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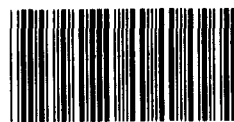
United States General Accounting Office

Briefing Report to the Honorable  
Dennis Deconcini, U.S. Senate

March 1991

# BORDER PATROL

## Southwest Border Enforcement Affected by Mission Expansion and Budget



143669

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**General Government Division**

B-243386

March 28, 1991

The Honorable Dennis DeConcini  
United States Senate

Dear Senator DeConcini:

This briefing report responds to your request for information on the Immigration and Naturalization Service's (INS) Border Patrol's ability to carry out its border control mission along the southwest border. The following are the specific areas of your interest: (1) the changes in the Border Patrol's mission since 1986; (2) the funding and staffing levels since fiscal year 1986, including attrition rates; (3) the time spent on various enforcement activities; (4) the apprehension of aliens attempting to enter the country illegally and the seizure of narcotics; (5) the assaults against Border Patrol agents; and (6) the availability and condition of the Patrol's field equipment. In March 1991, we briefed your office on the information we developed, and you asked that we officially transmit the results of our work. This briefing report transmits the information requested.

We obtained and reviewed information from INS and Border Patrol officials in Washington, D.C., and from Border Patrol officials at the nine sectors along the southwest border. We did not verify the information provided. Our review was done between July 1990 and March 1991. Appendix I presents a detailed objectives, scope, and methodology section.

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**Background**

The Border Patrol's mission is to maintain control of the international boundaries between the ports-of-entry by detecting and preventing the smuggling and illegal entry of aliens into the United States. As part of its mission, the Border Patrol is to also interdict narcotics and other contraband. In 1991, the Office of National Drug Control Policy designated the Border Patrol as the primary agency for narcotics interdiction between the ports-of-entry.<sup>1</sup> In accomplishing its mission, the Border Patrol (1) patrols the international boundaries (called "linewatch"); and (2) inspects passengers and vehicles at checkpoints located along highways leading from border areas, at bus and rail stations, and at air terminals. The Border Patrol uses vehicles and aircraft to patrol areas

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<sup>1</sup>The Office, which is in the Executive Office of the President, is responsible for developing and implementing a national drug control strategy.

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between the ports-of-entry and uses electronic equipment, such as sensors and low-light-level televisions, to detect illegal entry into the country.

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## Results

INS has assigned the Border Patrol additional responsibilities that do not involve border control activities. For example, INS requires the Border Patrol to share in implementing provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). This act requires employers to hire only authorized workers and establishes penalties for those who do not comply. The Border Patrol helps enforce IRCA by checking on employer hiring practices. In addition, the Border Patrol is involved in taking into custody aliens who have been convicted of serious crimes, as well as investigating drug- and alien-smuggling organizations.

Staff along the southwest border increased 24 percent from 1986 to 1988. However, since 1988 the number of staff has declined by 9 percent. Further, the proportion of total Border Patrol agent time devoted to border control activities decreased from 71 percent to 60 percent from 1986 to 1990.

Excluding first year agents, the Border Patrol's historical attrition rate has been 12 percent. However, it had been experiencing a 30-percent attrition rate for first year agents. INS has taken actions that have reduced the rate to 21 percent for first year agents. Current INS hiring plans may not keep pace with projected attrition, despite the improved attrition rate.

The Border Patrol's ability to carry out its mission is also affected by its reliance on vehicles in poor condition and its inability to replace all of those taken out of service. The Border Patrol's use of electronic equipment to detect illegal entry is similarly limited. Without suitable vehicles and electronic detection devices, the Border Patrol cannot achieve full coverage of areas known for high levels of illegal entry and drug smuggling.

Along the southwest border, the Border Patrol had 4,000 drug seizures in fiscal year 1990, a 6-fold increase over fiscal year 1985. In fiscal year 1990, alien apprehensions were 23 percent higher than in fiscal year 1989. However, the Border Patrol has reported an increase since 1987 in assaults against its agents along the southwest border.

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## Funding and Staffing Levels

Border Patrol funding increased 61 percent between fiscal years 1986 and 1990—from \$164 million to \$263 million. For the first 3 fiscal years, INS requested less funding for the Border Patrol than was in the President's budget. In fiscal years 1989 and 1990, the budget request exceeded the President's budget by \$14 million and \$48 million, respectively. After Congress approved INS' budget, INS provided the Border Patrol about 97 percent of the funds requested in the President's budget for this 5-year period. According to INS officials, other INS organizations that purchase equipment for use by the Border Patrol had their budgets reduced. As a result, the Border Patrol did not receive some of the equipment, such as sensors and low-light-level televisions, from these organizations.

According to Border Patrol officials, it has not been able to fund all of its authorized positions along the southwest border. The percentage of authorized positions filled fell from 94 percent in fiscal year 1985 to 87 percent in fiscal year 1990.

The Border Patrol's inability to reach authorized staffing levels is in part attributable to a high rate of attrition. A 1989 INS study identified several factors, including low pay and inadequate prescreening of applicants, as contributing to the high attrition rate. INS officials believe that recent federal pay reforms and other actions it has taken, such as implementing a better screening process, should help to lower attrition. However, Border Patrol hirings for 1991 may not offset estimated attritions, despite pay reforms and other actions. Border Patrol officials told us that attrition has been a more significant problem in the San Diego Sector as compared with the other sectors because of the high cost of living there. (See app. II.)

