

Surveillance has a body count

Customs and Border Protection (CBP) just released updated data on migrant deaths at the US-Mexico border, and the results are staggering. At least 895 people died at the border during the 2022 fiscal year – a 57 percent increase from the previous fiscal year. This grim statistic makes 2022 the deadliest year on record for migrants attempting to come to the US, and it's possible that the figure is an undercount.

For years, CBP has blamed the persistent rise in deaths on three factors: the summer heat, the ruggedness of the desert terrain, and the cruelty of smugglers who leave migrants to die there.

Climate change has indeed made summers hotter and drier, which means migrants who spend days or weeks trekking through remote stretches of the desert are more likely to become dehydrated and, if out in the sun for long enough, to succumb to exposure. But rising temperatures don't explain why migrants are crossing through such perilous parts of the borderlands in the first place, often dying in the process. The real culprit is the vast surveillance apparatus that funnels migrants – including people seeking asylum – into what CBP itself calls “hostile terrain.”

In November 2021, a month into the 2022 fiscal year, CBP gave me a tour of its surveillance infrastructure in the Tucson Border Patrol sector, which encompasses more than 90,000 square miles, and where, over the next 11 months, at least 142 migrants would lose their lives. I watched as CBP tracked a group of 11 migrants with a Predator drone and got a look at the remote camera feeds that agents allow agents to monitor human movement through the desert from an air-conditioned

office building. Later, while I walked around Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument with a local environmental activist, a Border Patrol agent drove up to us and said he had seen us on one of the cameras.

CBP's network of surveillance towers, hidden cameras, aerial drones, and overhead sensors is the result of an enforcement strategy called "prevention through deterrence."

The policy, which was implemented in the mid-1990s, was initially to build up manpower in highly trafficked areas of the border. At the time, most migrants entered the US through cities – they'd scale the fence that divided Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez, for example. In response, Border Patrol flooded cities along the border with agents to dissuade migrants from crossing. Those who attempted would be pushed onto "more hostile terrain, less suited for crossing and more suited for enforcement," Border Patrol's 1994 strategic plan read.

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Thirty years later, the plan has borne out, though it hasn't actually reduced migration. Instead, as the 1994 plan predicted, it just shifted the location of crossings. Surveillance tools allow Border Patrol to track migrants through vast expanses of the border without actually having to be there – the agency considers them a "force multiplier." But the expansion of CBP's surveillance apparatus has come at a significant human cost. A 2019 study by researchers at the University of Arizona found a "significant correlation between the location of border surveillance technology, the routes taken by migrants, and the locations of recovered human remains in the southern Arizona desert."

Migrants don't always know about the tools CBP uses to track

them through the desert, but smugglers certainly do – and so they encourage migrants to enter the US via remote, dangerous routes where they're less likely to be intercepted by Border Patrol agents but far more likely to die.

Title 42, a pandemic-era policy that let CBP expel migrants back to Mexico without a hearing, may have also had a compounding effect that exacerbated the massive 2022 death toll. The policy was ostensibly introduced to limit the spread of covid-19 but was, for both the Trump and Biden administrations, a de facto anti-immigration deterrence strategy.

As a result of the Title 42 expulsions, some asylum seekers who would have otherwise turned themselves in to Border Patrol at the first possible opportunity instead attempted to evade detection – sometimes because they had already been expelled to Mexico, where they faced significant danger. CBP's Southwest Border enforcement report for the 2021 fiscal year notes that the high number of encounters that year “was partly driven by high recidivism rates among individuals processed under Title 42 public health authorities.” In other words, some migrants who were expelled under Title 42 tried to cross the border over and over again until they were successful – or until the harsh desert terrain forced them to give up. In 2022, Border Patrol conducted more than 938,000 expulsions of single adult migrants and 116,000 expulsions of family groups, according to the agency's data.

Of the 895 fatalities listed for 2022, 131 were listed as partial “skeletal remains,” meaning that the death could have occurred at any time. If we leave those out of the 2022 count, that's still 764 confirmed deaths during a 12-month period, the majority of which resulted from exposure or drowning.

The confluence of Title 42, record heat, and the steady expansion of CBP's surveillance capabilities provided a perfect storm for migrant deaths in 2022. Title 42 was

rescinded last year, but the bipartisan border bill that Congress spent months debating included a provision that would effectively shut down the border, Title 42-style, whenever encounter numbers surpassed a certain threshold. Border surveillance, meanwhile, isn't going away any time soon. In fact, CBP's next goal is a "unified vision of unauthorized movement" across the US-Mexico border.

If the recent past is any indication, more surveillance won't reduce migration. Its body count, however, will keep growing.

<https://www.theverge.com/2024/3/20/24106098/cbp-migrant-deaths-border-surveillance>