

April 24, 2024

Overview of Migrant Casework and Challenges at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner

Jen Vollner, Ph.D.



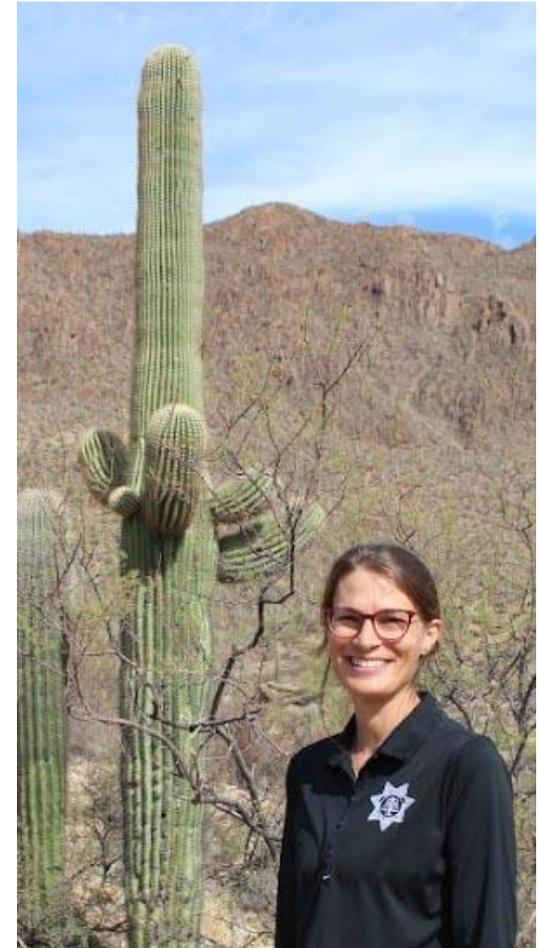


Disclaimer

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Jen Vollner, Ph.D.

Jennifer M Vollner, Ph.D. is one of three Forensic Anthropologists with the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner (PCOME) and an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the School of Anthropology at the University of Arizona. Dr. Vollner earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology from the College of Mount St. Joseph (now Mount St. Joseph University) in Delhi, Ohio. She earned a Master of Science in Anthropology from Mercyhurst College (now Mercyhurst University), as well as a Master of Arts in Anthropology and her doctorate in Anthropology from Michigan State University. Dr. Vollner has been employed by the PCOME since 2016 and became a Diplomate of the American Board of Forensic Anthropology in 2020. As one of the anthropologists at the PCOME her job duties and research interests revolve around the identification of migrants who have died in southern Arizona.



WARNING

This presentation contains graphic images that are sensitive in nature which may be considered triggering to some audiences.

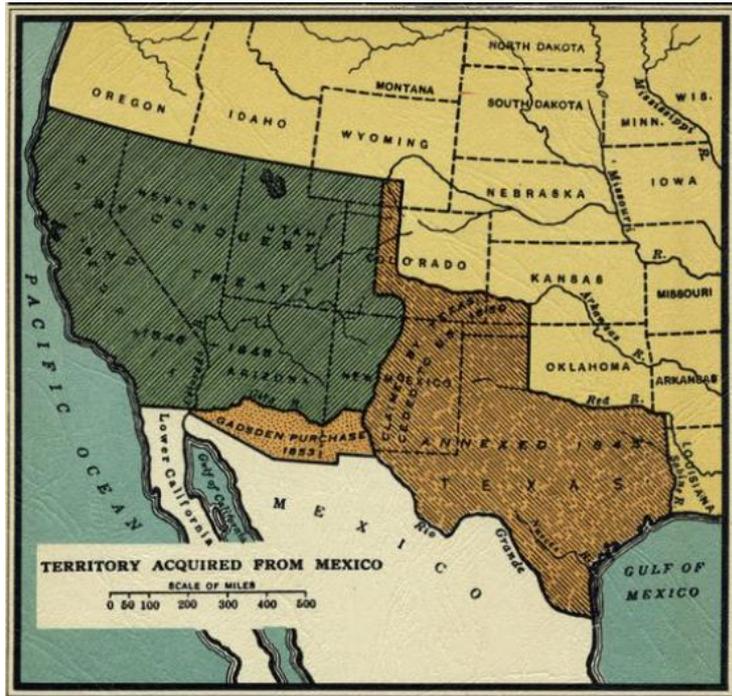
Overview

- Background
- Scope of the issue
- Undocumented Border Crossers (UBC) Designation
- Identification process
- Identification statistics



<https://geology.com/world/the-united-states-of-america-satellite-image.shtml>

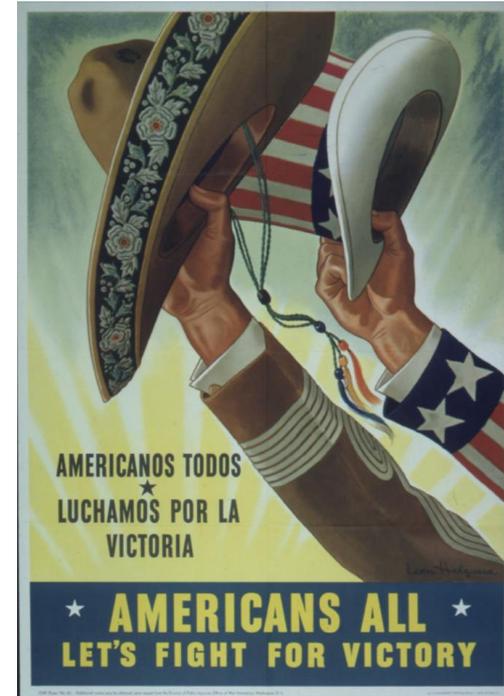
Brief History of United States-Mexico Border



- ~10,500 BCE: Evidence of several indigenous cultures
- 1530 CE: Spanish occupation
- 1821: Mexico independent from Spain (CA, NV, AZ, UT, NM, TX, parts of CO, KS, WY, and OK)
- 1845: US annexed TX
- 1849: End of Mexican-American War
 - Treaty of Guadalupe sets new borders
- 1853: Gadsden Purchase acquired southern AZ and southwestern NM

Migration at the United States-Mexico Border

- Pre-Bracero Wave of Immigration 1840s-1940s
 - 1910-1914: Mexican Revolution
 - Opportunities in mining and agriculture
 - Threats of violence pushed immigrants north
- 1924: Creation of US Border Patrol
 - Restrict Chinese migrants from Mexico
- 1930's: Mexican Repatriation
 - 1929 Depression triggered deportations of MX nationals
- Bracero Program Wave of Immigration 1942-1964
 - Began during WWII and ended 22 years later



(Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Calavari 1992)

