



Policy Brief

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## **Disproportionate Policing and Militarization of the Border: The Need for Civilian Oversight of Law Enforcement in Texas Border Counties**

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In March 2021, Texas Governor Gregg Abbott launched Operation Lone Star in response to a surge in undocumented migration along the U.S.-Mexico border. According to Governor Abbott, the purpose of Operation Lone Star is to have law enforcement “personnel work around-the-clock to detect and repel illegal crossings, arrest human smugglers and cartel gang members, and stop the flow of deadly drugs like fentanyl into our nation.”<sup>1</sup>

This initiative, coupled with the Governor’s disaster declaration, has further escalated decades of increasing militarization and discriminatory conduct of the border by flooding border cities and counties with law enforcement personnel. In a related move, Texas passed Senate Bill 4 in 2023, allowing state police to arrest individuals for illegal border crossings. While currently blocked by a federal appeals court, this law further exemplifies the state's aggressive stance on immigration enforcement and raises additional concerns about federal overreach and racial profiling.<sup>2</sup>

The Governor and state legislative support for the escalation of immigrant mitigation efforts and the associated demonizing immigrant rhetoric has raised serious constitutional and social justice issues.

A major social justice consequence of this heightened enforcement is the disproportionate targeting and criminalization of Latino communities. Operation Lone Star has led to a troubling escalation in the criminalization of Latinos, particularly American citizens of Mexican origin residing in towns along the U.S.-Mexico border, coupled with the racially laden anti-Latino immigrant messaging, creating divisiveness and marginalization.

Operation Lone Star is a salient example of anti-immigration measures, which are poised to exacerbate the marginalization of immigrants and the broader Latino population in Texas.

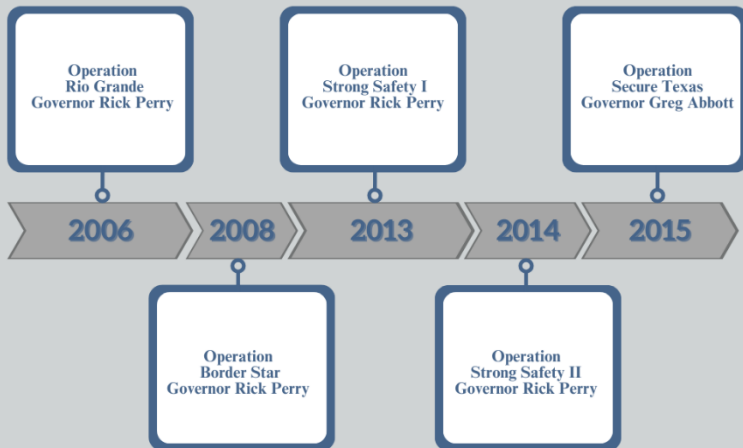
In turn, while Operation Lone Star has done nothing to deter or decrease undocumented migration, conversely spending billions of tax-payer dollars that otherwise could focus on improving the social and economic historical neglect of the border regions.

This policy brief provides an analysis of the current state of the issue, presents how this is harmful to Latino communities, and recommends actions to ensure safe, fair, and legal policing in communities along the Texas-U.S.-Mexico border.

