

TEXAS BORDER SECURITY PANORAMA



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Texas Border Security Panorama

Selene Rodriguez and Rodney Scott

Executive Summary

Border security and immigration enforcement are primarily—but not *exclusively*—the responsibility of the United States federal government. However, regardless of what the federal government chooses to do at the border, states and local communities should take every lawful step possible to keep their citizens safe and uphold their respective constitutional obligations. As Texans know all too well, public safety, health, education, and related costs that accompany a poorly controlled border have immediate negative impacts on state and local governments.

The smuggling of humans and contraband across the U.S.–Mexico border has changed dramatically from years past and increasingly poses a threat to the security of the United States. In fiscal year 2021, there were 1.7 million Border Patrol encounters¹ with illegal aliens along the border, most of them taking place in Texas. The previous record for illegal alien apprehensions at the southern border was 1.64 million in the year 2000.

In 2000, around 96% of the migrants arrested crossing the U.S. border illegally were from Mexico ([U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2002, p. 232](#)). In contrast, in fiscal year 2021, U.S. Customs and Border Protection encountered 1,079,092 migrants from countries other than Mexico—or 62.2%—crossing the southwest border illegally ([Customs and Border Protection, n.d.-c](#)).

Most migrants who choose to enter the United States illegally do so for economic reasons. Political turmoil as well as gang and cartel violence also drive people from their home countries.

Texas and Mexico share 1,254 miles of common border. In 2021, migrant encounters more than quadrupled in the Rio Grande Valley Sector, the Del Rio Sector, the Laredo Sector, the Big Bend Sector, and the El Paso Sector, with the two sharpest spikes in the Rio Grande Sector (+509% from 2020) and the Del Rio Sector (+543% from 2020; [U.S. Customs and Border Protection, n.d.-c](#)). Large groups of migrants surging in certain areas of Texas force the Border Patrol to allocate all its resources to these particular areas, leaving the remainder of the border vulnerable to drug and human trafficking. This in turn allows foreign cartels to conduct their illegal activities at the southern border and to take operational control of some areas of the border.

If the Texas–Mexico border is not secure, the entire country is exposed to an enormous national security risk. In this study we will examine the tools in place to achieve border security, along with the additional tools Texas could use to secure its border and the costs associated with their implementation.

¹ U.S. Customs and Border Protection southwest land border encounter counts include apprehensions, expulsions, and inadmissibles ([U.S. Customs and Border Protection, n.d.-e](#)).

Key Points

- Texas is expending substantial public resources for what is essentially a federal responsibility.
- To date, state border security efforts remain limited to deter large numbers of migrants from illegally crossing the border.
- While improving state border security capabilities and effectiveness, Texas must simultaneously continue to press the federal government to fulfill its responsibilities.

Border Security and Immigration Enforcement

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was founded under the Homeland Security Act (DHS, 2022a). DHS's responsibilities include the duties of the former U.S. Customs Service and Immigration and Naturalization Service with, today, two primary organizations responsible for border security, and three responsible for immigration, respectively (DHS, 2022b). U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) work together to safeguard the nation through enforcement of applicable U.S. laws.

CBP is responsible for securing and safeguarding our borders at and between the ports of entry. ICE is responsible for investigations associated with cross-border criminal activity and for interior immigration enforcement to include detention and fugitive removal operations. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is responsible for processing and adjudicating administrative immigration and asylum applications. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on CPB—alongside the Texas Department of Public Safety at the state level—specifically the functions carried out to safeguard the borders between the official ports of entry.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection

CBP is one of the world's largest law enforcement organizations and is charged with protecting the American people, safeguarding our borders, and enhancing the nation's economic prosperity by “keeping terrorists and their weapons out of the U.S. while facilitating lawful international travel and trade” (CBP, n.d.-a, About CBP).

CBP comprises four operational offices (see **Table 1** for further details about the agency's mission):

- The Office of Field Operations (OFO), which is responsible for the official ports of entry (POEs) throughout the nation.
- The U.S. Border Patrol, which is responsible for safeguarding the border between the official POEs.
- The Office of Air and Marine Operations, which is responsible for providing air and maritime capabilities to support a wide range of homeland security-related missions.
- The Office of Trade, which is responsible for monitoring and enforcing import and export laws to enhance the economic prosperity of the U.S.

Table 1
Enduring Mission Priorities

Counter terrorism	Anticipate, detect and disrupt the threat of terrorists, their weapons and actions to protect the people and economy of the United States.
Combat transnational crime	Detect, deter and disrupt transnational organized crime that threatens U.S. national and economic security interests at and beyond the border.
Secure the border	Protect the Homeland through the air, land and maritime environments against illegal entry, illicit activity or other threats to uphold national sovereignty and promote national and economic security.
Facilitate lawful trade and protect revenue	Enable fair, competitive and compliant trade and enforce U.S. laws to ensure safety, prosperity and economic security for the American people.
Facilitate lawful travel	Enhance, enable and transform the travel experience by anticipating, detecting and intercepting threats prior to and at ports of entry.

