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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Trévon Austin

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Up to three times more immigrants die crossing US-Mexico border than previously reported

An investigation by *USA Today* found that the government drastically underreports the number of immigrants killed attempting to cross the US-Mexico border. The investigation, titled “Uncounted deaths fuel ‘mass disaster,’” revealed that the number dead in the past five years surpasses official totals by anywhere from 25 percent to 300 percent in California, New Mexico and Arizona.

In other words, up to 27,000 immigrants may have died crossing the border in the last two decades, far above the official Customs and Border Protection (CBP) total of 7,209 dead over that period, if the totals from the last five years track back to 1998, the first year for which CBP provides statistics.

USA Today investigated the border region for nine months and found that federal agents and local police fail to report immigrant deaths.

Government underreporting occurs in all four states that border Mexico—Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and California—but is most serious in Texas, where the investigation could not reach a precise conclusion about the total number of dead because officials bury immigrants in mass unmarked graves. As a result, the *USA Today* reports, “the true number is even higher than the *USA Today* network’s count.” Remarkably, “the investigation found no central governmental, academic or non-profit entity that tracks all border deaths, beyond those encountered by the Border Patrol.”

Thousands of border deaths along the US-Mexico border were not included in official CBP statistics in the past five years alone. For example, the number of immigrant deaths

in New Mexico was nearly four times higher than those recorded by CBP, while in California there were 60 percent more deaths than the official reports. In Arizona, the death count was 25 percent higher.

The *USA Today* report quotes Robin Reineke, an anthropologist and co-founder of the Colibri Center for Human Rights, which helps identify the remains of immigrants who died while crossing the southwestern border, saying the “vigorous ignorance” of the lives lost lets public officials avoid addressing the issue.

“I’m disturbed by the fact that this massive loss of life on the border has been going on for nearly 20 years ... and we still don’t have a conclusive count, and we haven’t really invested the resources in getting anywhere,” he said.

The report notes that many counties in Texas “don’t track immigrant deaths. Some have buried remains in shallow graves with other crossers or in unmarked pauper’s graves. Some do not collect DNA samples, as required by state law, or do not conduct autopsies to determine a cause of death.” The federal government also effectively ignored a 2006 Government Accountability Office report that said CBP must improve its methods to record deaths.

The crisis that has unfolded along the Southwestern border is the result of a long-term anti-immigrant strategy agreed to by both the Democratic and Republican parties.

Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, both parties increased the number of agents and police patrolling the border and implemented modern technology such as infrared night-vision scopes, seismic sensors, and modern computer systems, creating a paramilitary force on the border. President Clinton implemented “Operation Gatekeeper” in 1993 and operation “Hold the Line” in 1994 which concentrated manpower in key urban crossing points in an attempt to deter immigrants with a “show of force,” with the intention of forcing immigrants to cross in uninhabitable desert regions.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, securing US borders became a key element of the anti-democratic crackdown and was accompanied by a surge of xenophobic rhetoric from American ruling circles. In 2003, President George W. Bush created the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the US Border Patrol became part of US Customs and Border Protection, a component of DHS.

President Obama, known as “deporter-in-chief,” has deported more immigrants than all the presidents preceding him. President Trump, who based his campaign on anti-immigrant xenophobia, has deported less immigrants in his first year than Obama did throughout 2016.

Trump has launched a campaign aimed at terrorizing undocumented immigrants with chilling parallels to the internment of Japanese-Americans in WWII and the Fugitive Slave Act of pre-civil war America. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) rounds up immigrants, intimidating them and spreading constant fear of deportation.

The states that border Mexico play a major role in the crisis. Millions of dollars are allocated to fund local efforts to prevent immigrants from escaping violence and poverty in their home countries caused in large part by US imperialism. In Texas alone, \$800 million was granted to border patrol efforts, at the cost of education and social programs, in the 2015 legislative session.