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## Time on Enforcement Activities

The proportion of time spent by Border Patrol agents on border control activities along the southwest border has declined from 71 percent of total hours in fiscal year 1986 to 60 percent in fiscal year 1990. Correspondingly, the percentage of time spent on other activities, such as enforcing the provisions of IRCA, increased from 29 percent of total hours in fiscal year 1986 to 40 percent in fiscal year 1990. Actual time spent on border control increased only 2 percent between 1986 and 1990. INS plans to reallocate about 200 agents from interior stations to sectors along the southwest border.

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## Apprehensions, Narcotics Seizures, and Assaults

The apprehension rate on the basis of the number of reported apprehensions per agent work hour along the southwest border decreased from 4 per 10-hour period in fiscal year 1986 to 2.5 in fiscal year 1990. Narcotics seizures along the southwest border increased from 649 in fiscal year 1985 to 4,000 in fiscal year 1990. The rate of narcotics seizures per agent work hour increased nearly fivefold during this period.

According to sector officials, the increase in narcotics smuggling has contributed to increased violence along the southwest border. Our analysis of assault reports from the 5 sectors for which complete data were available shows assaults on Border Patrol agents increased from 128 to 282 between 1987 and 1990; most occurred in the San Diego Sector. (See app. III.)

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## Availability and Condition of Field Equipment

Some Border Patrol equipment needs to be replaced, while other items are adequate to meet current Border Patrol needs. According to Border Patrol officials from the nine southwest border sectors, vehicles are their primary equipment need. The General Services Administration (GSA) established mileage criteria for determining when vehicles should be considered for replacement. Over 50 percent of Border Patrol's vehicles exceed the mileage criteria. During our visits, we observed many vehicles in poor condition. For example, some vehicles had cracked frames. According to Border Patrol officials, these vehicles would normally be removed from service. However, according to these officials, replacement vehicles were not available due to funding limitations. Therefore, they said that many vehicles that should have been removed were repaired and returned to service. Many Border Patrol vehicles require frequent, extensive maintenance and cannot be relied on regularly for patrols. The Border Patrol must spend more on repairs to keep them operational than it would if the vehicles were replaced. These officials estimated that maintenance costs associated with the operation of these vehicles could be reduced by 50 percent if the vehicles were replaced. INS officials told us that the current replacement rate is not sufficient to improve the overall condition of the vehicle fleet.

Some of the Border Patrol's electronic equipment used to detect illegal entry does not work, according to officials. Also, some sectors need additional electronic equipment to better surveil the border. As a result of these problems, sector officials cannot adequately monitor border activities, the officials said. (See app. IV.)

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We discussed the facts presented in this report with INS officials during the course of our work and have incorporated their comments where appropriate. These officials generally agreed with the information presented.

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We plan no further distribution of this report until 30 days after its date, unless you publicly release its contents earlier. After 30 days, we will send copies to the Attorney General, the Commissioner of INS, and other interested parties.

Major contributors to this report are listed in appendix V. Should you need additional information on the contents of this report, please contact me on (202) 275-8389.

Sincerely yours,



Lowell Dodge  
Director, Administration  
of Justice Issues

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**Abbreviations**

GSA	General Services Administration
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
IRCA	Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986

# Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

In response to Senator DeConcini's request, we obtained information on the ability of Border Patrol agents in the sectors along the southwest border to perform their border control mission. Specifically, our objectives addressed the

- changes to the Border Patrol's mission since the passage of IRCA in 1986;
- Border Patrol funding and staffing since 1986, including authorized and on-duty staff levels and data on attrition;
- time spent by Border Patrol agents on enforcement activities;
- number of (1) apprehensions of aliens attempting to enter the country illegally, (2) drug seizures, and (3) assaults against Border Patrol agents; and
- availability and condition of field equipment, including vehicles, night vision devices, weapons, bulletproof vests, and secure voice radios.

We performed our work at INS and Border Patrol headquarters in Washington, D.C. As agreed with Senator DeConcini's office, we visited four of the nine sectors along the southwest border—San Diego, California; Yuma, Arizona; and El Paso and McAllen, Texas. We held teleconference meetings with the five sectors we did not visit—El Centro, California; Tucson, Arizona; and Del Rio, Marfa, and Laredo, Texas.

To develop our information on (1) changes to the Patrol's mission, we reviewed the Border Patrol's mission statement and held discussions with INS officials; (2) funding and staffing levels, we analyzed INS budget and staffing data for fiscal years 1986 to 1990; (3) time spent on enforcement activities and Border Patrol apprehensions, narcotics seizures, and assaults, we used data from INS' management information system; and (4) availability and condition of field equipment, we visited four Border Patrol sectors to discuss these issues with sector officials, observed the condition of equipment and its operation, and reviewed relevant data from INS headquarters and the sectors. In addition, we interviewed INS and Border Patrol officials at INS headquarters and the chief patrol agents and their staffs at all nine sectors. We did not verify the accuracy and completeness of the INS and Border Patrol data.

We did our work from July 1990 to March 1991. We did not obtain agency comments, but we discussed the information with INS and Border Patrol officials during the course of our work and have included their comments where appropriate.

