

Jose Romero, Border Patrol Agent in New Mexico ([USA Today](#))



Border agents Supervisory Border Patrol Agent Jose Romero looks for activity while on patrol along the international line west of Columbus, New Mexico. (Mark Henle/USA TODAY NETWORK)

El Paso native Jose Romero works as a border patrol agent in the remote New Mexico border area. Unlike agents working in urban areas, rural patrols have to cover vast areas of borderland alone and spend their ten-hour shifts driving and hiking through uninhabited grasslands and mountain ranges scrutinizing the ground in search of disturbances. Romero, who is Hispanic, has faced heat from the immigrants he arrests for picking up his “own people” but says that he does this job for his people.

Selene Ramirez, Border Crossers ([USA Today](#))



Deadly trek “It’s killing us,” Selene Ramirez said of her family and search for her brother, Carlos Martinez. “The not knowing is the worst part. Not knowing if he is alive or if he is dead.” (Nick Oza/USA TODAY NETWORK)

U.S. citizen Selene Ramirez is the daughter of undocumented immigrants in Arizona. In 2016, her brother Carlos Martinez was deported and fell ill while crossing back into the United States, causing him to get separated from his group. Martinez was missing and presumed dead and Ramirez hunted for his body to provide closure to her family.

“It’s killing us,” she says. “The not knowing is the worst part. Not knowing if he is alive or if he is dead.”

In her purse, she carried her brother’s Mexican voter card. The photo on the ID, she hoped, would be useful should she find a body.

“Some people view them just as illegal immigrants trying to cross the border. They don’t realize they have families, families that care about them,” Ramirez said as she took her first steps into the furnace-like heat, seeking answers.

Carlos Martinez had lived in Arizona almost his entire life, Ramirez says. Their mother brought him to the U.S. illegally when he was 9 months old. Ramirez was born in Phoenix four years later, making her a U.S. citizen.

Ramirez said her brother considered Arizona home. He had “AZ” tattooed on his left shoulder inside an outline of the state. She described him as funny and caring, often stopping to give his fast-food meal to homeless people on the street. But in 2016 her brother was deported for a second time.

Selene searched for weeks before returning to Phoenix. Later, her family received notice that a male body was found. Her mother took a bus six hours to look at the body and provide a DNA sample. Two months after that, test results gave the family an answer. Selene’s brother had been found.

Arizona Border Recon, Border Vigilantes ([USA Today](#))



Border vigilantes Tim Foley, with his dog, says he and his Arizona Border Recon volunteers are making a difference by patrolling near the U.S.-Mexico line. (Nick Oza/USA TODAY NETWORK)

The Arizona Border Recon is a civilian group which carries out monthly patrols of the border in rural Arizona. Many of its volunteers have military or law enforcement backgrounds and consider this as an extension of their oath to serve and protect. This group, and others like them, are not sanctioned by the U.S. Government but the Arizona Border Recon refers migrants and smugglers to CBP. Regardless of further developments, the volunteers see a duty to watch the border.

“Basically the cartel controls at least the first five miles of the U.S. territory,” Oregon resident Mike LaMarte says. “The Border Patrol does the best they can out here, but they’re in and out. And the cartels know the routine and they just operate around them.”

The group has been criticized by humanitarian groups, which see their work as hostile to immigrants, and members of law enforcement, who are wary of civilians taking matters into their own hands.

The U.S. Border Patrol keeps its distance from groups like Arizona Border Recon. But at the same time, agents routinely encounter or must work around their volunteers.

In the past, when the group has found smugglers or stranded migrants, they call Border Patrol and holds them until agents arrive to take them into custody. But they don’t do it at gunpoint, and that they haven’t had any problems with that practice to date.

Arizona Border Recon say they have developed guidelines in place that all volunteers must follow to reduce the risk of violence, including going out on patrol in groups and limiting the type of weapons they can bring to operations. But in these remote areas of the border — often far from the eyes and ears of law enforcement — the actions of vigilante groups can go pretty much unchecked.

Tohono O'odham Nation, Border Tribe ([USA Today](#))



Border tribe Thomasa Rivas stands on a beach in Puerto Peñasco, Sonora, after she and her family (background) prayed as part of the Vikita ceremony. (Mark Henle/USA TODAY NETWORK)

The Tohono O'odham Nation — the tribe is the second-largest in the U.S., by land holdings — sits on an estimated 2.7 million acres in southern Arizona's Sonoran Desert. Ancestral lands stretch across the border into the Mexican state of Sonora.