Note. Information reproduced from *About CBP*, Customs and Border Protection, n.d. (<https://www.cbp.gov/about>).

Table 2
Border Patrol Operations

Linewatch and signcutting	Linewatch operations are conducted near international boundaries and coast lines in areas of Border Patrol jurisdiction to prevent the illegal entry and smuggling of individuals into the United States and to intercept those who do enter illegally before they can escape from border areas. Signcutting is the detection and the interpretation of any disturbances in natural terrain conditions that indicate the presence or passage of people, animals, or vehicles.
Traffic checkpoints	Traffic checks are conducted on major highways leading away from the border to (1) detect and apprehend individuals attempting to travel further into the interior of the United States after evading detection at the border and (2) to detect illegal narcotics.
Marine patrol	Along the coastal waterways of the United States and Puerto Rico and interior waterways common to the United States and Canada, the Border Patrol conducts border control activities from the decks of marine craft of various sizes. The Border Patrol maintains over 109 vessels, ranging from blue-water craft to inflatable-hull craft, in 16 sectors, in addition to Headquarters special operations components.
Horse and bike patrol	Horse units patrol remote areas along the international boundary that are inaccessible to standard all-terrain vehicles. Bike patrol aids city patrol and is used over rough terrain to support linewatch.

Note. Information reproduced from *Border Patrol Overview*, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, n.d. (<https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/along-us-borders/overview>).

U.S. Border Patrol

The U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) was created in 1924 and is the mobile, uniformed law enforcement arm of the CBP. Border Patrol is especially focused on preventing the entry of terrorists and terrorist weapons into the country (CBP, n.d.-b, Mission). Table 2 details USBP's core operations: linewatch and signcutting, traffic checkpoints, marine patrol, and horse and bike patrol.

USBP has refined and is continually evolving a combination of impedance and denial capabilities through the placement of various physical barriers complemented by detection and interdiction capabilities to enhance the effectiveness of intelligence-driven personnel deployments. Beyond the traditional patrols at and near the physical border, operations also include traffic checkpoints, uniformed and plainclothes mobile units, and targeted enforcement at critical transit nodes to restrict routes of egress from the border. In combination, these efforts deter illegal crossing to some extent and directly support enforcement operations on the actual border.

Texas Department of Public Safety and Its Role in Border Security

The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) is charged with protecting Texas and its citizens. In the mid-2010s, the state of Texas began utilizing DPS to increase its focus

on deterring criminal activity along the Texas–Mexico border. With the border security funding it has received, DPS has acquired and deployed assets such as tactical boats, night-vision capable helicopters, and patrol aircraft. Most notably, more than 5,000 day-and-night motion sensor cameras are used to detect and interdict drugs, criminal aliens, transnational gangs, cartel operatives, and human traffickers.

As evidence of the importance these resources play in securing the border, according to DPS, U.S. Customs and Border Protection relies on Texas' detection camera program as “it provides as much as 60% of the U.S. Border Patrol's situational awareness along the Texas/Mexico Border” (DPS, 2019b, p. 1). Through continued cooperation with the Texas Military Department, DPS is able to utilize Texas State Guardsmen to install, maintain, and monitor the detection cameras. Other resources in DPS border security efforts include “Special Agents to conduct investigations targeting Mexican Cartel networks ... Texas Rangers to conduct major violent crime and public corruption investigations ... [and] 6 Joint Operations and Intelligence Centers to collect, consolidate and share local, state and federal border incident data used to support operations” (p. 1).

Texas DPS Border Operations

In 2006, the Bush administration launched Operation Jump Start, placing 6,000 National Guard troops along the southwest border to assist Border Patrol. Upon its conclusion in 2008, “over 30,000 Army and Air Guard personnel from units in all 54 states, territories, and the District of Columbia had served on the border” ([National Guard, n.d., para. 5](#)).

Simultaneously, Texas Gov. Rick Perry announced the start of a state-run border security agenda financed mostly through federal grants (“[Gov. Perry Announces](#),” 2005; [Office of the Governor Rick Perry, n.d.](#)). The Border Security Operations Center (BSOC) was commissioned by Gov. Perry and stationed in Austin, Texas. Abrams Learning and Information Systems, a Virginia-based security consulting firm, was contracted to run the operations center ([Baddour, 2016](#)). The center’s first project was Operation Linebacker, which “awarded federal grant money to border sheriffs’ departments to expand patrols” ([Legislative Budget Board, 2013, para. 1](#); [Baddour, 2016](#)). Spanning across 16 counties along the Texas–Mexico border, it extended border operations to utilize police departments, Texas Parks and Wildlife personnel, Texas military forces, the U.S. Coast Guard, and the DPS ([American Presidency Project, 2015](#)).