# Funding and Staffing Levels

The Border Patrol carries out its mission in 21 sectors, 9 of which are located along the southwest border with Mexico.<sup>1</sup> At the end of fiscal year 1990, the Border Patrol employed 4,360 agents and support staff, 3,663 (84 percent) of whom were located in the 9 southwest border sectors. INS headquarters allocates available staff to its sectors on the basis of a staffing allocation model. To establish relative staffing needs for each sector, the model compares sectors on such factors as apprehensions and narcotic seizures.

In fiscal year 1990, the Border Patrol received \$263 million for salaries and expenses. INS support programs provided funds to purchase such equipment as vehicles and sensors for the Border Patrol. In addition, the Border Patrol has received funds specifically related to its narcotics interdiction role.

## Funding Issues

Figure II.1 shows that the Border Patrol's budget increased from \$164 million to \$263 million (or 61 percent) between fiscal years 1986 and 1990. The Border Patrol's share of total INS funding has increased from 28 percent in 1986 to 31 percent in 1990.

## Staffing Issues

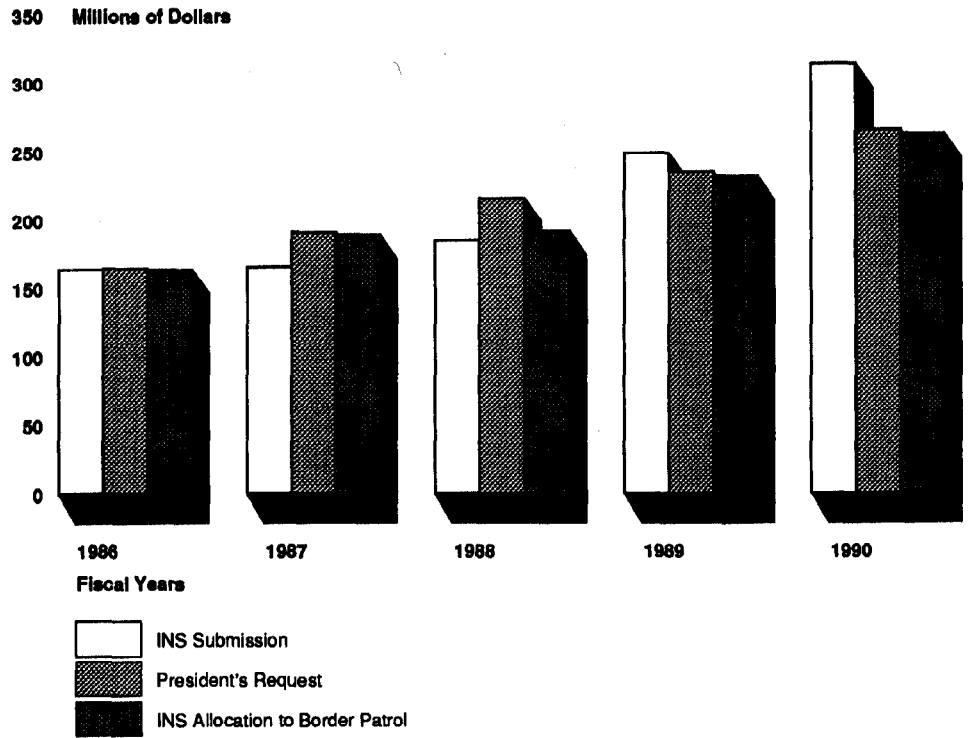
Figure II.2 shows the number of authorized positions for southwest border sectors has fluctuated but overall has increased from 3,166 to 4,240 (or 34 percent) between fiscal years 1986 and 1990.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, actual end-of-year staff has fluctuated but overall has increased from 3,222 to 3,669 (or 14 percent). However, since 1988, the number of actual staff has declined 9 percent.

<sup>1</sup>The nine sectors are located in San Diego and El Centro California; Yuma and Tucson, Arizona; and El Paso, Del Rio, Marfa, Laredo, and McAllen, Texas.

<sup>2</sup>Since 1986, Congress has authorized increases in Border Patrol staffing that would have increased staff up to 6,300 agents.

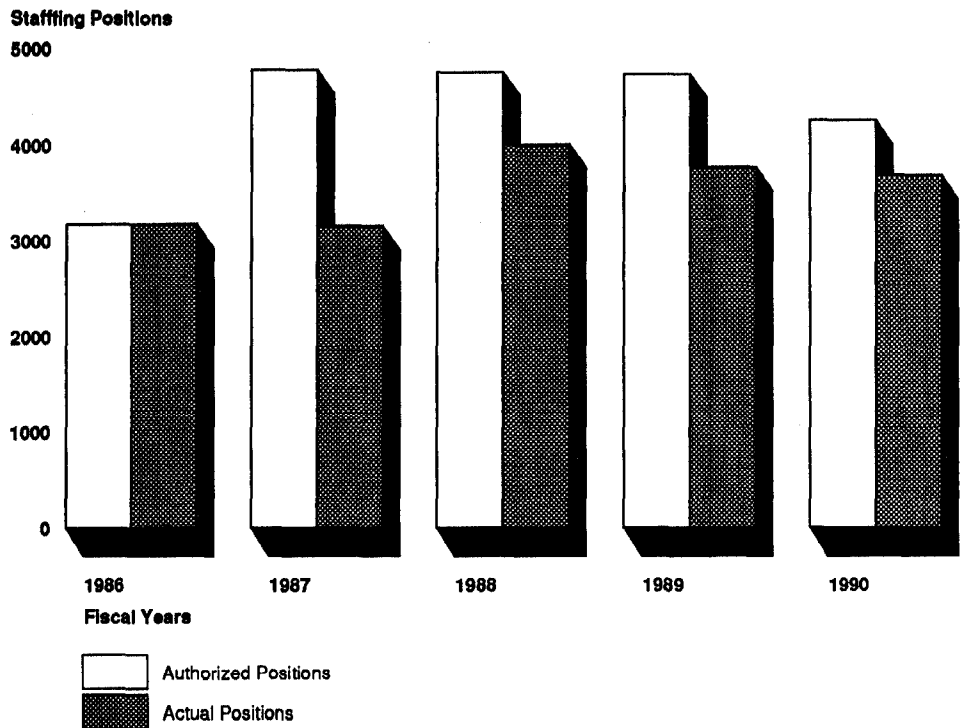
Appendix II  
Funding and Staffing Levels

