Over the past two decades, the remains of more than 3,900 migrants have been found in Southern Arizona, with untold others dying, never to be discovered. The humanitarian disaster is intensifying. The remains of 239 migrants were found in Southern Arizona in 2020, more than any other year on record. This year is on pace to be even worse. The remains of 222 migrants were found from January to September, compared to 150 sets of remains during the same period last year.

STAR INVESTIGATION: DEATH IN THE DESERT

Oscar’s phone battery was failing as he tried to stay on the line with the 911 dispatcher. He had crossed the Arizona-Mexico border southwest of Tucson a few days earlier, but he was running out of food and couldn’t keep walking through the Baboquivari Mountains. His calls to 911 came during a record heat wave that turned September 2020 into one of the deadliest months for migrants ever recorded in Southern Arizona.

“It’s lost and alone,” Oscar said through a shaky connection with a dispatcher at the Pima County Sheriff’s Department, which recorded the call. “I’ve been lost for four days. I have nothing left so I called this number.”

The battery was running out. “It’s down to 9%,” he said.

The dispatcher connected Oscar’s call to the Border Patrol, but the call dropped even through multiple carriers provided coverage in the location he called from.

“Hopefully, he’s able to call back,” the Border Patrol agent said.

Oscar called back again, pleading, “Please don’t leave me here.” The Border Patrol agent connected him to an aircraft that saw him, but Oscar said it was flying on the wrong side of the mountains.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” Oscar said. “I don’t have anything left. I didn’t think things were going to be so hard here.”

His battery was at 2%. “My wife is about to give birth and I hope to get back here. This is killing me,” Oscar said. He started to sob.

A Border Patrol agent took over the call and the 911 audio recording stopped.

Oscar’s fate isn’t known. The Sheriff’s Department later said the Border Patrol found him, but the Border Patrol could not find any record of what happened to him.

He was one of thousands of migrants who cross the border in Southern Arizona every year. Each year, many of them are overwhelmed by the harsh desert and mountains, leading to distress calls to 911 dispatchers, family members and local humanitarian groups. Some find help. Others don’t.

Over the past two decades, the remains of more than 3,100 migrants were found in Southern Arizona, according to the Pima County Medical Examiner’s Office, the Tucson-based aid group Humane Borders, and the Yuma County Sheriff’s Office. An unknown number of others also died while crossing the border, but their remains were never found.

The long-running humanitarian disaster is intensifying. Within weeks of Oscar’s calls for help, the remains of 50 migrants were found, making September 2020 the deadliest month since 2013. By the end of the year, the remains of 279 migrants had been found, more than any other year since large-scale deaths in the desert of Southern Arizona began in 2010.

Until this summer.

After the remains of 22 migrants were found in June, more than any month since 2010, the death toll soared in 2020 on pace to surpass last year. The remains of 222 migrants were found in Southern Arizona from January through September, compared to 152 during the same period last year and 124 during that period in 2019.

“2020 does not look like a one-year blip,” said Dr. Greg Hess, Pima County’s medical examiner, who oversees the vast majority of remains recovered in Southern Arizona. “We’re seeing a big surge over the past few years of remains in 2021 and I imagine we’re going to come close to the numbers we had last year.”

The increase in immigrant deaths is raising the stakes for President Joe Biden as he seeks to overhaul immigration policy. Hundreds of predictable and preventable deaths could continue for the foreseeable future without...
The Star found the Border Patrol was also involved in the death, but that it wasn’t the only agency involved that does not take a lethargic approach to responding to a crisis.

Exposure to the elements, particularly heat, is the most common cause of death, leading some to argue for a stronger joint effort. The Star found that migrant deaths tend to be treated as the responsibility of the next law enforcement agency along the corridor, without a joint effort to improve communications.

As the debate over immigration and border enforcement continues, the U.S. government and its allies are working to improve joint efforts to reduce deaths in the desert.

The Star also found that the loss of migrant lives is a complex issue, involving a wide array of new immigration and humanitarian policies that make it difficult to provide clear guidance.

The reporters

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The MR and the O'odham Nation Police Department also track the percent of a rescue that is effective. While the Border Patrol statistics show Title 42 expulsions were the norm in the Tucson Sector in 2021, no data is available on how many of those migrants who died had been expelled.

More than 230,000 migrants died or were found dead since 2000. The MR and the O'odham Nation have documented that rescues were significantly fewer than the number of migrants who died. Many migrants were left behind at the border, as the MR and the O'odham Nation have documented. The MR and the O'odham Nation have documented that rescues were significantly fewer than the number of migrants who died.