The success of Operation Linebacker prompted Operation Rio Grande, which was designed to “maximize the impact of law enforcement resources on organized smuggling activity” ([American Presidency Project, 2015, para. 4](#)). By centralizing intelligence sharing between state and local law enforcement agencies, the Border Security Operation Center ([DPS, n.d.-a](#)) was established as the DPS repository and coordination center for border-related intelligence and statistical information. The first three BSOC operations—Linebacker, Rio Grande, and Wrangler—used federal funds to help support law enforcement efforts in the border region and install cameras ([Legislative Budget Board, 2013](#)).

In 2008, Operation Border Star was described as “a long-term commitment to Texas border security that combines and synchronizes the actions of federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies to secure the Texas-Mexico border” ([DPS, n.d.-b, p. 1](#)). Operation Border Star provided funding, coordination of operations and intelligence-sharing, and technological options. For the 2008–09 biennium alone, the Texas Legislature allotted \$110.3 million for Operation Border Star—and \$452 million between 2008 and 2013 ([Legislative Budget Board, 2013, p. 2](#)).

The state also focused on making more technological tools available to local efforts. For example, in 2011, “Operation Drawbridge put more than 500 motion-activated cameras on the border” ([Baddour, 2016, para. 14](#)). The cameras are monitored by Texas DPS, the Texas Military Department, and Border Patrol. By 2014, DPS claimed more than 58,000 individuals were detected during Operation Drawbridge, nearly 30,000 apprehended, and more than 88,000 pounds of drugs were seized ([DPS, 2015](#)). An additional 4,000 cameras were funded.

Operation Lone Star

On March 6, 2021, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott launched Operation Lone Star, an initiative that augments the resources of DPS and the Texas National Guard, as well as includes the participation of the Border Prosecution Unit and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Operation Lone Star’s stated aim is to deploy “air, ground, marine, and tactical border security assets to high threat areas to deny Mexican Cartels and other smugglers the ability to move drugs and people into Texas” ([Office of the Texas Governor, 2021a, para. 1](#)).

DPS oversees Operation Lone Star, which, as of April 2022, has more than 1,600 troopers assigned to the border.

Private landowners regularly grant DPS and the Texas Military Department (TMD) access to their property to track and arrest migrants trespassing on private property, as part of Gov. Abbott’s catch and jail policy. DPS troopers may also provide saturation patrols on major smuggling corridors to deter and interdict human and drug smuggling (Col. McCraw, DPS, personal communication, April 2022). DPS has seen an uptick in drivers who are recruited by criminal smuggling organizations through social media platforms such as Tik Tok, WhatsApp, and Facebook. This method of recruitment can entice young adults to engage in criminal activity such as human smuggling ([Hernandez, 2021](#)). These operations were initiated in July of 2021 in Val Verde and Kinney counties. In early 2022, operations were expanded to other regions in South Texas.

DPS troopers also receive support from the Texas National Guard, which provides surveillance, engineering, administrative, and mechanical assistance and is also helping with the construction of temporary border barriers. As of March 2022, “the Texas National Guard ha[d] constructed more than eight miles of fencing and ha[d] secured signed agreements for an additional 62 miles” ([Office of the Texas Governor, 2022c, para. 12](#)).

As of April 14, 2022, Operation Lone Star resulted in 13,600 criminal arrests, with more than 11,000 being felony arrests, along with 233,000 migrant apprehensions. DPS also seized nearly (300 million lethal doses of fentanyl), \$30 million, and more than 3,700 weapons ([Office of the Texas Governor, 2022a](#)).

As part of Operation Lone Star, DPS has created specialized brush teams made of state troopers, drone operators, tactical operators, and National Guard soldiers. These specialized teams focus on private ranch lands where an influx of migrants trespass on private property to circumvent Border Patrol checkpoints.

Even with the successes of Operation Lone Star in curbing drug and human trafficking, the operation has also met significant challenges.

Once a defendant arrested for trespassing is released from jail, whether it be as a result of making bond or completing their jail sentence, they are transferred to the custody of ICE. During a legislative hearing, DPS Director Steve McCraw noted that “there wasn’t the prosecutorial capacity to keep up with the number of arrests that DPS was making” (quoted in [McCullough, 2022, para. 13](#)).

In December 2021, 10 civil rights organizations filed a joint discrimination Title VI complaint, requesting the Department of Justice to investigate Operation Lone Star. The complaint alleges that the operation is a “unlawful, racist and xenophobic system of state immigration enforcement in Texas” ([Sanchez, 2021a, para. 1](#)). The groups associated with the complaint also allege that the surge of law enforcement and military at the southern border “inflict[s] undue harm on migrants and unfairly affects border communities” ([para. 8](#)). DPS troopers and National Guard soldiers have been accused of luring migrants onto private property to arrest them, though Lt. Olivarez of the DPS has stated that that is inaccurate ([Sanchez, 2021b](#)). In April 2022, a group of migrants apprehended for criminal trespass in Kinney County under Operation Lone Star filed another lawsuit against Gov. Abbott arguing that the operation is unconstitutional ([Martínez-Beltrán, 2022](#)). The migrants claim that they were held in custody after posting bond and having their charges dismissed.