Figure II.1: Border Patrol Budget Has increased



Source: INS.

Figure II.2: Border Patrol Authorized and Actual Staff Differ



Source: Border Patrol.

### Unfunded Staffing

In recent years, however, INS has not had resources to fund all authorized positions. For example, the southwest border sectors had 4,240 authorized positions but had 3,669 staff on actual duty at the end of fiscal year 1990. According to INS officials, in 1990 INS reduced the number of total Border Patrol authorized positions by 633, and the southwest sectors were reduced by 483 to more accurately reflect anticipated funding.

### Attrition

Another factor affecting staffing is attrition. Although staff attrition has declined recently, Border Patrol staffing may also decline during fiscal year 1991. On the basis of a historical average attrition rate of 12 percent for agents with more than 1 year of service, we estimated that about 490 agents are expected to leave during fiscal year 1991. The Border Patrol plans to hire 288 during 1991. Continuation of the historical attrition rate in 1991 would result in a net loss of 202 agents. This

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decline does not include the 21 percent of new hires who are expected to leave.

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**Staffing Impact on Mission**

Border Patrol officials in sectors along the southwest border believe that given their increased responsibilities for nonborder control activities, the staff resources devoted to border control are insufficient to carry out their border control mission. Some sectors had decreased the number of agents patrolling areas with high alien and drug-smuggling traffic. For example, at one location in the McAllen Sector seven agents were patrolling 66 miles of the border. For about 3 hours each night, all seven agents were carrying out other duties; as a result, the border area was totally unpatrolled during the 3 hours. Similarly, a supervisory agent in the San Diego Sector said that one-third of the border under his jurisdiction was not patrolled. Furthermore, officials from several sectors stated they have reduced the amount of time they operate the traffic checkpoints. In addition, in 1989 the National Drug Policy Board stated that the reduction in time spent on border control may have hurt narcotics interdiction efforts.

# Enforcement Activities, Apprehensions, and Narcotics Seizures

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## Enforcement Activities

As shown in figure III.1, the proportion of time that Border Patrol agents spent on border control activities in the sectors along the southwest border has declined 11 percent, from 71 percent in 1986 to 60 percent in 1990.

As shown in figure III.2, the percentage decline is even more dramatic in several sectors. For example, San Diego Sector activities declined from 67 percent to 47 percent. San Diego accounts for 42 percent of all Border Patrol apprehensions. El Paso Sector activities declined 14 percent and McAllen Sector activities declined 17 percent. Together, these sectors accounted for 53 percent of all narcotics seizures along the southwest border from 1985 to 1990. As shown in figure III.3, the total hours spent on border control activities have increased from 4.1 million hours to 4.2 million hours (or only 2 percent) between fiscal years 1986 and 1990. According to INS officials, Border Patrol resources were used at various times to carry out nonborder enforcement activities and to meet other needs.

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## Alien Apprehensions

As shown in figure III.4, the apprehension rate has decreased overall since 1986. In fiscal year 1986, southwest border sectors made four apprehensions per 10 hours, compared to two and one-half apprehensions per 10 hours in 1990. Overall, apprehensions of aliens attempting to enter the country illegally declined by 47 percent from fiscal year 1986 to fiscal year 1989. However, 1990 apprehensions increased 23 percent over 1989. (See fig. III.5.)

