

Death Toll in San Antonio Migrant Smuggling Tragedy Climbs to 51. Here's What to Know

Jasmine Aguilera - Time

What to Know About the Deaths of 51 Migrants Found in a Truck in San Antonio

*Fifty one people have now died after a semi truck trailer was found baking in the San Antonio, Texas heat on Monday night. The dead are believed to be migrants who were crossing the U.S.-Mexico border—victims of what may be the deadliest **people smuggling tragedy** in recent U.S. history.*

There are 11 survivors, and at least one teenage boy remains in critical condition at University Hospital in San Antonio. A 23-year-old woman is also in serious condition. So far, 34 of victims have been identified by authorities, Bexar County Commissioner Rebeca Clay-Flores said Tuesday afternoon. Mexican officials said most of those identified so far are Mexican nationals.

The people found alive at the scene were “hot to the touch,” San Antonio Fire Chief Charles Hood said Monday night. “They were suffering from heat stroke, heat exhaustion. No signs of water in the vehicle.

It was a refrigerated tractor trailer, but there was no visible working A/C unit on that rig.” He added that the survivors were too weak to help themselves out of the semi truck, but were conscious.

“We’re not supposed to open up a truck and see stacks of bodies in there,” Hood said. “None of us come to work imagining that.”

*The discovery comes as the **U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)** **reported record encounters** at the U.S.-Mexico border—with Customs and Border Protection agents stopping migrants 239,000 times in May.*

*The tragedy also immediately became a political issue, with **Republican Gov. Greg Abbott**, who is running for reelection, blaming President Biden’s “open borders policy”*

*— despite the fact that **the border remains all-but closed to legal migrants and asylum seekers** as a result of measure put in place by Donald Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic. Advocates for migrants say the policy*

*— **which uses Title 42 of U.S. Code**—is driving people to increasingly desperate and illegal methods to enter the U.S.*

What we know so far



In this aerial view, members of law enforcement investigate a tractor trailer on June 27, 2022 in San Antonio, Texas. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has confirmed the deaths of 50 people who died in the alleged human smuggling attempt. Jordan Vonderhaar—Getty Images

A worker on a desolate stretch of road in southwest San Antonio discovered the trailer after hearing a cry for help on Monday night. He opened the trailer and found multiple bodies inside.

Temperatures in San Antonio reached 101 degrees Fahrenheit on Monday. The worker called authorities shortly before 6 p.m., and about 60 firefighters soon arrived on scene, authorities said. The San Antonio Police Department and Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) also arrived.

Three people were detained at the scene. HSI, the investigative arm of DHS, told TIME the suspects are “believed to be part of the smuggling conspiracy.”

HSI has taken over the investigation. “HSI continues its enforcement efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of our communities,” a spokesperson with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the DHS body that oversees HSI, told TIME in a statement.

“We will continue to address the serious public safety threat posed by human smuggling organizations and their reckless disregard for the health and safety of those smuggled.”

What we know about the victims

Of the victims who have so far been identified, 22 are Mexican nationals, seven are Guatemalan, and two are Honduran, according to Mexican Foreign Affairs Secretary Marcelo Ebrard.

“We know that these families came to find new opportunities for their families,” San Antonio Council Member Adriana Rocha Garcia told reporters Monday night. “The city of San Antonio is known as a city with a lot of compassion, so this hurts us all that this has happened here in the city. But the people who have survived who are in hospital, we’re sure that they will be treated with the care most deserved of people who have suffered so much.”

Five of the survivors were transported to the Baptist Medical Center in San Antonio. Three later died and two remained in critical condition Tuesday.

Advocates began raising concerns that some families may fear coming forward to claim their dead loved one’s remains or participate in the investigation because of their immigration status.

On Tuesday, an ICE spokesperson sought to reassure family members that they would not target people connected to the San Antonio tragedy.

“To the fullest extent possible, ICE and CBP will not conduct immigration enforcement activities so individuals, regardless of immigration status, can seek assistance, and otherwise address the tragedy with law enforcement,” the spokesperson said.

A deadly border crossing



San Antonio Police Chief William McManus, center, briefs media and others at the scene where dozens of people have been found dead and multiple others were taken to hospitals with heat-related illnesses after a semitrailer containing suspected migrants was found, Monday, June 27, 2022, in San Antonio. Eric Gay—AP

So far this fiscal year, which began in October, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials have stopped migrants more than 1.5 million times across the U.S.-Mexico border (this figure includes people who have been encountered more than one time).