While Operation Lone Star is unable to cover all the gaps created by the federal government, it has filled gaps left open by the federal government’s mismanagement of border security, including recent uncertainty over

enforcement of Title 42, which has been used during the Covid public health emergency to quickly expel large numbers of border crossers. In response to the Biden administration’s announced intention to end Title 42 enforcement, Gov. Abbott directed DPS and TMD to deploy “additional boat blockades ... razor-wire at low-water crossings and high-traffic areas, and [install] container blockades to stem the flow of illegal crossings. Additionally ... all DPS troopers and specially trained Texas National Guard soldiers will be given riot gear in case of violence among caravans and migrants” ([Office of the Texas Governor, 2022d, para. 6](#)).

Long term, the requirements for executing Operation Lone Star are difficult to sustain, both financially and in terms of manpower. In view of these pressures, TMD leaders have testified to the Texas Senate Border Security Committee on the need to adjust and reduce deployments ([Thayer, 2022](#)).

The Border Wall – Historical Perspective

The most publicly tangible tool for border security is the border wall. The U.S. began the formal installation of border fences to restrict the movement of unlawful immigration and drugs in 1990, with the San Diego fence ([Nuñez-Neto & Garcia, 2007](#)). Six years later, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act ([IIRIRA, 1996](#)) granted the Immigration and Naturalization Services the power to build a triple-layered fence barrier system to reinforce the efficiency of the existing fence and continue to deter illegal crossing in areas of high illegal entry ([Nuñez-Neto & Garcia, 2007](#)).

In 2006, President George W. Bush signed the Secure Fence Act into law, which authorized the construction of 700 miles of fencing along the southern border. The Secure Fence Act:

- Authorize[d] the construction of hundreds of miles of additional fencing along the southern border;
- Authorize[d] more vehicle barriers, checkpoints, and lighting to help prevent people from entering our country illegally;
- Authorize[d] the Department of Homeland Security to increase the use of advanced technology like cameras, satellites, and unmanned aerial vehicles to reinforce our infrastructure at the border. ([White House, 2006, “By Making Wise Use” section](#))

The U.S. Government Accountability Office ([GAO, 2017](#)) reports that between 2005 and 2015, the border fencing increased from about 120 miles to more than 650 miles and “CBP spent approximately \$2.4 billion between fiscal years 2007 to 2015 to deploy (TI) [tactical infrastructure]—fencing, gates, roads, bridges, lighting and drainage infrastructure—along the nearly 2,000 miles of the southwest border” ([p. 1](#)).

President Trump’s 2016 campaign prominently featured border security, promising to build a “big, beautiful” wall along the southern border. According to Reuters ([Ainsley, 2017](#)), a 2017 DHS report estimated that President Trump’s border wall would cost an estimated \$21.6 billion, though its final price tag would likely be more. The plan for the modern border wall system included a combination of various types of infrastructure to include internally hardened steel-bollard barriers from 18’ to 30’ high, new and improved all-weather access roads, perimeter lighting, and enforcement cameras ([DHS, 2020](#)). Although it was not publicly disclosed initially, the wall system also included a sophisticated intrusion sensor system and fiberoptic cabling to facilitate additional advanced technology and improve USBP communication capabilities ([Miroff, 2020](#)).

Upon taking office, President Biden halted all construction of the southern border wall by freezing money allocated to it and terminating President Trump’s national emergency declaration along the border. According to a *Politico* article, Pentagon spokesperson Jamal Brown declared: “DoD has begun taking all necessary actions to cancel border barrier projects” ([Niedzwiadek, 2021, para. 2](#)). A White House press release ([2021](#)) confirmed that “The President’s Budget proposes no new funding for border wall construction, and calls on Congress to cancel any border barrier funds that remain at the end of the year” (“[Calling on Congress](#)” [section](#)).

In June of 2021, Gov. Abbott ([Office of the Texas Governor, 2021b](#)) announced Texas’ plan to build a border wall along the Texas–Mexico border, which would be constructed by the Texas Military Department. The new wall would be funded with both state funds and private donations. Gov. Abbott also announced that he had asked President Biden for “the immediate return of any land taken by the federal government to build the border wall. Once returned, Texas will talk to those property owners about the possibility of Texas using that land to build the wall” ([para. 6](#)).

