

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-107548](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Border Patrol responds to reports of migrants who may be missing or in distress upon attempting to enter the U.S. between ports of entry. In fiscal year 2023, Border Patrol recorded 704 migrant deaths and conducted over 5,800 rescue events. The Missing Persons and Unidentified Remains Act (the Act) requires U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to submit an annual report to Congress including the number and location of unidentified remains found along the southwest border. CBP submitted its most recent report in April 2024. The Act also includes a provision for GAO to review how CBP collects data on migrant deaths.

This report addresses (1) how Border Patrol coordinates with external entities, such as medical examiner's offices, in instances of missing migrants and the recovery and identification of migrant remains; (2) how Border Patrol records data on migrant rescues, deaths, and other Missing Migrant Program activities; and (3) the extent to which Border Patrol has conducted oversight of the Missing Migrant Program. GAO analyzed Border Patrol policies and documentation. GAO also interviewed officials at Border Patrol headquarters and representatives from six external entities and conducted visits to five field locations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations to CBP to ensure Border Patrol develops an evaluation design to assess the Missing Migrant Program and collects information on activities linked to its scope and purpose. DHS concurred with the recommendations.

For more information, contact Rebecca Gambler at GamblerR@gao.gov.

April 2025

BORDER SECURITY

Additional Actions Needed to Evaluate the Missing Migrant Program

What GAO Found

The U.S. Border Patrol, within U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), established the Missing Migrant Program in 2017 to help rescue migrants in distress and reduce migrant deaths along the southwest border. In 2023, it expanded the program to selected locations on the northern and coastal borders. The program includes various efforts, such as placing rescue beacons and 9-1-1 placards in remote areas along the border.

Border Patrol Rescue Beacon and 9-1-1 Placard, Arizona, June-July 2024



Source: GAO photos. | GAO-25-107548

Border Patrol coordinates with external entities such as local law enforcement, nongovernmental organizations, and foreign consulates in response to reports of distressed or missing migrants and to assist in locating remains of suspected deceased migrants. The agency also works with medical examiners and coroners, among others, to identify suspected migrant remains and return them to their families.

In field locations, Border Patrol sector personnel record rescues and deaths in the agency's system of record. Border Patrol has also developed applications to track information on Missing Migrant Program field activities, such as tracking the status of responses to 911 calls.

Border Patrol oversees the Missing Migrant Program through regular calls and information collection. However, the agency has not developed an evaluation design that provides an overall approach to gathering and analyzing information to answer specific research questions about the program. Such a design would better position Border Patrol to answer questions about the extent to which the program is meeting its scope and purpose. Additionally, the information collected is not clearly linked to the Missing Migrant Program's scope and purpose of reducing migrant deaths and rescuing migrants in distress. Following the development of an evaluation design, collecting information that is clearly linked to the program's overall scope and purpose would better position Border Patrol and decision makers to understand the program's impact providing assistance to migrants in distress and preventing migrant deaths.