At an office on South Swan Road in Tucson, a Border Patrol agent talks to a group of five lost somewhere in the Baboquivari Mountains. The corridor west of that mountain range has triple the death count of any other area this year in Arizona’s borderlands.

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Arizona Daily Star

The desert requires overcoming a multitude of challenges, said the Arizona Daily Star found by analyzing tens of thousands of calls to 911, dispatchers and Border Patrol agents try to gather information from the migrant in distress. In other, large areas of the desert west of Tucson, there is no cell phone coverage, making calls for help difficult.

The wilderness in Southern Arizona is so large as several states, and would-be rescuers often have little information about where distress calls come from. When they have an exact location, they may still have to travel long distances to reach the migrant.

Rescue efforts will continue with new strategies that include local sheriff’s departments, U.S. Fish and Wildlife officers, National Park Service rangers, the Tohono O’odham Nation Police Department. When calls come from areas that could be in multiple jurisdictions, 911 dispatchers have to figure out which agencies to notify.

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Deputies searched for Arevalo, but couldn’t find him. One of the brothers told a deputy that he and volunteers with No More Deaths would search the next day. They followed birds to Arevalo’s body, about 10 miles north of the border.

**Calling for help**

When officials spoke to a crowd of news reporters this June, Deputy Chief Patrol Agent Sabri Dikman urged migrants not to cross the border illegally, saying, “Don’t do it. The desert is vast and treacherous.”

Rescue efforts are often officiated by someone in the group, who (or something) relays location information, “I’ve been walking for five days” can be nearly impossible,” Dikman said. “Even with our best resources, the task can take days.”

For migrants who carry a cellphone, he urged them to call 911. “This is your single best chance for being rescued.”

“If you call anyone else, you’re wasting your battery.”

**Desert west of Tucson deadliest for migrants**

The western corridor of the desert southwest of Tucson is the deadliest for migrants. The death toll for migrants who have died in the desert southwest in Cochise County, including the desert southwest of Tucson, hit 273 in 2021, the highest since records began in 2004.

**STAR INVESTIGATION: DEATH IN THE DESERT**

In some cases, humanitarian groups and relatives of a missing migrant must step in when official efforts fail.

During a record-breaking series of 100-degree days in June, four brothers showed up at the Pima County Sheriff’s Department to ask about their brother, who had left for the border early that morning and was never seen again. The sheriff’s office did not have any resources.

The Mexican Consulate had informed the brothers that the woman who died, Berta Ladios, was in the group that crossed the border with their brother. They contacted the consulate and told them the group contacted the brothers and told them she was doing well after she left.

According to reports from local law enforcement agencies, they often mention finding phones and solar battery chargers next to migrants who died in the desert.

While Border Patrol agents, local law enforcement and humanitarian volunteers can’t
Border Patrol Agent Jesus Vasavilbaso walks along a trail in the Baboquivari Mountain Range west of Sasabe, Ariz.

**Focus**

FIG. F7

Many migrants die every year, yet those efforts fail an obstacle that no amount of individual effort can overcome: They can't respond to distress calls that are never made.

The desert west of Tucson has been one of the busiest areas for border crossings for many years, but vast areas of it either do not have cell coverage of any kind or the coverage is spotty and unreliable, according to coverage maps from the Federal Communications Commission as of June 2020. The largest coverage hole is in and around the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, one of the deadliest areas for migrants in Southern Arizona. Smaller holes dot the mountain ranges that run north-south across the border.

The remains of 48 migrants were found in areas without cell coverage since the start of 2021. Another 68 sets of remains were found in those areas in 2020, the Star found by comparing data on migrant deaths with cellphone coverage maps from the FCC. The remains of 38 migrants were found in those areas since 2010.

Nearly all of the 911 calls the Star reviewed came from the area between Nogales and the southern portion of the Tohono O’odham Nation reservation. The only calls from west of the reservation came from humanitarian, ranchers or wildlife officials reporting the discovery of human remains.

**Nerve center**

The limits created by the lack of cell coverage are clearly visible inside an office on South Swan Road that the Border Patrol uses as its nerve center for rescuing migrants.