Challenges to Building a Border Wall

Kamarck and Stenglein ([2019](#)) explain that while there are many obstacles to building a border wall, two are proving the toughest. The first is persuading more members of Congress that new wall construction will be effective in deterring illegal immigration and drug smuggling. In 2019, it was reported that “smuggling gangs in Mexico have repeatedly sawed through new sections of President Trump’s border wall ... by using commercially available power tools, opening gaps large enough for people and drug loads to pass through” ([Miroff, 2019, para. 1](#)).

While CBP has declined to provide information confirming where the breaches occurred as well as the number of breaches, according to a *Washington Post* article, CBP has said that “the new bollard system remains far superior and more formidable than any previous design” ([Miroff, 2019, para. 9](#)).

The basic design of the modern border wall system included a high-tech sensor system; the sensors quickly detect the vibrations that sawing produces on the bollards. The Biden administration, however, stopped wall construction before the accompanying technology was fully operational.

The second major obstacle to building a border wall is that two thirds of the land along the U.S.–Mexico border is privately owned, and Texas has the highest number of privately owned parcels of any border state ([Analysis: Land Along the U.S.-Mexico Border, n.d., Texas section](#)). While obtaining private property proved to be a challenge under the Trump administration, in Texas, private landowners have volunteered to have border barriers built on their land ([Abbott, 2021](#)) and signed agreements with the state and TMD to do so.

Operation Steel Curtain

The state’s barrier initiatives also include Operation Steel Curtain that coincided with the September 2021 surge of thousands of Haitian migrants in the Del Rio Sector. This effort involved the use of dozens of steel shipping containers lining the riverbanks along the Rio Grande in Eagle Pass, Texas. The Texas National Guard and DPS worked together to place the shipping containers with concertina wire, aided by armored vehicles as a second line of defense.

DPS continues Operation Steel Curtain initiatives along the southern border, specifically in the Rio Grande Valley and Del Rio Sectors, by deploying multi-agency

resources—DPS, Texas Military Department and Texas Parks & Wildlife. This operation entails a combination of ground, marine, and air assets.

But Does It Work?

A GAO (2017) study on the efficiency of fencing on border security operations reported positive feedback from CBP (p. 20). A report by DHS (2020) stated that illegal drug, border crossings, and human smuggling have decreased in areas where barriers are deployed. An example in Texas is that of the Rio Grande Valley Sector where RGV Zone 1 saw a 79% decrease in apprehensions since implementing a border wall system in an area that previously did not have border infrastructure. Since the completion of the border wall in Zone 1, CBP also reported a 26% decrease in narcotics seizures. Now, “smugglers are ... forced to take their groups further west into areas that are less dense with brush and easier for CBP surveillance cameras to detect illicit activity” (“RGV Sector” section).

The Center for Immigration Studies visited with Border Patrol agents in New Mexico and Texas in 2021 to obtain their professional assessment of the impacts that halting border wall construction would likely have. One agent working out of the Big Bend Sector in Texas said:

That whole tall-wall-taller-ladder thing? Haha, fine, let them lug a 45-foot ladder out there in the middle of the desert. I don't care. It's a deterrent. It's not a 100 percent guarantee, but it [a wall] stops most of the people who are mediocly [sic] going to commit a crime. A lot of people have no interest in risking their lives to climb that high or lug a band-saw and cutting tools out to the middle of nowhere. A lot of people are deterred by just the idea of all that. (Bensman, 2021, para. 7)

Experience with a border fence has led to several conclusions. The first is that left unprotected, any physical barrier will be defeated. For a physical barrier to be effective, quick detection of attempted breaches and rapid law enforcement response before significant damage can be done are necessary. Application of technology can allow for real time detections with minimal manpower requirements. Planners must also include an appropriate budget for maintenance and repairs to prevent degradation of the barrier.

The border wall has proven to be an effective deterrent in areas where it is up to date and properly maintained. But in order for the wall to reach its maximum effectiveness, it must be finished. In areas where the wall is incomplete or

lacking proper technology, people can simply walk around it. While a wall cannot be the only tool in the border security toolbox, it provides a significant benefit to border enforcement personnel and the security of not only border states, but America as a whole.

Tactical Infrastructure and Technology

Border security involves two main goals that require very different tactics. The first is sorting contraband from cargo at ports of entry. The second, and most important for the purposes of this paper, is detecting, tracking, and apprehending people attempting to smuggle humans and illicit drugs into the U.S.

To function properly, border agents need sufficient tactical infrastructure (TI) to minimize illegal activity along the border. TI includes fencing, gates, roads, bridges, lighting, and drainage infrastructure. TI is a critical element of border security as it allows agents additional time to respond to and resolve threats. Between 2007 and 2015, CBP spent approximately \$2.4 billion to deploy TI along the 2,000-mile border.

In 2009, “CBP estimated that it would need to spend more than \$3.5 billion over the next 20 years on TI operations and maintenance to sustain these investments and to ensure TI continues to support Border Patrol's mission” (GAO, 2017, p. 1-2).