In May alone, more than 239,000 encounters took place at the U.S. Mexico border, a nearly 55% increase from January. More than 750,000 of the encounters so far this fiscal year ended in expulsion from the U.S. under Title 42.

The U.S. has been the main destination for international migrants since 1970, according to the United Nations' [International Organization for Migration \(IOM\)](#). The IOM's Missing Migrants Project has [documented](#) nearly 3,000 deaths of migrants attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border since it began collecting data in 2014.

Since the 1990s, the U.S. government's response to increasing migration at the border has been to implement deterrence measures and policies to try to discourage unauthorized migration. These deterrence efforts, however, have led to increases in migrants taking deadlier risks to enter the U.S., experts have documented. Over the same period of time, Congress has failed to pass meaningful immigration reform, making it increasingly difficult to immigrate to the U.S. legally.

Though migration to the U.S.-Mexico border in recent years has remained lower than the record-breaking highs seen between 1983 and 2006, migration to the border has increased since 2021, according to the [Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse \(TRAC\)](#), a research organization at Syracuse University.

"We can't look to enforcement solely, we can't enforce our way out of this issue of migration pressures and migration flows," says Doris Meissner, senior fellow and director of the U.S. Immigration Policy Program at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), a nonpartisan research organization.

Some of the pressures at the border have been compounded by the federal government's [Title 42](#) health measure, an authority enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic that officials have used to immediately expel people who are caught attempting an unauthorized crossing, or who wish to claim asylum.

The discovery of the trailer in San Antonio—some 120 or more miles from the Mexican border—reveals a bit about the complex path migrants often take after arriving in the U.S. Migrants who have crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally, or who have made a claim for asylum and are permitted to remain in the U.S. often move further inland—usually seeking family members in other parts of the country.

For those who are crossing illegally, Border Patrol officials still pose a risk miles into the interior of the U.S., including at checkpoints on highways dozens miles away from the border. Smugglers are aware of this, Meissner says, and will often guide migrants through routes that evade border officials, but put migrants in [greater danger](#).

How governments are reacting

In a Tuesday statement, President Joe Biden called the deaths "horrific and heartbreaking," and said the Administration, working with regional partners, has launched a "first-of-its kind anti-smuggling campaign." In the past three months, the White House says, over 2,400 arrests have been made.

“Exploiting vulnerable individuals for profit is shameful, as is political grandstanding around tragedy, and my Administration will continue to do everything possible to stop human smugglers and traffickers from taking advantage of people who are seeking to enter the United States between ports of entry,” Biden said.

U. S. officials are collaborating with the Mexican Consulate, which is also in contact with its counterparts in Central America, according to Ruben Minutti-Zanatta, Mexico’s Consul General in San Antonio. On Tuesday, Ebrard [announced](#) that the Mexican Attorney General is also opening an investigation into the San Antonio tragedy.

Meanwhile, other Texas and Immigration officials have shared their condolences and shock about what happened.

“Horried at this tragic loss of life near San Antonio,” CBP Commissioner Chris Magnus said on [Twitter](#).

“This speaks to the desperation of migrants who would put their lives in the hands of callous human smugglers who show no regard for human life. We will be working with our federal, state and local partners to assist in every way possible with this investigation.”

San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg, who spoke at the Monday evening press conference and called for those responsible to be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law, also shared additional comments on [Twitter](#).

“Migrants seeking asylum should always be treated as a humanitarian crisis, but this evening we’re facing a horrific human tragedy,” he wrote.

“More than 40 hopeful lives were lost. I urge you to think compassionately, pray for the deceased, the ailing, and their families at this moment.”

Texas Governor Greg Abbott [said](#) on Monday evening that Biden is to blame for the deaths, saying, “They are a result of his deadly open border policies,” and “they show the deadly consequences of his refusal to enforce the law.”

(The Biden Administration’s border policies include Title 42 expulsions of some migrants, and the use of [the “Remain in Mexico” program](#), which requires those seeking asylum to wait in Mexico while their case is decided by a judge in the U.S. Unaccompanied minors and some family units are exempted from these policies and are able to request asylum in the U.S.)

DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas also took to [Twitter](#) to share a call to action. “I am heartbroken by the tragic loss of life today and am praying for those still fighting for their lives,” he wrote.

“Far too many lives have been lost as individuals—including families, women, and children—take this dangerous journey... We will work alongside our partners to hold those responsible for this tragedy accountable and continue to take action to disrupt smuggling networks.”