A massive 10-foot-long screen dominates one wall, with white agents of various collegiate maps penned by agents on the screen. The screen shows a map of Southern Arizona similar to the topographical maps offered by Google Maps, with icons showing where distress calls come from and how far agents are from arriving at the migrant’s location.

The map showed three red icons of telephones on June 12 indicating those distress calls from migrants in the Baboquivari Mountains. Icons for Border Patrol agents slowly moved across the screen toward them. The area from the San Manuel Indian School to the Tohono O’odham Nation reservation was one of the largest areas with little or no cell coverage near the migrants, agents, aircraft and other Border Patrol assets. But much of the desert west of Ajo showed no activity at all.

The lack of cell coverage west of Ajo is a fact that Agent Ryan Rizzucchini, who leads the rescue efforts from the office, must work around. Simple put: “People can’t call for help out in that area,” he said.

Even for migrants who are in areas with cell phone reception, the ability to make a call does not guarantee a rescue.

Migrants at a shelter in Nogales, Sonora, said smugglers told them not to turn on their phones because the Border Patrol would be able to track the signal; or that they bought a phone to be able to make calls, but the signal was unreliable. Calls to the 911 dispatch center are one of the few ways agents can get an accurate fix on a migrant’s location.

The Star found after reviewing roughly 100 calls the Sheriff’s Department transferred to the Border Patrol since September 2020.

**Deadliest areas**

The border counties in Arizona where migrants cross into the U.S. include about 275,000 square miles, or more than three times the size of El Salvador. But migrant deaths are not spread evenly across that area. Instead, remains are found in a small fraction of it, focused on specific areas west of Tucson.

A few hours can mean life or death.

Nearby, the desert corridor west of Nogales, Sonora, is one of the areas with the highest death rates in the country. Since 2000, the remains of about 1,000 migrants were found within a 15-mile area of three towns. Nearly all of these 16 areas are west of Interstate 10. Most overlap the Tohono O’odham Nation reservation. Others overlap the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, Barry M. Goldwater Air Force Range and a section of the Coronado National Forest along the border.

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A cross made by Alvaro Enciso stands in the spot where the remains of a 16-year-old girl were found along I-19 north of a Border Patrol checkpoint.

"If you are the love of my life and you were the woman that you wanted in your life, “ she wrote in Spanish. “I know that sometimes I’m not with you, “ Hess said. “Legally, the only thing the law says one must do with unidentified remains is report it to the medical examiner’s office. That’s it.”

Belongings found on migrants who died in the deserts of Southern Arizona are kept in sealed bags at the Medical Examiner’s Office in Tucson’s south side. The Border Patrol and the U.S. Attorney’s Office separately downloaded DNA tests from the remains of migrants who died in the desert, locked in a small room in the office that’s it."

In 2018, No More Deaths volunteer Scott Warren faced felony human-smuggling charges after he let a pair of migrants spend two nights at a No More Deaths aid station in Ajo.

A cross made by Alvaro Enciso stands in the spot where the remains of a 16-year-old girl were found along I-19 north of a Border Patrol checkpoint.

We try to keep as much detailed, objective information as we can to respond to people’s needs to learn about those different types of deaths, … Legally, the only thing the law says one must do with unidentified remains is report it to the medical examiner’s office. That’s it.”

Dr. Greg Hess, director of the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, on his office’s efforts to track migrant deaths.
Actions by US never matched its rhetoric

By Jared Rosenblatt and Luke Ryan

A s a political issue, the deaths of thousands of migrants in Southern Arizona rarely appear on the national agenda or in major speeches. The issue popped up sporadically over the past few decades in bills proposed by members of both parties. In March 1995, Sen. Bill Frist, a Republican from Tennessee, introduced the Border Deaths Reduction Act, which would have directed the Department of Homeland Security to gather data on the number of migrant deaths, causes of deaths, and border crossings. The bill died in committee.

The increase in migrant deaths has been dramatic in recent years, with a record-breaking 239 remainders found in 2020. Biden has proposed more than doubling the number of rescuers — bringing the total to about 1,400. But migrant deaths remain part of the immigration debates, but they rarely are elevated to the level of that discussion unless they can be used as props for other arguments, like the Biden administration pushing for an increase in border enforcement. It’s a problem that’s been exacerbated by the pandemic, which has led to more rescue beacons in the desert, but has also slowed down the number of rescues.

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