The rural, mountainous areas of the border are good regions to deploy unmanned surveillance aircraft, or drones, which are “used to detect suspicious activity along treacherous terrain and to get a closer look at areas that may be inefficient or unsafe for personnel to patrol in person” (Ghaffary, 2020, para. 23). Predator B drones, originally built for military use, have been used by CBP since 2006 and can stay in flight for nearly 30 hours with the capability of reading a license plate number from two miles high.

While effective, each Predator B drone costs an estimated “\$17 million ... and about \$12,255 per flight hour to operate” (Ghaffary, 2020, para. 26). Technological advances have led to smaller and more cost-effective drones coming to use, small unmanned aerial systems. Though “they can't stay in the air as long as the larger Predators and they're more vulnerable to bad weather conditions, but they fly at a much more efficient cost and require far less training to use” (para. 28).

Another tool is the aerostat technology known as the Tethered Aerostat Radar System (TARS), which provides “long-range detection of low altitude aircraft at the radar’s maximum range. . . and detects and tracks a majority of suspicious air traffic along the southwest border, including ultralight and short landing aircraft threats” (CBP, n.b.-d). The aerostat can stay aloft for weeks at a time, and it is unthwarted by undulating terrain, though it can easily be sidelined by inclement weather, and it is expensive to operate and maintain.

Fixed surveillance towers, or integrated fixed towers, are “equipped with radar, high-resolution daytime cameras and infrared cameras to monitor up to a seven-mile radius” (Berkowitz et al., 2019, para. 17) and up until recently had been the most commonly used type of tower. Autonomous surveillance towers (AST) are now cheaper to install and move around. As of March 2022, 175 ASTs have been deployed along the southern border as “part of a five-year deal with Anduril, a California-based security and defense contractor specializing in artificial intelligence systems” (Miroff, 2022, para. 4). ASTs operate off-grid with 100% renewable energy and can provide autonomous surveillance operations 24/7. The Anduril system’s main innovation is the use of artificial intelligence (AI).

AI is believed by some to more efficiently and accurately meet border security needs, over the use of man-operated drones. Indeed, AI can help spot humans in remote areas by recognizing emotional expressions or biometric and facial information (Tyler, 2022). CBP is not currently using facial recognition technologies in between ports of entry, though it is using new drones and surveillance towers that can employ AI software to process information from radars and cameras in use along the border more rapidly.

According to CBP, such technology is “absolutely essential to border security and compliment[s] other capabilities such as the Border Wall System, Remote Video Surveillance System, Integrated Fixed Towers, Mobile Surveillance and small drones” (CBP, 2020, para. 6). Federal and state agencies use many other tools to enforce border security in between ports of entry, such as ground sensors, night-vision goggles, planes, helicopters, and patrol boats. To work in dangerous and desolate areas of the border, agents need to be well-equipped and properly trained in all of the tools at their disposal.

The Cost of Border Security

Between 2008 and 2013, the Texas Legislature appropriated \$452 million to border security efforts (LBB, 2013). Since then, funding has increased to reach nearly \$3 billion in 2021, with the bulk of the funds going to DPS to support its border security efforts. The 87th Texas Legislature appropriated \$1.12 billion in state funds to 10 state agencies in support of border security during the regular session. The second called session appropriated an additional \$1.8 billion, totaling \$2.92 billion across three bills: Senate Bill 1, House Bill 2, and House Bill 9 (LBB, 2022b).

HI 9 (2021) allocated funding “to enable state agencies and border counties to increase deterrence, protection of private property and targeted prosecution of state crimes committed by unauthorized migrants” (Oliver & Hall, 2021, para. 2). Most notably, the bill contained \$750 million to build a border wall and temporary fencing. This is in addition to \$250 million the state had committed to the Texas Facilities Commission earlier in the year to kick-start the state border wall project.

House Bill 9 includes \$32.5 million to the Office of Court Administration for court costs; \$301.0 million to the Texas Military Department for additional personnel; \$154.8 million to the Department of Public Safety for Operation Lone Star surge costs, replacement tactical marine units, and additional intelligence personnel; \$273.7 million to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice for increased corrections costs; \$214,785 to the Texas Commission on Jail Standards for employee overtime and travel costs; \$1.02 billion for barrier construction, local grants, and establishing processing centers; \$3.75 million for Border Prosecution Unit funding; and \$16.4 million to the Texas Department of State Health Services for contracted ambulance services. (Office of the Texas Governor, 2021c, para. 3)

As part of the FY22–23 General Appropriations Act and the House Bill 9 supplemental appropriations bill, Gov. Abbott’s Public Safety Office has awarded more than \$36.4 million in grant funding for law enforcement and prosecution activities in support of Operation Lone Star (Office of the Texas Governor, 2021d).