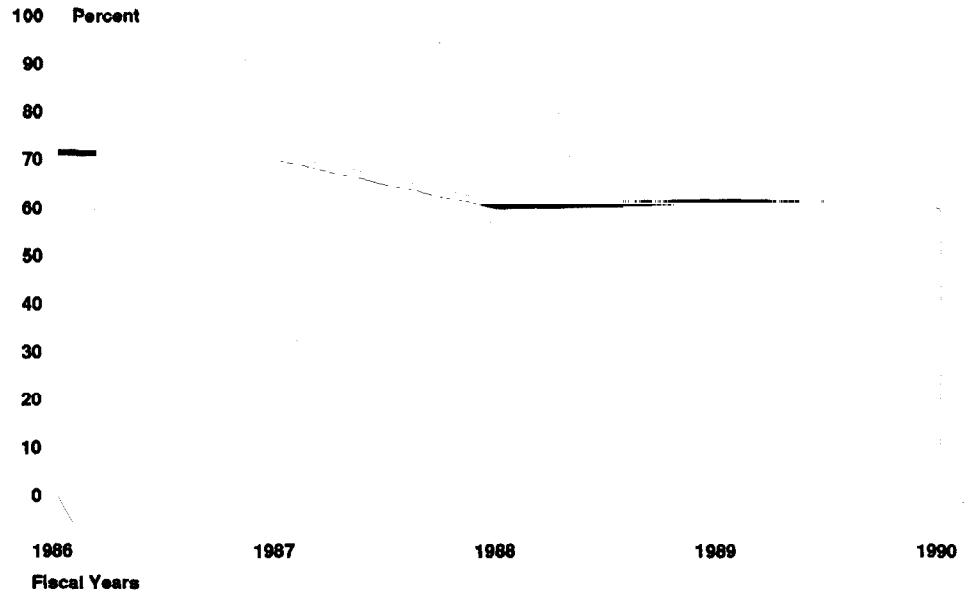
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## Narcotics Seizures

As figure III.6 shows, the number of narcotics seizures along the southwest border has increased dramatically. Total seizures increased from 649 in fiscal year 1985 to 4,000 in fiscal year 1990. This represents an increase from one seizure for every 5,000 hours of border enforcement in fiscal year 1985 to one seizure for every 1,056 hours in fiscal year 1990. In fiscal year 1990, southwest border sectors also seized 19,208 conveyances (e.g., automobiles) and \$25.5 million in cash.

**Appendix III  
Enforcement Activities, Apprehensions, and  
Narcotics Seizures**

**Figure III.1: Percent of Time Spent on  
Border Control Activities Has Decreased**



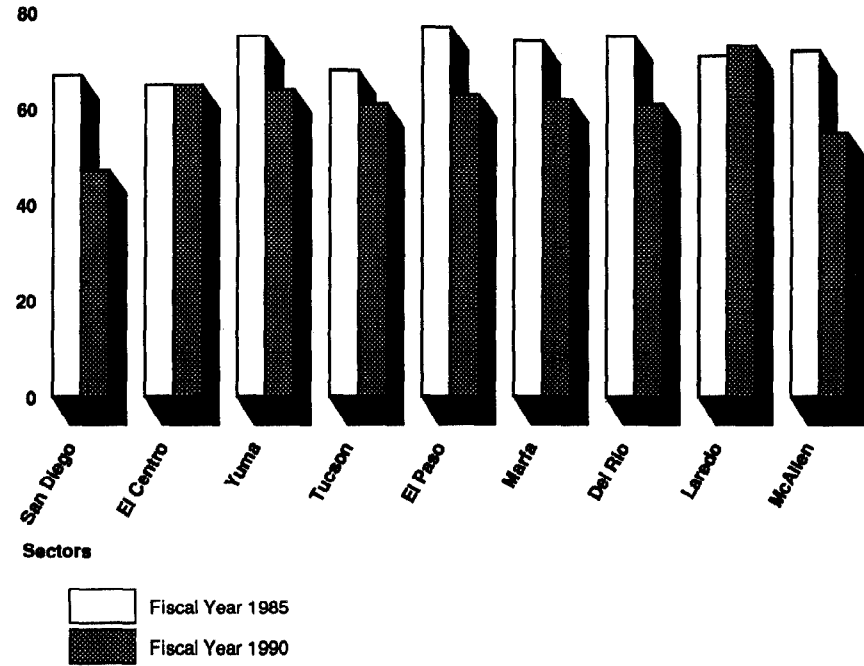
Source: Border Patrol.



Appendix III  
Enforcement Activities, Apprehensions, and  
Narcotics Seizures

Figure III.2: Percent of Time Spent  
Patrolling the Border Has Declined in  
Most Sectors

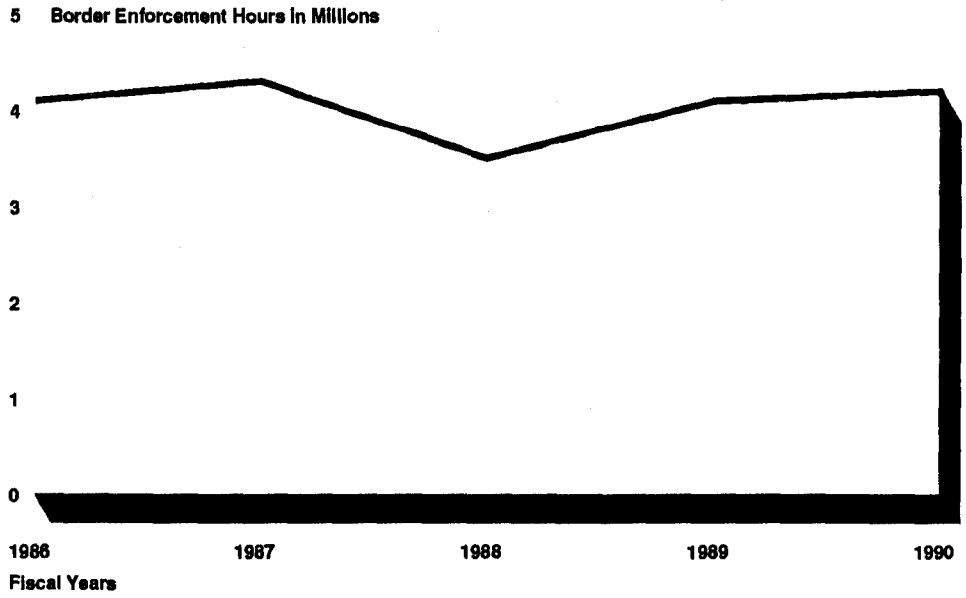
100 Percent of Time on Border Enforcement



Source: Border Patrol.

