

## BORDER DEATHS PROJECT

### Border Deaths and Border Control Policies

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BORDER CROSSING  
**OBSERVATORY**  
BORDERS, CRIME, JUSTICE

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## OVERVIEW

Where border controls *fail to deter* unauthorised border crossing, illegalized border crossers are exposed to significantly increased risks. Border control policies are implicated not only in the overall *numbers* of those who die; they also influence *who* dies, *where* they die and *how* their lives are lost. Evidence of the effects of the deterritorialized border can be found in deaths occurring en route, in encounters with officials at physical borders, and at sites of border enforcement within destination countries, such as detention centres, designated places of dispersal and sites of illegalised work and arrest. Far from being random and unforeseen events, border deaths are significantly shaped by *particular* border policies and practices that have both *local* inflection and *global* significance.

## DEATH BY POLICY

Border control policies can be linked to deaths *structurally*, where they limit the choices of illegalized travellers in ways that increase risks; *directly*, where the immediate actions of government agencies or other individuals bring about the deaths of illegalized travellers; and *indirectly*, where individuals take their own lives because of the intolerable circumstances they face. Although the causal links between policy and avoidable death may be more readily visible in relation to deaths occurring *directly* at the hands of others, the *indirect* and *structural* violence of border control policies accounts for many more deaths amongst individuals denied the opportunity to make safe and legal border crossings. In effect, border control policies are the invisible actors behind these deaths.

### Structural violence

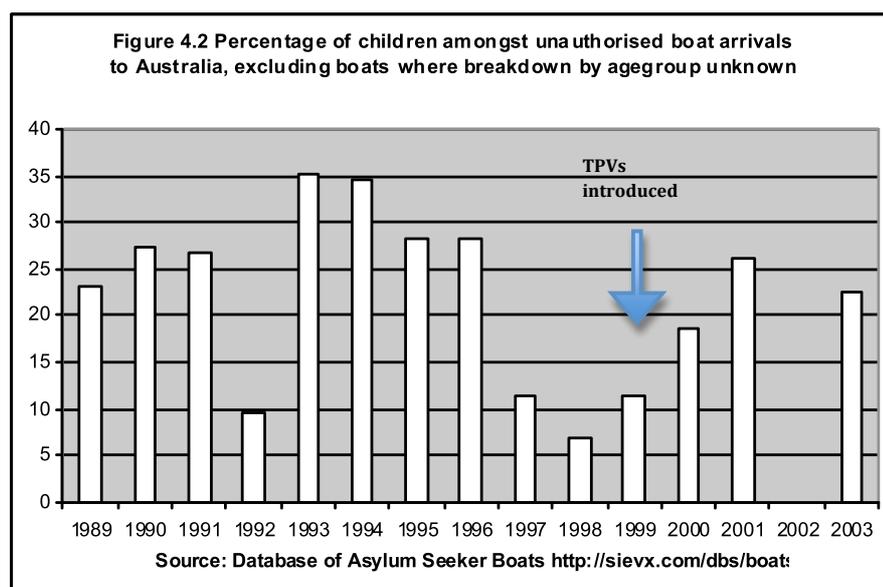
Illegalized border crossers are exposed to heightened risk of death through *geographical* displacement into inhospitable terrain (e.g. where militarisation of the US-Mexico border pushes unauthorised crossings into the Arizona desert); *demographic* displacement (e.g. where withdrawal of family reunion rights results in larger numbers of women and children attempting dangerous sea voyages to Australia – see Figure 4.2); and displacements into riskier modes of *transport* (e.g. concealed in airless lorries and ship containers or crammed onto unseaworthy vessels attempting to make clandestine entries into Europe). Individuals also die slow and lonely deaths as a result of deliberate exclusion from access to essential goods and services because of their illegal status.

### Suspicious deaths

Deaths during deportation can be highly visible and controversial. This has prompted European governments to opt for charter flights using private security guards so that forced deportations can take place away from the public gaze. On rare occasions, notably in the United States and Mediterranean, deliberate shootings by border guards or vigilantes have claimed the lives of unauthorised border crossers. Although they appear to be *individual* acts, deaths at the hands of state agents, private contractors, people smugglers and other private individuals must also be understood as products of the *policy context* in which they are embedded. For example, official removal targets may create an organisational culture particularly conducive to violence, while the public demonization of asylum seekers informally authorises their ill treatment and erodes public sympathy. The constraints imposed by illegalized travel also furnish opportunities for exploitation and the perpetration of deadly violence by organised criminal groups.

## Suicide and self harm

Internationally, suicide as a form of border-related death is mostly discernible in relation to failed asylum (or equivalent) applications, experiences of immigration detention centres and impending deportation. Suicide is, on the one hand, representative of a small proportion of border-related deaths. Yet it is important to note that there are significant shortcomings in how states identify and classify suicide and self-harm in the context of illegalized migrant death, and therefore the existing quantitative picture is deficient. On the other hand, suicide is arguably the most emblematic form of border-related deaths: an act often performed in the context of imminent return or indefinite detention, and one seen as indicative of the punitiveness of migration systems and the helplessness and hopelessness of detainees.



## RESISTANCE, RISK AND RESCUE

Border controls are often met with resistance from those who are targeted by them and from their supporters, who may also seek to mitigate the risks associated with illegalized border crossing by leaving drinking water in the desert, rescuing passengers from sinking boats, intervening during forced deportations, or simply by providing shelter and sustenance to individuals denied the legal means to obtain them. Governments have sometimes responded by seeking to criminalise acts of support and rescue. At other times they have argued that increased border controls which prevent people from making risky journeys are the most effective way to save lives. There have been attempts across some border sites to expand the role of border control agents to include the protection of illegalized border crossers. However, in the end there is a dissonance between these two expectations that can never be fully resolved. Since deterrence is rarely completely effective, intensified controls have led to quantifiable increases in border-related deaths, albeit using data that must be treated with caution. Perhaps most controversially of all, illegalized travellers have sometimes deliberately increased the risks faced by themselves and others, by disabling boats or setting fire to detention centres, as acts of frustration and protest, or in a last-ditch attempt to force border officials to shift their role from interception to rescue. While many will find these actions blameworthy, they must also be viewed against the backdrop of an ambiguous architecture of risk built on a foundation of deterrence-based border control policies.

Prepared for the Border Crossing Observatory by Leanne Weber, March 2012

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