In April 2022, Texas leaders approved \$495.3 million to continue funding Operation Lone Star (Office of the Texas Governor, 2022b). Of that, \$465.3 million will support the Texas National Guard. TMD leaders said that more funding would be necessary to continue to run Operation Lone

Star at its current pace ([KVUE News Staff, 2022](#)). TMD estimates that it will require \$510 million to fully fund the mission beyond May 1.

Texas lawmakers have provided substantial resources to help gain greater control over the Texas–Mexico border. But it is important to note that Texas should never have

had to pay for the crisis created by the federal government in the first place. During Texas House floor debates over the budget, DPS Colonel Steve McCraw told legislators that “prior to the crisis that erupted this year, he was hoping to see the state be in a position to reduce its border security expenditures” ([Oliver & Hall, 2021, para. 10](#)).

Table 3

Border Security Appropriations in Texas, 2016-2023

Biennium	Border security total	Agency	Total
2016–2017	\$800 million	DPS	\$749.8 million
		Trusted Programs within the Office of the Governor	\$38.4 million
		Texas Parks and Wildlife Department	\$9.9 million
		Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission	\$1.2 million
		Texas Commission on Law Enforcement	\$0.2 million
		Department of Criminal Justice	\$0.5 million
2018–2019	\$800 million	DPS	\$694.3 million
		Trusted Programs within the Office of the Governor	\$52.7 million
		Texas Parks and Wildlife Department	\$33 million
		Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission	\$6.9 million
		Department of Motor Vehicles	\$5.6 million
		Texas Soil and Water Conservation Board	\$3 million
		Office of the Attorney General	\$2.6 million
		Texas Department of Criminal Justice	\$1.6 million
		Texas Commission on Law Enforcement	\$0.3 million
2020–2021	\$800.6 million	DPS	\$693.3 million
		Trusted Programs within the Office of the Governor	\$53.5 million
		Texas Parks and Wildlife Department	\$29 million
		Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission	\$6.9 million
		Texas Department of Criminal Justice	\$1.6 million
		Texas Commission on Law Enforcement	\$0.3 million
		Office of the Attorney General	\$2.6 million
		Texas Soil and Water Conservation Board	\$3 million
		Department of Motor Vehicles	\$10.4 million
2022–2023	\$2,926.3 million	DPS	\$942.6 million
		Trusted Programs within the Office of the Governor	\$1,375.2 million
		Texas Military Department	\$411.9 million
		Texas Department of Criminal Justice	\$25.3 million
		Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission	\$6.8 million
		Texas Commission on Law Enforcement	\$0.3 million
		Texas Commission on Jail Standards	\$0.2 million
		Texas Indigent Defense Commission	\$32.5 million
		Texas Parks and Wildlife Department	\$125.5 million

Note. Information from *Fiscal Size-Up 2016-2017 Biennium*, *Fiscal Size-Up 2018-2019 Biennium*, *Fiscal Size-Up 2020-2021 Biennium*, and *Fiscal Size-Up 2022-2023* by Legislative Budget Board (<https://www.lbb.state.tx.us/FSU.aspx>)

Additional Measures

IBC Bank President and CEO Dennis E. Nixon, a recognized expert on cross-border commerce and binational economic development, has long emphasized that “a one-size-fits-all barrier approach does not work ... we [must] work with the local terrain and topography to create the most effective barriers to entry” (Nixon, 2021, p. 6). One solution that Nixon and others have proposed is building additional weir dams along the Rio Grande.

Weir dams are built across a river to control the upstream water level and have long been used to control the flow of water in streams, rivers, and other bodies of water. In doing so, it broadens the reach, width, and surface area of the river, thus making it arduous to cross.

In 2015, the 84th Texas Legislature directed the Texas State Soil and Water Conservation Board to create a program to eradicate carrizo cane along the Rio Grande (Texas State Soil & Water Conservation Board, n. d.). Carrizo cane, or *Arundo donax*, is an invasive grass that lines the banks of the river in thickets. Not only does it create ecological issues, but it can also aid criminal activity by concealing bad actors and making law enforcement efforts more difficult. Continued efforts to eradicate the cane will enhance border security efforts as well as have positive environmental impacts.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration’s 2016 National Drug Threat Assessment reported that “the most common method employed by Mexican TCOs [Transnational Criminal Organizations] involves transporting drugs in vehicles through U.S. ports of entry” (Drug Enforcement Administration, 2016, p. 7). This year, the U.S. General Services Administration announced \$3.4 billion worth of infrastructure and technology upgrades at 26 POEs along the U.S. northern and southern borders (Heckman, 2022).

According to a Border Report article, President and CEO of the Border Industrial Association Jerry Pacheco stated that “many ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border are in need of federal funding for repairs, technology or expansion” (Resendiz, 2021, para. 8). Increasing volumes at POE crossings will also require more staffing. Should more border wall construction be completed, it is likely that the POEs will see a higher volume of illicit drug trafficking. Texas and the rest of the states, have a vital interest in seeing to it that all of the country’s POEs are properly staffed and up to date with screening technology that can intercept all illegal drugs being brought into the U.S.

