

# **A Humanitarian Crisis at the Border: New Estimates of Deaths Among Unauthorized Immigrants**

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For almost a decade now, there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of deaths each year among unauthorized border-crossers in the deserts and mountains of southern Arizona. The official statistics compiled by the U.S. Border Patrol consistently undercount the actual number of deaths in Arizona and elsewhere along the U.S.-Mexico border. But various academic and government studies estimate that the bodies of between 2,000 and 3,000 men, women, and children have been found along the entire southwest border since 1995, including at least 1,000 in the inhospitable terrain of southern Arizona. Experts, including the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), now explain this crisis as a direct consequence of U.S. immigration-control policies instituted in the mid-1990s.

The Binational Migration Institute (BMI) of the University of Arizona's Mexican American Studies and Research Center has undertaken a unique and scientifically rigorous study of all unauthorized border-crosser (UBC) deaths examined by the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office (PCMEO) from 1990-2005. Because the PCMEO has handled approximately 90 percent of all UBC recovered bodies in the U.S. Border Patrol's Tucson Sector, an analysis of such deaths serves as an accurate reflection of the major characteristics of all known unauthorized border-crosser deaths that have occurred in this sector since 1990.

A reliable analysis of known deaths among unauthorized border-crossers in the Tucson Sector is important for many reasons. Most important is the fact that, according to available figures produced by the U.S. government and the academic community, a comparison of the totals of such deaths for each of the nine Border Patrol sectors along the U.S.-Mexico border shows that the Tucson Sector has been the site of the vast majority of known UBC deaths in the new millennium. The results of the BMI study, which are confirmed by comparable research, show that there has been a dramatic increase in the number of UBC recovered bodies in the Tucson Sector from 1990 to 2005, thereby creating a major public health and humanitarian crisis in the deserts of Arizona.

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