About 2,000 of the tribe's 34,000 members live in Sonora, according to tribal officials. They were cut off from the rest of the nation by the 62-mile international boundary and have found themselves increasingly isolated from their people in Arizona. Mexico does not recognize the sovereignty of indigenous land. Tohono O'odham in Mexico were still accounted for when the tribe became federally recognized in the United States and ratified a constitution that defines tribal membership based on blood, not country of origin. Tribal members living in Mexico were given the same rights as those in the U.S., regardless of citizenship status.

The Tohono O'odham people consider the San Miguel Gate a traditional passage of their ancestors. At the San Miguel Gate, Tohono O'odham people can legally cross the border into the U.S. Most Americans and Mexicans cannot. A tribal ID serves as a passport of sorts for members to travel back and forth.

They were on this land long before it was divided, first by the border and again as fences were built and gates closed. They now fear they will be divided by a wall, something which their language has no words to represent. Thomasa Rivas, tribal elder, says that further separating the nation "is going to change who we are" as a nation and people.

Jaguar, Endangered Species ([USA Today](#))



Tutu'uli, a 6-month-old female jaguar at the Ecological Center of Sonora in Mexico. (Mark Henle/USA TODAY NETWORK)

Jaguars. They are scarce in the Southwest because the U.S. government once tried to exterminate them. Since then, people have tried to bring them back. Protect the apex species, and you protect the rest of the landscape.

Despite the attractive habitat of the southwestern United States, ranchers along the border have worked to rid the area of jaguars, contributing to the cat's endangerment. Scientists call the jaguar an "umbrella species" meaning its survival is critical to every other species in the ecosystem. Further development along the southern border would threaten the migration of jaguars and several other animals that roam freely across the border.

In northern Sonora, jaguars are heard more often than seen, but there is no question this is big cat territory. Remote cameras document the jaguars' movements. Bones and carcasses betray its feeding habits.

Jaguars move under cover of vegetation, often following an oak-lined ridgetop or a shaded canyon. At the reserve Young manages, one particular dry wash deep in an orange canyon and shaded by palms and big mesquites has proven the most productive spot for trail cameras.

The vegetation is not so much thick as it is a continuous strand of limbs overhead, filtering dappled light that melds with a jaguar's spots to conceal it.

It's the same effect that oaks and piñons have farther north in the Patagonia and Santa Rita Mountains, two Arizona ranges in which jaguars have wandered north from Mexico almost to Tucson, Arizona, in this decade.

So far the wanderers have all been males. Male jaguars disperse more widely in search of territory, but for the jaguar to re-establish even a small population in the U.S., females would have to make the same journey north. They can't do that unless Americans leave the trail open.

Biologists say jaguars cannot survive in the U.S. without a connection to Mexico's population. Building a wall on the border would sever that connection.

Tony Zavaleta, Landowner ([USA Today](#))



Property worries Tony Zavaleta closes the gate at Palmito Ranch, west of Brownsville, Texas.

(Mark Henle/USA TODAY NETWORK)

Border development began on government-owned land but as the southern border is further developed, the federal government has begun using eminent domain to seize private property. Just six miles from the border, the Historic Palmito Ranch is threatened by these developments. What began as thousands of acres has been reduced to 20 acres with no cattle or crops. Owner Tony Zavaleta understands that further developments mean one of two things; "The question is: do they run the fence through the middle of my property? Or do they run the fence back toward the highway so I can't get to [my property] without going through a locked gate?"

More than a decade ago, then-Gov. Rick Perry laid out an ambitious plan to sweep up hundreds of thousands of acres of private land to build a wide superhighway, rail line and utility corridor from Oklahoma to the Mexican border.

"If they want it, they're going to take it," says Billy Dyer, a Houston lawyer who handles eminent domain cases. "The statute that authorized the acquisitions for the border wall is all based on national security."

Aleida Flores Garcia, Landowner ([USA Today](#))



Ties to the land: La Paloma Ranch has been in Aleida Flores Garcia's family for five generations. If the government tries to seize her property, she says she'll fight back — just like she did the first time officials tried it. (Mark Henle/USA TODAY NETWORK)

Aleida Flores Garcia lives in Los Ebanos, near a twisty segment of the Rio Grande. From her home on Heriberto Garza Street, heading straight to Mexico means heading north.