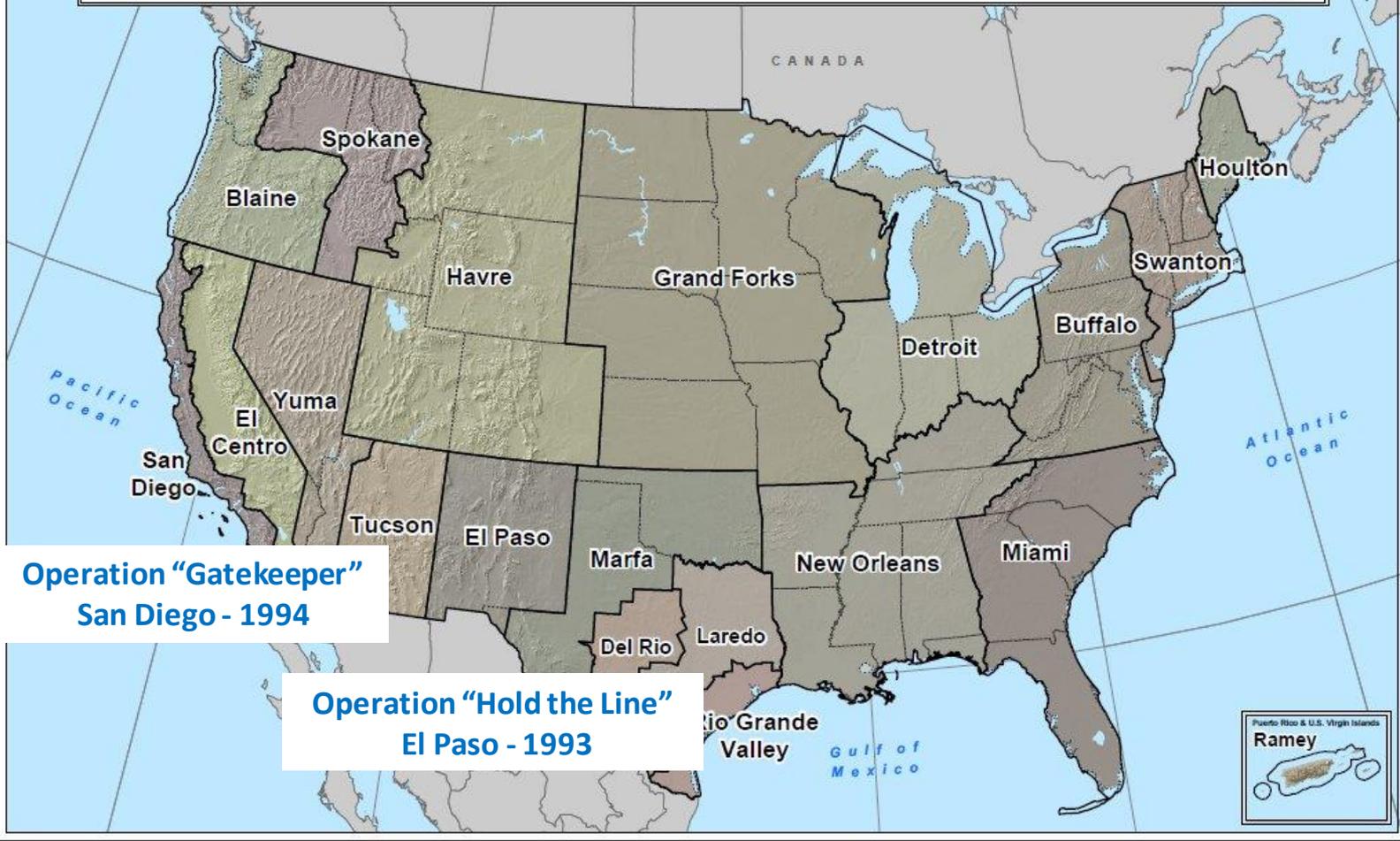
Migration at the United States-Mexico Border

- Post-Bracero Immigration Wave 1965-Present
 - 1965: Immigration and Nationality Act signed
 - Eliminated national-origins quota system
 - 1986: Immigration Reform and Control Act
 - 1994: North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)
 - Peso dropped in value and incentivized migration north
 - 1993-1994: Operation Hold the Line and Gatekeeper
 - Enacted in El Paso and San Diego to protect crossing points