The border cannot be secured without adequate personnel. Unfortunately, the Biden administration’s Department of Homeland Security FY2022 Budget Request contained “no additional appropriations ... for new Border Patrol agents, support staff, or CBP Officers” (Painter, 2021, p. 11). The budget did request funding for Border Patrol Processing Coordinators who would assist CBP by performing tasks such as transportation, processing, and escorting migrants in CBP custody. The budget also called for \$74.3 million in support of 350 new Office of Professional Responsibility Special Agents to investigate and maintain integrity and transparency in CBP programs and operations.

Border Patrol agents are border security professionals. Beyond detecting and apprehending illegal migrants, they also arrest suspected terrorists, seize drugs, weapons, and intercept human trafficking schemes and save lives.

Notably during the ongoing border crisis, Border Patrol agents have rescued countless unaccompanied minors who have been abandoned by human smugglers as well as rescued individuals who have been wounded or fallen ill on or near the border. It is not an easy job, but it is a necessary one. Investing in Homeland Security personnel and capabilities to defend the nation’s borders should be a nonpartisan priority.

For its part, the Texas Department of Public Safety emphasizes its partnership with CBP and other federal law enforcement as an essential part of its border security mission. Specifically, the DPS border security mission states that:

[DPS] will work with its local and state partners to provide direct assistance to U.S. Customs and Border Protection to deter, detect and interdict smuggling along the Texas/Mexico border through the deployment of an integrated network of detection and communication technologies and an increase in ground, air and marine interdiction assets. ... [In addition,] DPS will work with its local and federal partners to target transnational criminal activity including drug trafficking, labor trafficking, sex trafficking and money laundering in key Texas transshipment and trafficking centers and other impacted areas throughout the state. (DPS, 2021, p. 1)

DPS has a structure in place to meet its operational goals in this area. Its Criminal Investigations Division investigates transnational gangs, drug trafficking organizations tied to

Mexican cartels, human traffickers, and other organized crime enterprises. With its specialized branches, like the Ranger Division, DPS can

employ the full spectrum of law enforcement disciplines fully integrated across jurisdictions to include a state-wide intelligence system capable of accurately assessing current and future criminal and terrorism threats; unified ground, air, marine and tactical operations to increase the detection coverage and interdiction capacity along the Texas/Mexico border; conduct enterprise investigations targeting those criminal organizations that represent the greatest threat to the state; conduct major crimes and public corruption investigations; and conduct state-wide patrols to interdict crime and rescue victims. ([DPS, 2019a, p. 7–8](#))

With continued cooperation between DPS and the Texas Military Department, Texas is increasingly prepared to provide CBP the support it needs to fill critical gaps in border security efforts.

Successful border security for Texas will both deter migrants from unlawful entry and impede criminal drug cartel operations. Achieving this goal requires proactive federal and state cooperation. While strengthening the effectiveness of Texas' own border security system, state officials can and should continue to hold the federal government accountable for the protection of all the states of the Union. As long as Texas has an unsecure border, every state is a border state. ★

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Selene Rodriguez is a policy analyst for Right on Immigration. In this role, she conducts research on public policy issues related to immigration; assists the Foundation in academic publication; educates lawmakers and members of the public on Foundation research; and provides formal testimony to local, state, and federal entities. Prior to this position, Rodriguez served in the Marine Corps as an intelligence specialist and completed an internship at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. Born and raised in Del Rio, Texas, Rodriguez graduated from Texas State University with a B.A. in political science and is currently a graduate student. She has a passion for her three children, her dogs, and volunteering at her local church.



Rodney Scott is a senior distinguished fellow for border security. Prior to joining the Texas Public Policy Foundation in the fall of 2021, Rodney Scott served as the 24th Chief of the United States Border Patrol. During his three-decade career in the Border Patrol, under both Republican and Democrat administrations, Scott earned the respect and admiration of agents, colleagues and partners alike while working to successfully enforce our nation's laws and secure our borders.

In a tribute to his leadership and integrity, former Acting CBP Commissioner Mark Morgan called Scott "the absolute embodiment of the U.S. Border Patrol's motto, 'Honor First.'" In addition to serving as Chief of the nation's 21,000 Border Patrol agents, Scott's past assignments included serving as Chief Patrol Agent of the San Diego and El Centro (California) Sectors, Assistant Chief in U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Office of Anti-Terrorism and Director of the Incident Management and Operations Coordination Division at CBP Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Throughout his career in federal law enforcement, Scott was not a political appointee but a career public servant, belonging since 2012 to the federal government's Senior Executive Service.

Within the context of the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Right on Immigration campaign and in his capacity as senior distinguished fellow for border security, Rodney Scott provides America's leading state-based think tank with analysis and recommendations on both federal, state and local border security efforts.

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