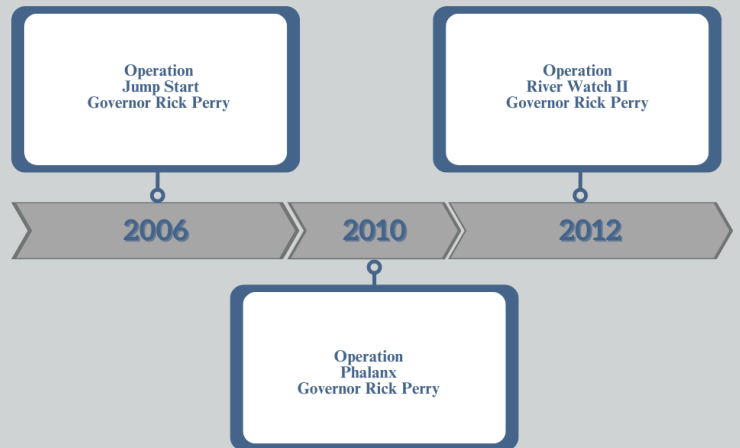
## History of Texas Border Missions

Operation Lone Star is far from the first instance of militarization along the Texas-Mexico border by state authorities. Successive Texas governors have deployed the Texas National Guard and the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) to the border region, ostensibly to combat undocumented migration. These operations date back to 1916 for the National Guard, with more recent missions like Operation Jump Start (2006), Operation Phalanx (2010), and Operation River Watch II (2012).<sup>3</sup> The DPS has also been involved in border deployments such as Operation Rio Grande (2006), Operation Border Star (2008), Operation Strong Safety I and II (2013 and 2014), and Operation Secure Texas (2015).<sup>4</sup> Invariably, these missions have involved sending hundreds of law enforcement personnel to the U.S.-Mexico border under the pretext of intercepting undocumented crossings between ports of entry.

### Texas DPS Operations



### Texas National Guard Operations



## Cost of Border Militarization

The militarization of the Texas-Mexico border region represents a troubling escalation that has proven enormously costly for taxpayers while raising serious social justice concerns. In its zealous pursuit of hardline border security through Operation Lone Star, the state has poured

billions into deploying law enforcement personnel, military equipment, and grants to local border governments - diverting critical funds from other priorities.

The financial toll has been staggering. Governor Abbott initially announced just \$36.4 million for Lone Star initiatives in 2021.<sup>5</sup> However, since then, expenditures have skyrocketed past \$11 billion, siphoning resources from other vital state programs and agencies.<sup>6</sup> Personnel costs alone reached \$459.3 million through August 2023, with the prospect of another \$1.8 billion needed to maintain the heightened troop presence over two more years. These unnecessarily large financial commitments underscore the significant resources dedicated by the state to “address” border-related concerns and highlight the ongoing budgetary implications of such initiatives.

This border militarization has seen the deployment of heavy tactical equipment more suited for wartime operations than community policing. In a widely criticized move in June 2023, Abbott ordered installing a 1,000-foot line of massive orange buoys costing \$1 million in the Rio Grande near Eagle Pass, sparking legal battles.<sup>7</sup> The National Guard has also controversially lined miles of the river's U.S. side with concertina wire at a cost of \$11 million as of January 2024.<sup>8</sup> While aimed at bolstering border enforcement, these measures have faced legal challenges and scrutiny from various stakeholders that are still being contested in courts today.

Far from actually curbing migration, such heavy-handed tactics have stoked tensions and sowed division in border communities, particularly among Latino residents who have faced disproportionate targeting by emboldened authorities. The demonizing anti-immigrant rhetoric from state leaders has further fueled an environment of marginalization.

Adding to the extensive list of costs, Governor Abbott's border wall project aims to construct 100 miles by 2026, with 34 miles completed so far at a cost of \$25 million per mile. To achieve the identified 805 miles, the project would require around 30 years and \$20 billion.<sup>9</sup> Despite challenges including high costs, land acquisition issues, and political opposition, the project proceeds, funded by Texas' budget surplus. Yet again, critics argue it fails to address root causes of immigration.

Undeterred, Texas has introduced the \$5 million Operation Lone Star Grant Program explicitly aimed at "enhancing interagency border security operations" in 2025. Dubbed the Operation Lone Star Grant Program, this local grant initiative aims to support Operation Lone Star and "enhance interagency border security operations, including the facilitation of directed actions to deter and interdict criminal activity."<sup>10</sup> This doubling down reaffirms the administration's unwavering zeal for militarization, regardless of its negative social impacts or ballooning taxpayer costs.

## **Operation Lone Star**

Governor Abbott initiated Operation Lone Star as a response to what he termed an immigration "crisis" at the border, purportedly fueled by surging undocumented migration. The operation has deployed thousands of state troopers and National Guard members to border counties, nearly quadrupling law enforcement presence in the region.<sup>11</sup> However, this militarized surge in border

enforcement has disproportionately impacted Latino communities through increased scrutiny, surveillance, and criminalization - perpetuating harmful stereotypes and undermining civil rights.

Despite Abbott's attempts to blame President Biden's policies for the migration uptick, evidence suggests Operation Lone Star and the Texas Legislature's anti-immigration agenda are significant drivers of the marginalization facing Latinos. These measures not only violate the dignity of Latino residents but stigmatize entire communities.