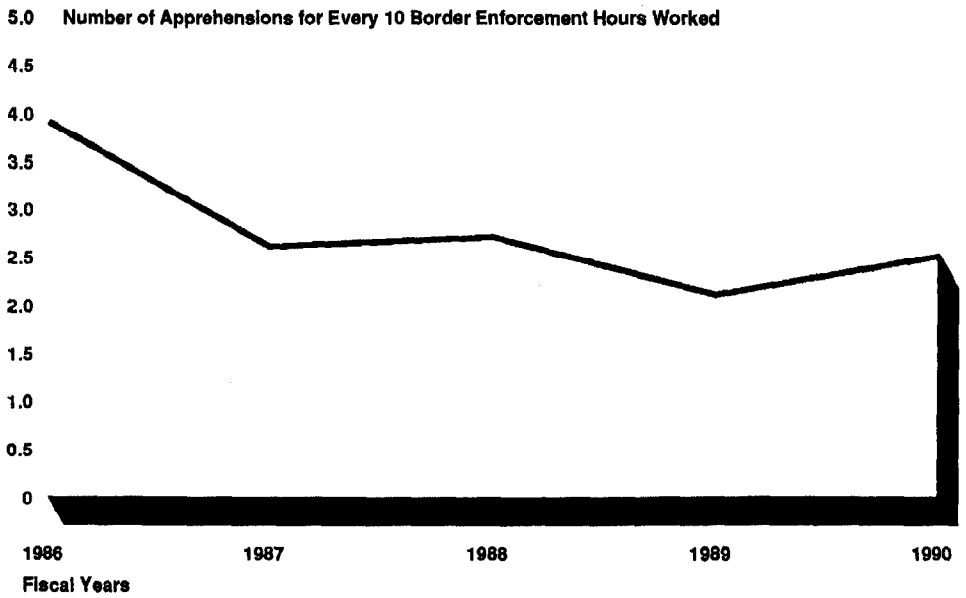
**Appendix III  
Enforcement Activities, Apprehensions, and  
Narcotics Seizures**

**Figure III.3: Border Enforcement Hours  
Increased Slightly**



Source: Border Patrol.

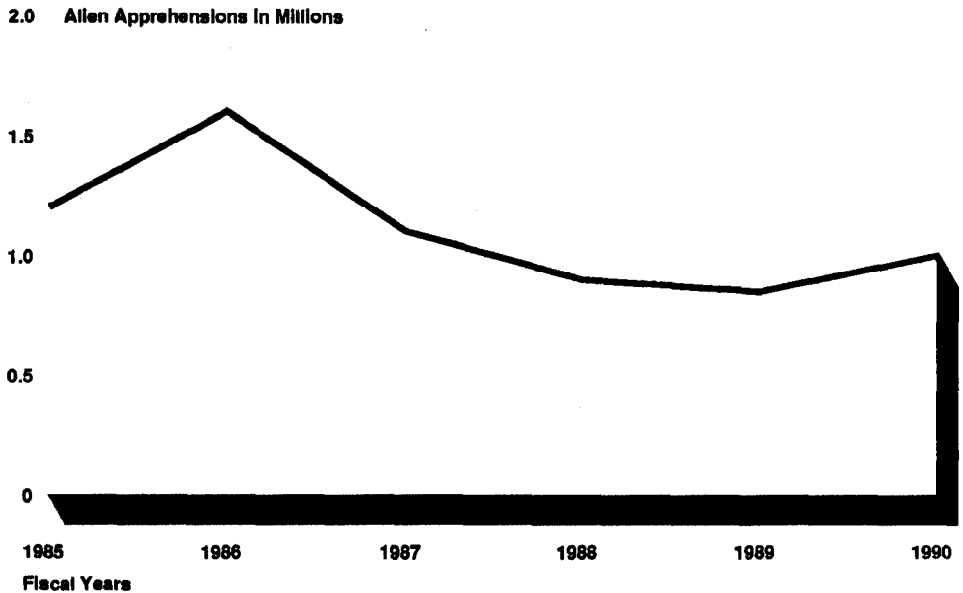
**Figure III.4: Apprehension Rate Has  
Decreased**



Source: Border Patrol.