U.S. Customs and Border Protection

Office of Border Patrol - Sectors

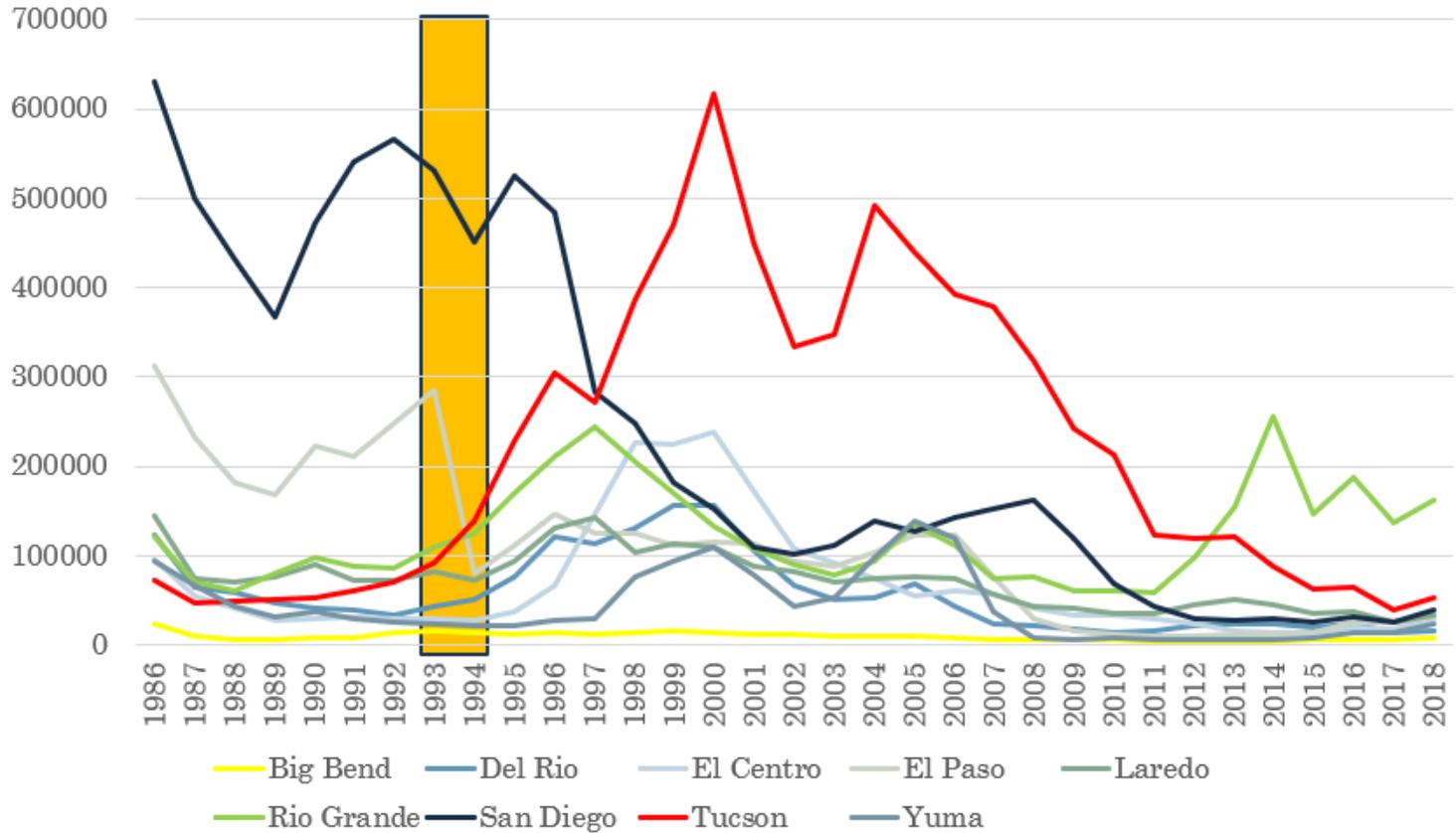


Operation "Gatekeeper"
San Diego - 1994

Operation "Hold the Line"
El Paso - 1993

Policy Impact

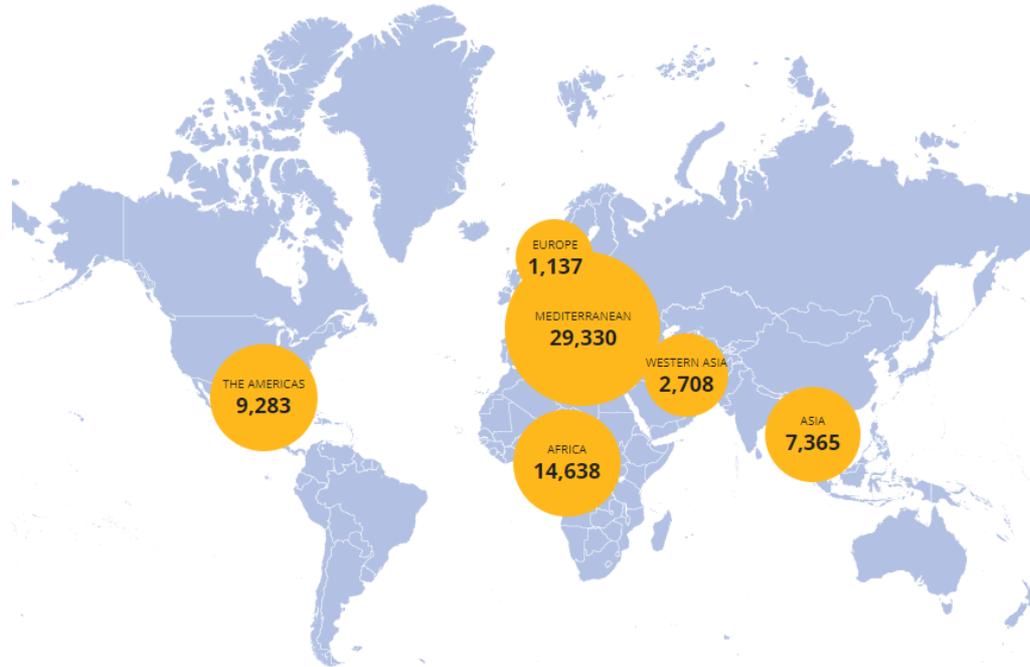
USBP Apprehensions by Fiscal Year



From U.S. Customs and Border Protection Public Data Portal

Scope of the Issue

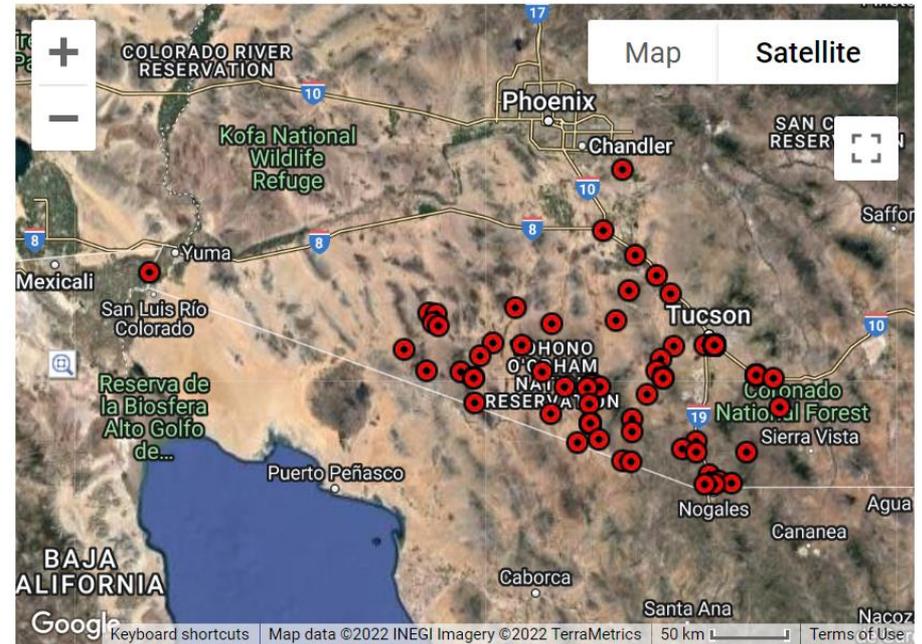
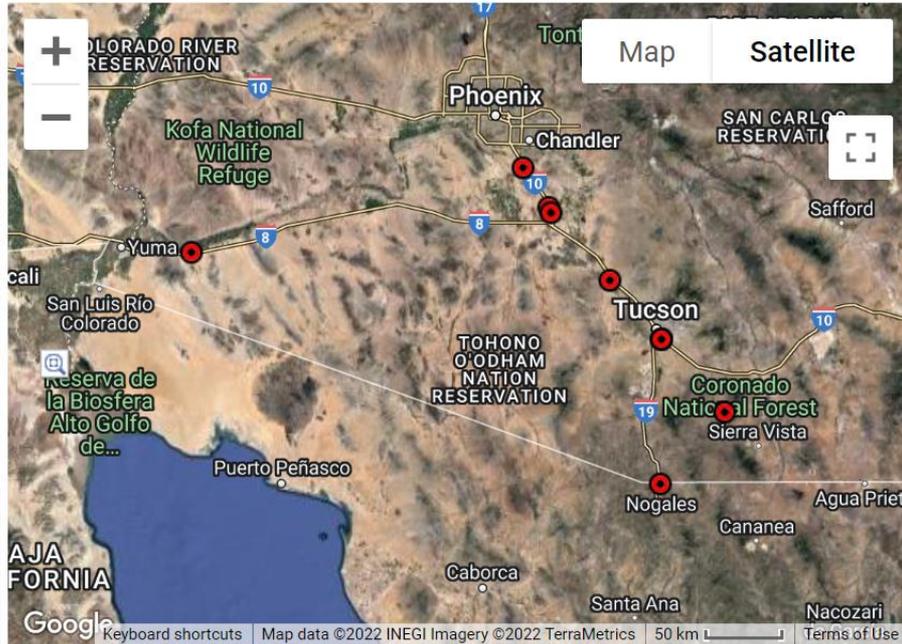
- International Organization for Migration (IOM)
 - 5291 missing crossing the US-Mexico border since 2014



