply leave at the local bus station. These very basic services—a shower, a meal, diapers, first aid, a place to sit during the hours before the next bus—should be available wherever large numbers of families seeking protection are arriving, and should not be funded precariously through private initiatives.

DEPORTATIONS

- The recently instituted limitation on night deportations to dangerous Mexican border cities is a common-sense move that bears little cost to U.S. agencies. It should continue in 2015.
- The security situation in Tamaulipas, Mexico grew more severe in 2014, yet the state's border cities received the largest number of U.S. deportees. ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO), in particular, must take into account security trends when choosing cities where repatriations occur. To do otherwise endangers deportees—subjecting them to extortion or even kidnapping—or increases the possibility of their recruitment by organized crime. Estimations of the security situation can change rapidly—witness the improvement in Ciudad Juárez and the deterioration in Nuevo Laredo since 2010—so there must be frequent re-evaluation of deportation destinations' security, including consultations with service providers in Mexican border cities.
- The Mexican government must dramatically improve facilities and staffing for the National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM) and System for Integrated Family Development (*Desarrollo Integral de la Familia*, DIF), and continue to improve coordination with the

Tamaulipas government and IOM in Tamaulipas border cities. New construction to replace the shockingly small INM facility in Matamoros is welcome; the new office must receive greatly increased staffing, equipment, and internal controls.

BORDER SECURITY

- The Texas state government should proceed with its plan to end the current 1,000-person National Guard deployment by April 2015. If additional staff is needed for surveillance or search-and-rescue, civilians should fill these positions.
- Calls to build 14-foot pedestrian fencing along the entire length of the Rio Grande in the RGV sector are unrealistic. The terrain, the situation of property holdings, and environmental considerations would require this to be a sophisticated, and prohibitively expensive, engineering project. Meanwhile, a clear majority of local business, political, and civil society leaders strongly oppose it.
- Border Patrol does not need a further nationwide staffing increase to fortify its presence in the Rio Grande Valley sector. There appears to be a surfeit of Border Patrol presence in sectors where the number of border-crossers plummeted many years ago, especially San Diego and El Paso. Border Patrol and its union must negotiate an improved capability to redeploy agents in a way that responds more nimbly to geographic shifts in cross-border activity.
- It is important that U.S. border law enforcement remain a civilian mission. Border Patrol officials point out that, as civilians, they have far less resources available to pay for frequent relocations than do their counterparts in the Defense Department, who are accustomed to regular redeployments. A more nimble Border Patrol will require more resources to relocate agents and their families, and to provide them with support in their new communities. This would be far less expensive than hiring new agents when abundant capacity already exists in quieter border sectors.
- Mexico must increase its ability to combat organized crime's grip on its border zones. As long as traffickers and smugglers operate with their remarkable current level of impunity, undocumented migration, human trafficking, and drug transshipment will continue and migrants

will remain at risk of kidnapping and other crimes. Organized crime on the Mexican side of the border thrives on Mexican authorities' largely uninvestigated, unpunished corruption. Without an unprecedentedly thorough crackdown on this corruption, increased capacity in the criminal justice system, and improved internal and external controls over Mexico's security forces (and the INM), it is unlikely that the security situation will improve in Tamaulipas or elsewhere.

MIGRANT DEATHS

- Border Patrol should be more transparent about the methodology it uses to register migrant deaths. Providing information about this methodology and on the demographics of the deceased (sex, age, region/country of origin, and cause of death) could inform life-saving efforts, allow the public and civil society organizations to evaluate such efforts, and inform consular services by governments in the region.
- Border Patrol should provide yearly data about the number of rescue beacons in operation, their geographical placement, and how many migrants were saved as a result of their activation. This could influence spending priorities and it would allow Border Patrol to determine an effective strategy for the placement and number of beacons needed to mitigate migrant deaths.
- Water stations in surrounding ranch lands save lives, and should be expanded. Ranchers who have allowed volunteers to maintain them on their landholdings deserve praise. Rescue beacons, too, should be expanded and maintained.

Search-and-rescue is saving lives, and should be expanded as migrants continue to die in large numbers in the RGV sector. The Texas State Guard effort, begun in 2014, is welcome as is the use of Border Patrol's Search, Trauma, and Rescue unit (BORSTAR). These efforts should be expanded in and around Brooks County, especially in areas known for high traffic due to migrants seeking to avoid permanent checkpoints.

- Many of the remains of the thousands of migrants who have lost their lives attempting to cross the border are unidentified. There is no unified procedure to process remains and DNA samples

of bodies found in the border region. This has led to inconsistencies, a failure to take DNA samples of many remains, and a high number of reported missing migrants without a consolidated effort to match the DNA of unidentified remains with family members searching for missing loved ones. U.S. authorities should explicitly encourage genetic laboratories receiving federal grant monies to process samples from unidentified remains found within 200 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border and compare the resulting genetic profiles

against samples from the relatives of any missing individual, including samples provided by foreign consulates or authorized entities.

- Resource-strapped jurisdictions like Brooks County need federal help in order to cover the high cost of properly handling migrant remains. As long as Border Patrol maintains its checkpoint in the middle of Brooks County, the Department of Homeland Security should consider it a “border county region” eligible for increased federal funding.

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