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Migrant deaths from violence have become rarer in Southern Arizona over the past decade, as an analysis of all migrant deaths in the state found that, as a result of violence, such as gunshot wounds or stab wounds. About 220 deaths were linked to vehicle wrecks.

A woman named Esfilda died in 2000 while crossing the border in Arizona. "I think it was the worst health I've seen," said Nadia, the sister of the deceased. "The shift away from towns and other areas has left us in remote and dangerous areas," Martinez said. But the resources, such as fencing in remote areas, are not enough to stop migrants from crossing.

"I don't know exactly how far Esfilda walked, but she walked three days and that those days were very difficult for her, that it was terrible but her per- sonal story was in the best health to walk," Nadia said.

"Imagine that Esfilda had to have suffered from this?" Nadia said as her voice choked up and she wiped tears from her eyes. "Sometimes I think about it, that, that Esfilda died. It hurts me," Nadia said.

"I asked about her sister's health, and she answered that it was the worst health I've seen," Nadia said. "I don't know exactly how far she walked, but she walked three days and that those days were very difficult for her, that it was terrible but perhaps Esfilda wasn't in the best health to walk," Nadia said. "Imagine that Esfilda had to have suffered from this?" Nadia said as her voice choked up and she wiped tears from her eyes.

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Crisis

Federal officials acknowledged at the time that the strategy could place migrants in “mortal danger,” as a 1994 warning document put it, but the thinking was that the danger would deter migrants from crossing the border. Instead, migrants continued to cross, and thousands died in the wilderness of Southern Arizona.

Over the past two decades, the number of agent deaths in Arizona increased sharply, and a wide array of surveillance technology and border barriers was installed, including border-wall building in urban areas such as Nogales, Douglas, Naco and Sasabe.

The Star looked at corridors across the state and found that while migration typically swelled at the same time each year, more deaths were found in the corridor west of Lukeville. "We tend to be found in remote corridors," the Star found.

To run the first model, the Star calculated the border miles in each corridor that were uninhabited as of 2015, based on housing data from the U.S. Census Bureau. Then the Star calculated the number of border miles in each corridor by year that were uninhabited, as of data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Using these two numbers, the Star calculated each corridor’s share of Arizona’s uninhabited border by year.

Our first statistical model estimates that a 1 percentage point increase in a corridor’s share of Arizona’s uninhabited border typically increases deaths by about 4%. For example, the migration corridor west of Lukeville currently has the smallest share of Arizona’s uninhabited border. Nearly all of it is arid or desert, but it is also the border that migrants have to travel to get from Mexico to the Tucson Sector.

Meanwhile, the corridor west of Nogales, which the Star calculated has nearly 4 miles of Arizona’s uninhabited border and is home to the most agents, has about 3% of Arizona’s uninhabited border across the state.

Based on data from 2015 to 2020, the model estimates that the corridor west of Nogales would have 14% more deaths in 2020 than in 2015, accounting for 225 miles of wall, or roughly half of all the miles of wall under the Trump administration.

As a candidate, Joe Biden said he would not build another foot of border wall. From taking office as president, Biden tore down wall construction, including an additional 20 miles of wall planned for Arizona’s 570-mile border with Mexico.

Body count is up in uninhabited areas

The Star has found statistically significant evidence that walls and pedestrian fencing have contributed to the death toll.

While these models help us see certain patterns in the data at hand, they do not establish cause and effect.

Federal officials would need to make much more data available for researchers to build a highly persuasive model that might allow scientists to disprove this trend.

If these models are right, the increase in deaths is likely to continue through 2022, the Star calculated. The models show that, in the next year or two, more deaths are likely to be found in uninhabited areas.

Title 42 is new and needs more research, but it would be wise to discount its contribution to the death toll in Southern Arizona, the Star’s models said.

Title 42 expulsions are leading people to engage in migration crossing at a rate that may not be as high as previously thought, the Star’s models show.

The data show that, since the end of the Trump administration, migrants have been more likely to attempt illegal entry to the United States at points along the border west of Lukeville.

Cesar Sanchez disappeared in the desert near Lukeville as he headed to Tucson to work in construction in October 2016. He had worked as a police officer before but had struggled to find a better way to support his family. He had worked as a police officer before but had struggled to find a better way to support his family. He had worked as a police officer before but had struggled to find a better way to support his family.

The cross and ceremony mark a spot where a family can mourn and others can remember migrants who simply disappeared in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found, are left to disappear in the wilderness, their remains never found.