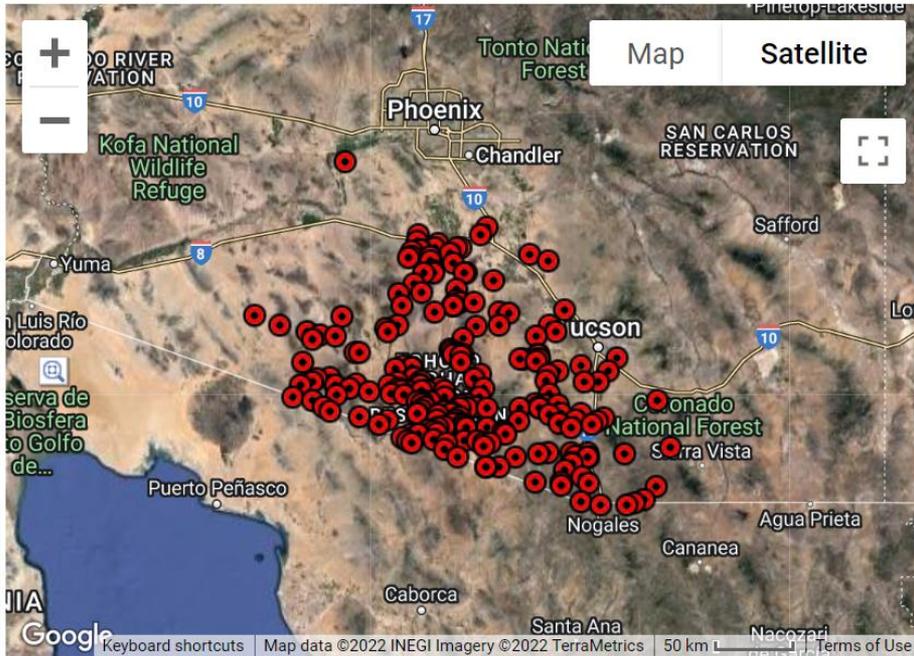
<https://missingmigrants.iom.int/>

Disclaimer: The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration. Data represent minimum estimates and locations are approximate. The latest incident recorded occurred on 08 April 2024.

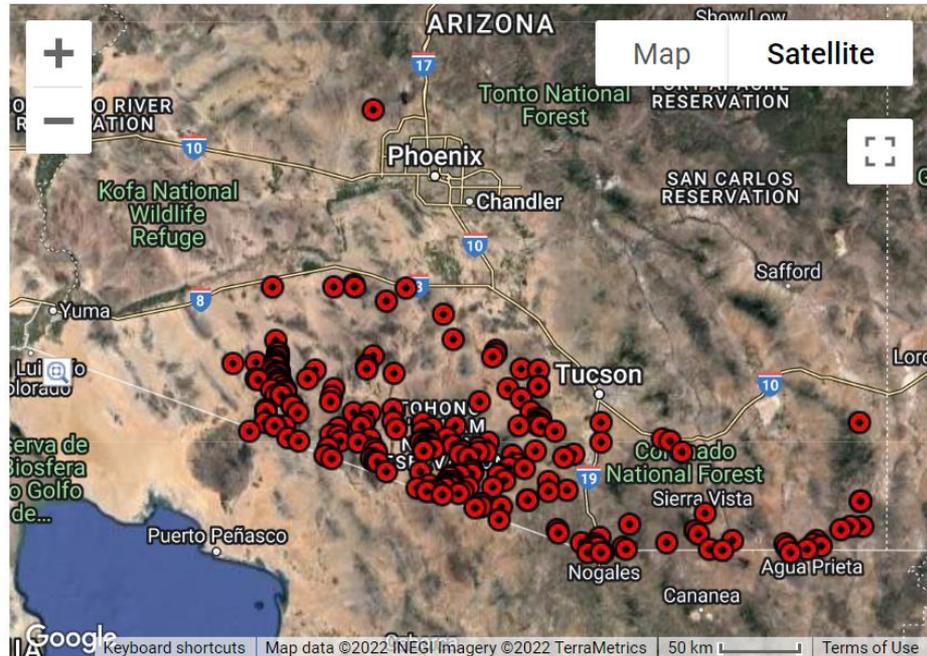
Arizona Migrant Deaths



Arizona Migrant Deaths



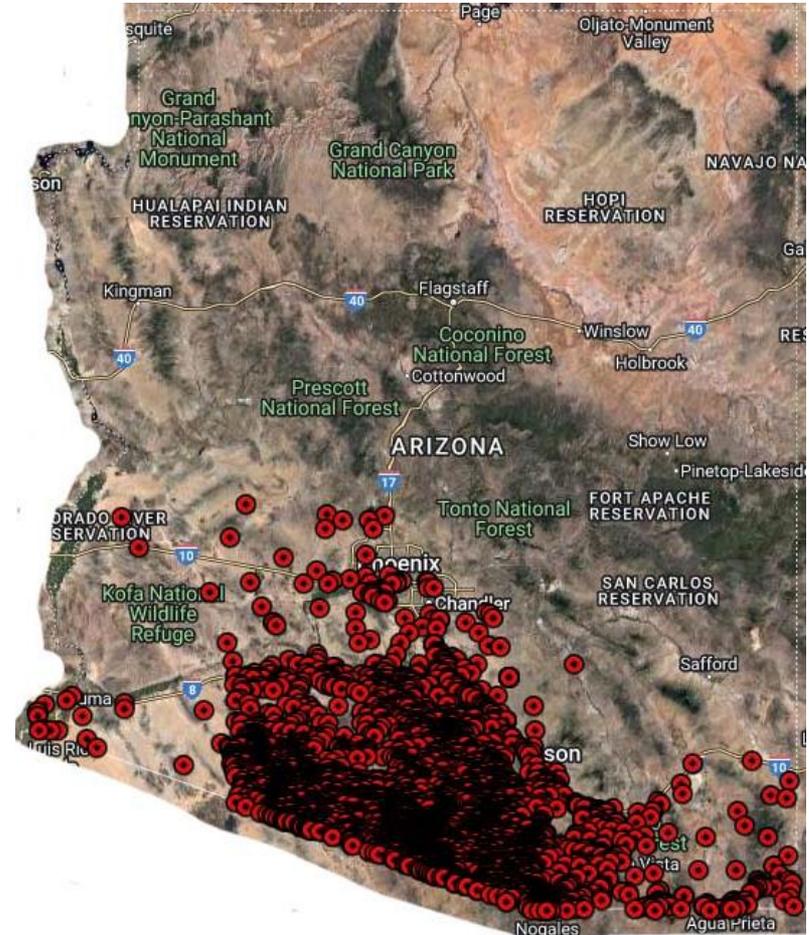
2010 – 224 Individuals Recovered



2020 – 223 Individuals Recovered

Arizona Migrant Deaths

- 4,199 recoveries in the state of AZ
 - As of 4/9/2024 according to Humane Borders
- PCOME has jurisdiction over majority of Arizona-Sonora border
 - Pima, Santa Cruz, and Cochise Counties