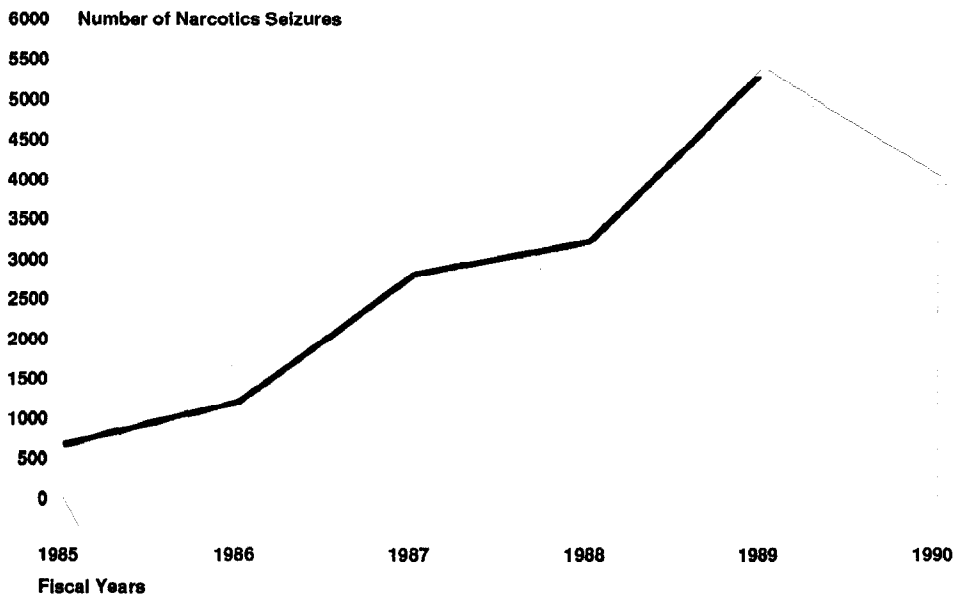
**Appendix III  
Enforcement Activities, Apprehensions, and  
Narcotics Seizures**

**Figure III.5: Number of Apprehensions  
Has Fluctuated**



Source: Border Patrol.

**Figure III.6: Number of Narcotics  
Seizures Has Increased**



Source: Border Patrol.

# Availability and Condition of Field Equipment

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## Vehicles

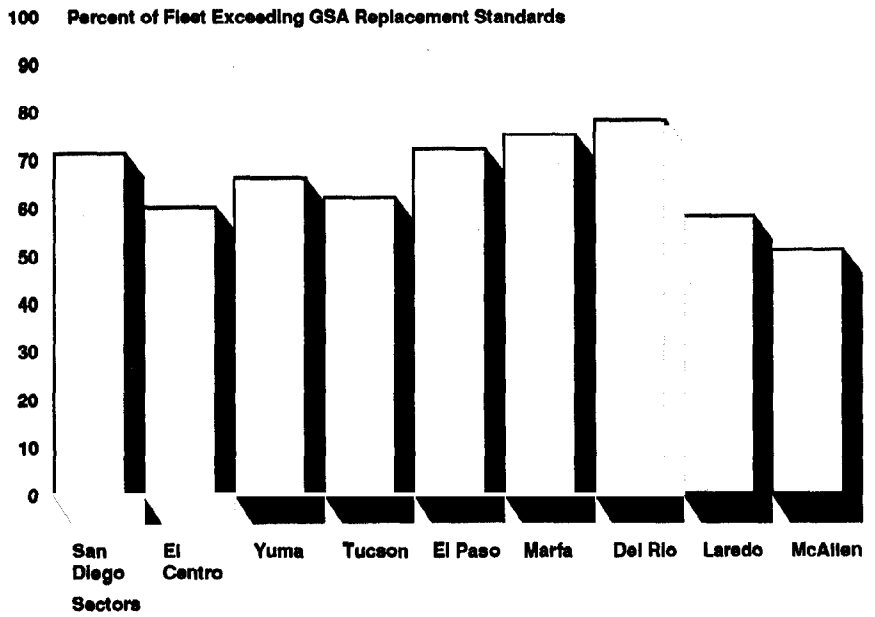
On the basis of our review, we determined that over 50 percent of the Border Patrol's 3,086 vehicles should be evaluated for possible replacement using GSA criteria. (See fig. IV.1.) According to sector officials, many of their vehicles have travelled over 100,000 miles, although GSA criteria recommend that replacements should be considered when trucks reach 40,000 miles and sedans reach 60,000 miles. During our visits, we observed vehicles in poor condition, including some with cracked frames that had been welded several times, according to Border Patrol mechanics. (See fig. IV.2 and fig. IV.3.) According to Border Patrol mechanics, vehicles in such poor condition are normally removed from service. However, since replacements are not available, and there is a shortage of operational vehicles, the older vehicles are repaired and returned to service.

According to Border Patrol officials, the lack of a sufficient number of vehicles hinders their operation in several ways. First, older vehicles with high mileage require frequent and extensive maintenance; they cannot be relied on regularly for patrols, thus further reducing the coverage of border areas. Some sectors estimated that up to one-half of the fleet may be down for repairs at any one time. Secondly, the border is sometimes not patrolled during shift changes because there are not enough vehicles to maintain coverage during the shift change. Because agents coming on duty do not have vehicles, they must wait for the agents returning to the station to obtain their vehicles. Thirdly, repair costs are excessive. Several sector officials stated that vehicle repair costs could be reduced by 50 percent if vehicles in poor condition were replaced. For example, an official from the El Paso Sector estimated the sector could reduce its vehicle repair costs by \$120,000 per year.

Although INS is purchasing vehicles for the Border Patrol, these purchases will not significantly improve the condition of the fleet. INS replaced 499 vehicles in 1991 and plans to purchase 213 in fiscal year 1992. According to INS Fleet Management officials, about 25 percent of the Border Patrol's vehicle fleet, or about 750 vehicles, should be replaced every year, at a current cost of about \$12 million. INS officials told us budget constraints have prevented the purchase of the total needed.