"I was born here, my dad was born here, my ancestors were born here," says Flores Garcia, holding a hand over her heart. "We are American. Why can't the government take that into consideration?" She believes efforts are underway, or perhaps will be soon, to carve away this slice of land in the river bend where her family has been for five generations now.

The Census Bureau describes Los Ebanos as a census-designated place — not a town — with 147 homes and 335 residents, nearly a quarter of whom live below the poverty line.

It's also home to the Los Ebanos ferry, an old-style hand-drawn ferry that shuttles cars on a barge that follows a rope line to the Mexican city of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. While there are other ways to enter Mexico from here, the ferry remains a busy and popular draw. It's a novelty, a reminder of a time when tensions over border security and illegal immigration didn't run so hot.

Flores Garcia is preparing to fight the government over her family's land — for what would be a second time. For more than three years, Flores Garcia battled the federal government, which served notice it wanted her home and land to make way for the border fence. The offer was \$8,300.

She turned it down. "I couldn't believe it," she says. "This is my home. The experiences and memories alone aren't even worth that."

A judge signed an order on Dec. 3, 2011, nullifying condemnation of her property. But she remains concerned she may get another letter from the government soon. If that happens, "I'm going to keep fighting. You're supposed to fight for your home," Flores Garcia says. "It's just too bad that we have to keep on fighting all the time."

David Lowell, Rancher ([USA Today](#))



Border ranchers Atascosa Ranch owner David Lowell once drew a "Map of Atrocities" to mark where shootouts had occurred and bodies had been found. The problems of illegal immigration are a collective memory for ranchers in the area. (Nick Oza/USA TODAY NETWORK)

Ranching is a heritage of land, a family legacy, a lifestyle. It's a cycle of fence mending, cactus dodging and calf branding, measured by sweat and blisters.

Most families have been at it more than a century, isolated in wild, lonely, peaceful country with only the buzzing of flies and the bawling of calves.

These operations today run about 150,000 head of cattle in southern Arizona, an \$18 million economic driver in Cochise County alone. Ranches and grazing leases account for much of the land area, and lifestyle.

During the 1980s, roughly 300 immigrants passed across ranch land per month. During the 90s and 2000s, crossings had ramped up to 300 per day. Although border security was increased, border patrol agents largely patrolled miles north of the US-Mexico border, leaving the ranch lands as "no-man's land" where rival cartels and banditos waged war. Rancher David Lowell kept a "Map of Atrocities" to keep track of shootouts and bodies found on his land.

Ranchers down here will tell you they despised the Obama administration, and helped vote Donald Trump into the White House. Yet a funny thing happens when you ask them about the president's famous promise of a "tall, powerful, beautiful" border wall. Almost unanimously, they think it's bad idea.

Today's rancher outrage is aimed mostly at how things used to be, not how they are.

Mike Wilson, Humane Borders Volunteer ([HRW](#))



Mike Wilson, a volunteer with the Tucson, Arizona-based Humane Borders, places containers of water in the desert in the hope of preventing more migrant deaths and leads search missions for families looking for loved ones. Wilson is a member of the Tohono O'odham Nation, on whose reservation many of the migrants have died. Members of his tribe and the congregation he used to serve as a pastor, he said, have criticized him for trying to save lives of people who are breaking federal immigration laws. "As your pastor, I have to choose between two sets of law," he tells them. "Which law is above the other? Federal immigration laws or God's moral, universal law that you take care of the stranger?"

Robin Reineke, Colibrí Center for Human Rights Director ([HRW](#))



Robin Reineke, director of the Colibrí Center for Human Rights, holds the personal effects of unidentified border crossers. Such personal effects are kept at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner in Tucson, Arizona, to match families with missing migrants who were last seen alive crossing the border. According to Reineke, from 1990 to 1999, an average of 12 remains of border crossers were brought into the Pima County Medical Examiner's office per year. From 2001 through the present, the average number of remains is 164.

"There's been this discourse that security is the automatic obvious need on the border ... more walls, more border patrol, more surveillance, more unmanned aerial drones," she said. "That's the type of strategy that we saw change our landscape into one of death, and it's heartbreaking to see the same type of conversation happening now." Obama announced in a November 2014 speech that he would seek "additional resources" for law enforcement on the US border with Mexico