PCOME UBC Cases

Annual UBC Recoveries

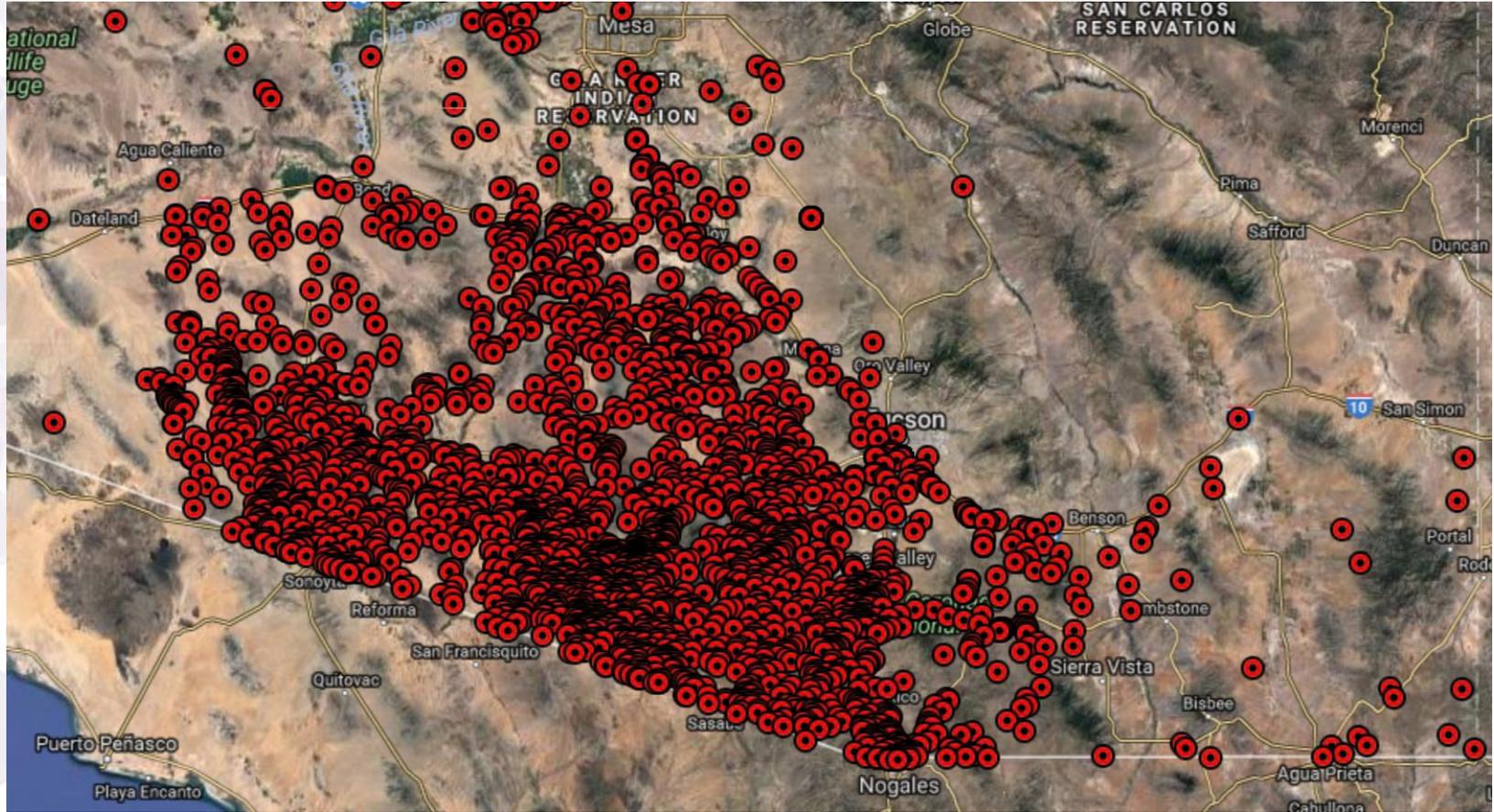


As of 4/10/2024, the PCOME has examined 3885 cases believed to be Undocumented Border Crossers (UBCs) since 2000

UBC Designation

- Geographic location
 - Remote, desert areas in established migrant corridors
- Personal effects
 - Clothing and footwear, foreign currency, written materials, IDs
- Skeletal indicators
 - Craniometrics and non-metric traits, dental traits
 - Health, stress, and nutrition markers
- Confirmation through identification

Geographic Discovery Location



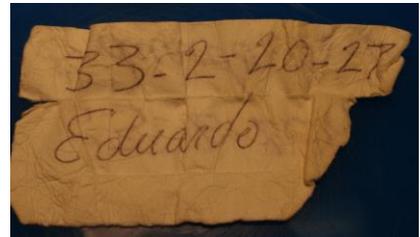
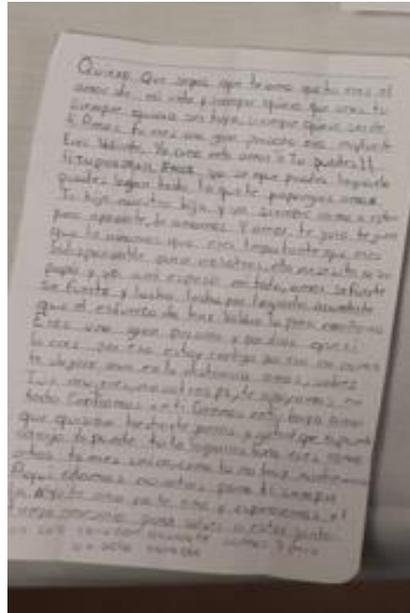
Clothing & Footwear





Personal Effects

- Practical Items
 - Currency, Tickets, Phone Numbers, Water Jugs, Medications
- Forms of Identification
 - Voter Cards, Driver's Licenses, Birth Certificates, Marriage Licenses
- Forms of Protection/Good Luck
 - Religious Items, Two Dollar Bills
- Forms of Remembrance
 - Photos of Family, Kid's Drawings