Appendix IV  
Availability and Condition of  
Field Equipment

Figure IV.1: Many High Mileage Vehicles  
May Warrant Replacement



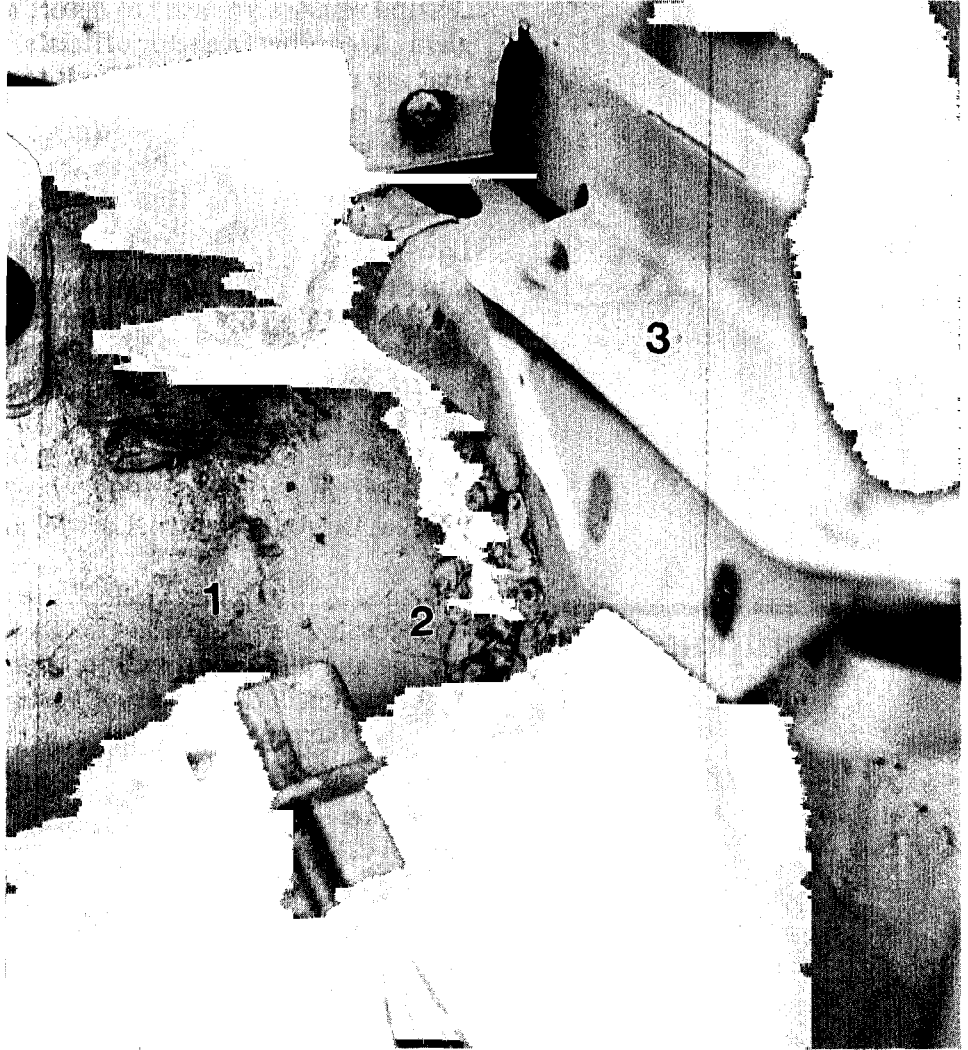
Source: Border Patrol.

**Figure IV.2: Crack in Floor of Border  
Patrol Truck**



- 1: Passenger Seat
- 2: Drain Plug

Figure IV.3: Crack in Engine  
Compartment Repaired by Welding



- 1: Firewall of Engine Compartment
- 2: Weld
- 3: Driver's Side Quarter Panel and Mounting Bracket

## Electronic Equipment

Sector officials told us that additional electronic equipment used to detect aliens is needed to enhance mission effectiveness. For example, some electronic night vision devices that are on loan from the military are also difficult to maintain. Most of the funding allocated for night vision devices—\$800,000 in fiscal year 1991—is being used to maintain the existing equipment rather than to procure new and improved models.

Ground sensors are used to detect aliens entering illegally and smugglers. According to sector officials, many of the sensors are older models that are unreliable and difficult to service. In addition, officials from several sectors stated that they needed additional sensors because large, remote areas cannot be fully covered. INS expects to have a contract to replace sensors in all southwest border sectors in fiscal year 1993.

Low-light-level television camera systems are deployed in both remote and densely populated areas to monitor alien and smuggler traffic. The Border Patrol monitors the cameras at a central location and agents are dispatched when needed. According to a supervisory agent in Laredo, several cameras and 3 agents could monitor the same area that is now patrolled by 25 agents. The Border Patrol has implemented a program to upgrade these television systems in the Tucson and El Paso Sectors. However, in fiscal year 1991, INS eliminated funding for such systems in the San Diego, El Centro, Laredo, and McAllen Sectors.

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## **Other Equipment**

To meet its communication needs, INS is purchasing secure-voice radios for use along the southwest border. According to Border Patrol officials, the weapons and bulletproof vests used by the agents are adequate to meet the current threat.



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# Major Contributors to This Report

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