The Things Hidden



The Things Carried



Skeletal and Dental

UBC Designation Leads to Faster Identifications

- Use of different pathway and resources for identification
- Alerts to Non-Governmental Organizations
- Alerts to foreign consulates
 - Mexican, Guatemalan, Salvadoran, and Honduran
- Fingerprints (if possible) run by U.S. Customs and Border Protection and Arizona Department of Public Safety
- Entry into NamUs.gov



Identification Process

Comparison between antemortem and postmortem record

1. Visual identification
2. Circumstances
3. Fingerprint identification
4. Medical or dental radiographs
5. DNA



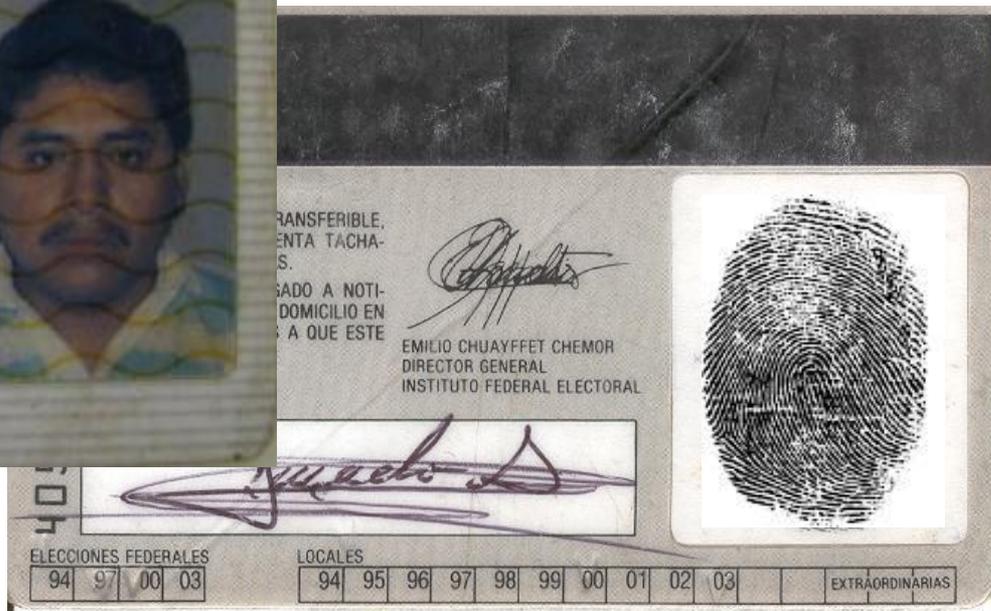
Circumstantial Identification



Circumstantial Identification

Fingerprint Identification

Fingerprint Identification



Fingerprint "Identification"

40 Unidentified Persons Cases Found [Revise Search](#)



Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP72245

Male, Uncertain

Date Body Found
July 12, 2020

Location Found
Tucson, AZ

Estimated Age Range
--

Date Modified
March 16, 2023



Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP14766

Male, Hispanic / Latino

Date Body Found
August 22, 2015

Location Found
Why, AZ

Estimated Age Range
35-50 Years

Date Modified
June 24, 2021



Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP12079

Male, Hispanic / Latino

Date Body Found
July 17, 2013

Location Found
Near Lukeville, AZ

Estimated Age Range
30-50 Years

Date Modified
October 27, 2021



Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP12076

Male, Hispanic / Latino

Date Body Found
July 05, 2013

Location Found
Cowlic, Tohono O'Odham Nation, AZ

Estimated Age Range
25-36 Years

Date Modified
April 05, 2021



Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP12292

Male, Uncertain

Date Body Found
June 21, 2013

Location Found
Near Pisinimo Village, AZ

Estimated Age Range
30-48 Years

Date Modified
October 27, 2021



Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP12486

Male, Uncertain

Date Body Found
June 21, 2013

Location Found
Near Pisinimo Village, AZ

Estimated Age Range
18-23 Years

Date Modified
April 05, 2021

Medical Radiograph “Identification”

Records?

Alias?

Family acceptance?



DNA Challenges

- Lack of funding
 - Current backlog since 2019 = 427 samples
 - Fragmented data
- Additional remains found at different dates
- Varied successes with extraction
 - Techniques and technology changes
- Obtaining Family Reference Samples from foreign nationals



DNA “Identification”


[MY DASHBOARD](#)
[MISSING PERSONS](#)
[UNIDENTIFIED PERSONS](#)
[UNCLAIMED PERSONS](#)

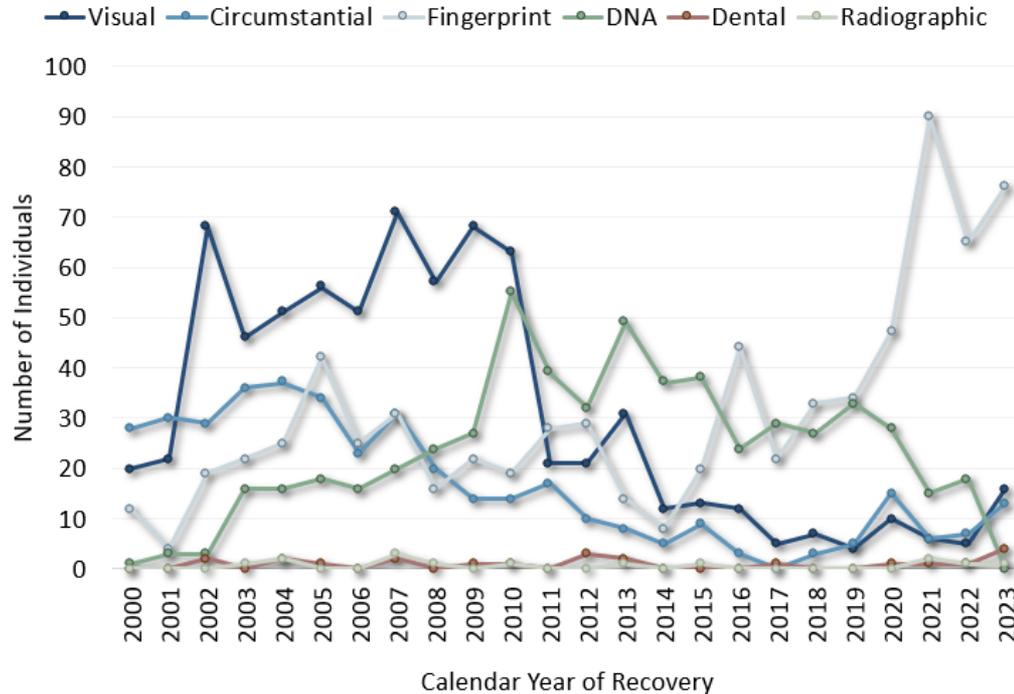
29 Unidentified Persons Cases Found [Revise Search](#)

	Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP5515 Male, Hispanic / Latino Date Body Found February 12, 2004	Location Found Casa Grande, AZ	Estimated Age Range 35-55 Years	Date Modified January 12, 2024
	Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP8736 Male, Hispanic / Latino Date Body Found July 15, 2010	Location Found Vaya Chin, AZ	Estimated Age Range 29-45 Years	Date Modified April 05, 2021
	Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP8606 Male, Hispanic / Latino Date Body Found September 17, 2010	Location Found Marana, AZ	Estimated Age Range 30-45 Years	Date Modified June 23, 2022
	Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP8669 Male, Hispanic / Latino Date Body Found December 01, 2010	Location Found --, AZ	Estimated Age Range 35-50 Years	Date Modified April 05, 2021
	Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP9354 Male, Uncertain Date Body Found February 24, 2011	Location Found south of Maricopa, AZ	Estimated Age Range 30-50 Years	Date Modified April 05, 2021
	Unidentified Person / NamUs #UP8870 Male, Hispanic / Latino Date Body Found June 15, 2011	Location Found east of Ajo, AZ	Estimated Age Range 23-57 Years	Date Modified December 21, 2023

Identification Statistics

	Identification Status			
	Total UBCs	Unident.	Identified	% Identified
2000	74	13	61	82%
2001	77	18	59	77%
2002	147	26	121	82%
2003	155	34	121	78%
2004	169	36	133	79%
2005	195	44	151	77%
2006	168	53	115	68%
2007	214	56	158	74%
2008	162	44	118	73%
2009	190	58	132	69%
2010	222	69	153	69%
2011	178	73	105	59%
2012	154	59	95	62%
2013	165	60	105	64%
2014	127	65	62	49%
2015	135	54	81	60%
2016	147	64	83	56%
2017	118	61	57	48%
2018	120	50	70	58%
2019	136	60	76	56%
2020	215	114	101	47%
2021	214	94	120	56%
2022	171	74	97	57%
2023	197	87	110	56%

Primary Identification Methods

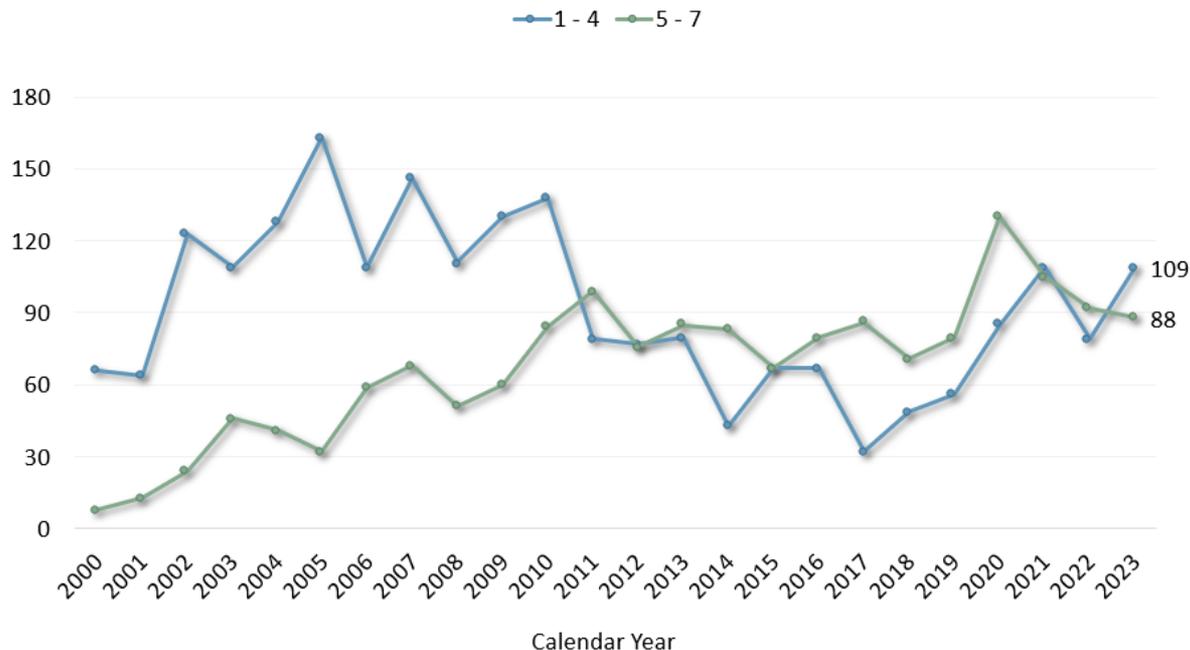


Body Condition & Postmortem Interval (PMI) Scale

Postmortem Interval (PMI) Scale: An assessment of time elapsed from death to recovery of the remains

- 1 – 4 Individuals discovered more recently with a likely PMI of ≤ 3 months
- 5 – 7 represent skeletal remains with a likely PMI of ≥ 3 months

Pooled Body Conditions of Recovered UBC Remains by CY2000 - 2023



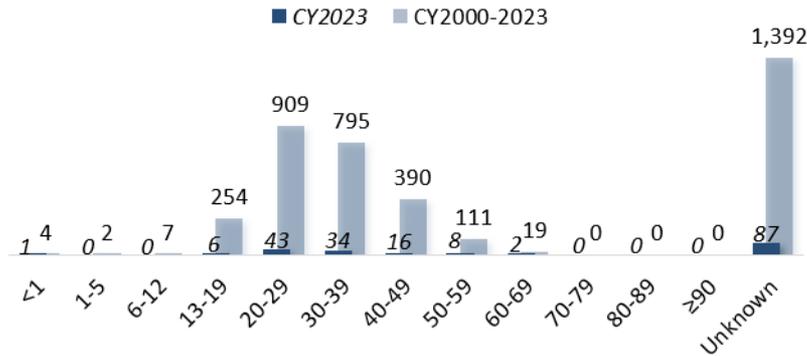
Identified Migrants

UBC Recoveries by Decedent Sex

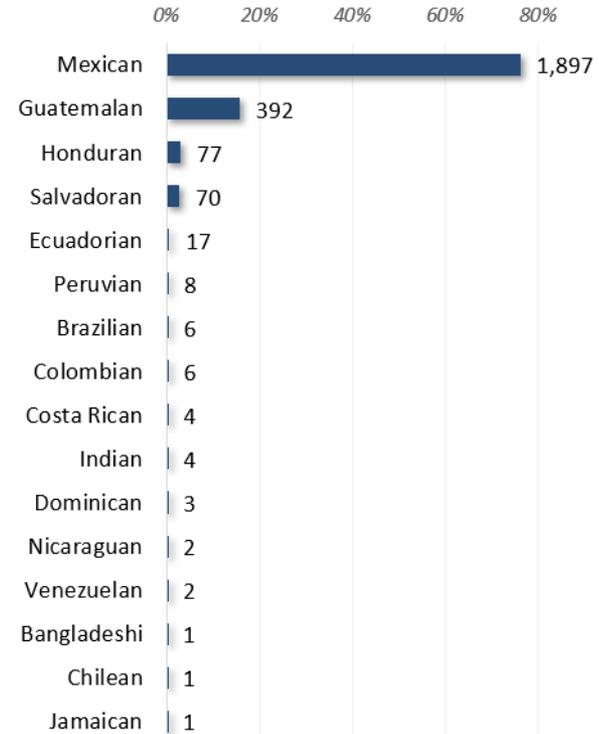


	CY2000 - 2023	CY2023
Male	3,184	130
Female	573	35
Unsure	126	32

UBC Recoveries by Decedent Age Group

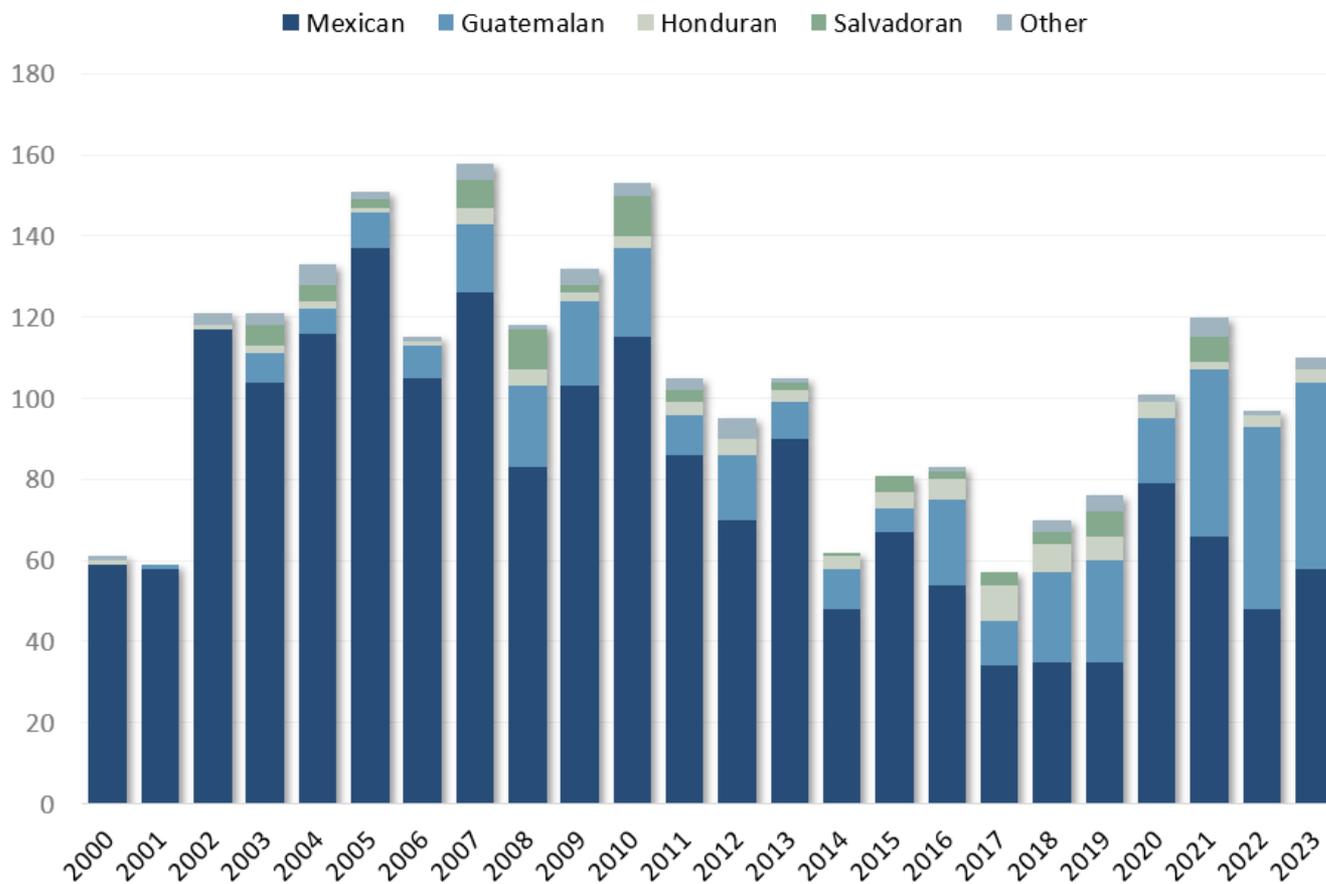


UBC Recoveries by Nationality, CY2000 - 2023



Identified Migrants

Nationality of Identified UBC Recoveries by Year, CY2000 - 2023

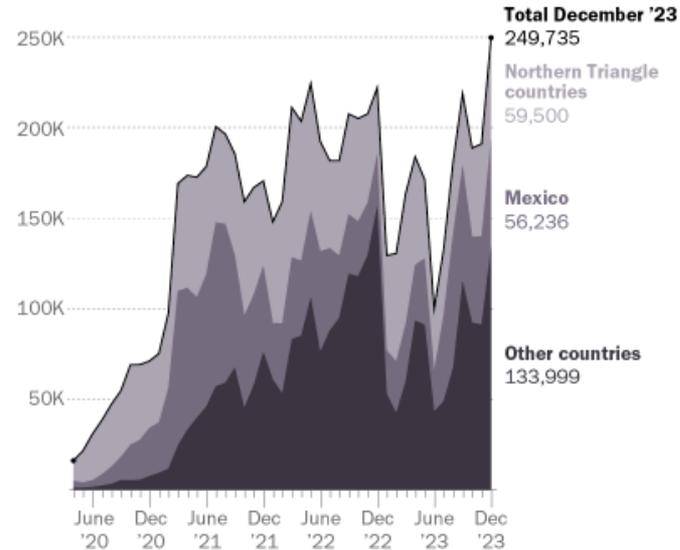


Unidentified Migrants

- 1,392 migrant cases remain unidentified
 - NamUs: 14,738 Unidentified Persons nationally
 - 9% from PCOME
- 80% male, 11% female, 9% unknown
- Changing country of origins?

Most border encounters now involve people from countries other than Mexico and Northern Triangle

Monthly migrant encounters by U.S. Border Patrol at U.S.-Mexico border involving citizens of ...



Note: The Northern Triangle countries are El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Migrant encounters include apprehensions and expulsions; some migrants are encountered more than once.

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/02/15/migrant-encounters-at-the-us-mexico-border-hit-a-record-high-at-the-end-of-2023/>



Thank you!
Questions? Comments?

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