Initial research analyzing ticketing data reveals a stark rise in citations issued to Latinos following Lone Star's implementation. In 2022, the number of citations in Kinney County skyrocketed from 1,400 in 2019-2020 to over 6,800 - by far the largest spike in Texas. Simultaneously, the law enforcement presence nearly tripled from 14 to 41 officers in this county of just 3,674 residents, 81% Latino.<sup>12</sup>

This pattern of disproportionate targeting and over-policing of majority-Latino border communities represents a profoundly troubling consequence of Texas' aggressive border militarization. The human costs of such discriminatory policies, fueled by insidious anti-immigrant rhetoric from state leaders, cannot be ignored amid the relentless pursuit of draconian enforcement measures.

Qualitative accounts from affected residents further evidence the disproportionate toll of increased border militarization on Latino communities. As citation rates have soared, testimonies reveal mounting fears over the erosion of civil liberties and personal safety in these over-policed areas.<sup>13</sup>

Latino residents report being pulled over and subjected to questioning or searches without probable cause, with civil rights organizations decrying these as unconstitutional practices stemming from heightened enforcement.<sup>14</sup> The prevalence of high-speed pursuits by emboldened officers has also sparked safety concerns after multiple fatalities. A former police officer lamented the jarring transformation of once-peaceful towns due to the influx of personnel.<sup>15</sup>

For many in these predominantly Latino communities, the impacts of militarization now permeate daily life. Some elderly residents have curtailed driving habits out of fear of being stopped.<sup>16</sup> This climate of surveillance and intimidation represents a severe infringement on the freedom and dignity of Latino border residents.

Yet in the face of such glaring injustices, no substantive policies or programs have been enacted to address the disproportionate policing of these communities. While comprehensive data remains limited (e.g., physical and mental health, social divisiveness, and economic impact), the troubling first-hand accounts demand a thorough examination of enforcement practices and the implementation of robust policy solutions to uphold constitutional rights and mitigate discriminatory impacts.

“Texas’ Operation Lone Star is an abusive system of border policing that has been found unconstitutional by a Texas district court. The federal government, including the Department of Homeland Security, has been on notice since at least December 2021 that Operation Lone Star targets people based on race and national origin, disregards due process, and subjects them to abuses in detention.”<sup>1</sup>

-Human Rights Watch

## Policy Recommendations

Operation Lone Star has exacerbated the heightened presence of law enforcement officials. Currently, there is no mechanism in place to ensure the accountability and safety of residents in Texas border communities. As a result, increased militarization at the border has disproportionately targeted Latinos in Texas border counties in a multitude of different ways. This raises serious concerns regarding the fairness and equity of law enforcement practices in these communities. Border missions will continue, so they are unlikely to end the militarization of the border. As a result, we should find other alternatives to have fair policing at the border. To address this urgent issue, we recommend:

### 1. Establishing a Civilian Oversight Commission

This oversight commission would serve as a critical mechanism for ensuring:

- Transparency
- Accountability
- Community engagement

A Civilian Oversight Commission, established by the Texas Legislature or the Mexican/American Legislative Caucus, would be tasked with monitoring the policing practices of both State Troopers and local law enforcement agencies. To ensure comprehensive representation and expertise, the commission's creation and ongoing operation should actively involve immigration advocates, community organizations, and allies. The commission's membership should include a significant proportion of individuals from immigrant rights organizations, ensuring that the perspectives of affected communities are central to its work.

This inclusive approach would provide a platform for addressing grievances, fostering trust between law enforcement and immigrant communities, and advancing policies that promote fairness and justice for all residents. By incorporating the expertise and lived experiences of immigration advocates, the commission can more effectively address the unique challenges immigrant communities face in border enforcement operations.

### 2. Include more research and investigation to monitor the program

Operation Lone Star's impact on border communities lacks comprehensive monitoring and data collection beyond anecdotal reports. This absence of systematic analysis hinders a thorough understanding of the program's effects on minority populations along the Texas-Mexico border. Implementing a structured research and investigation protocol would address this critical gap, providing researchers, humanitarian actors, and advocates with essential data to assess the operation's dynamics and consequences.

Such a framework would enable the collection of metrics on community well-being, economic impacts, social cohesion, and civil rights concerns. This data-driven approach would not only facilitate more informed policy discussions but also provide a factual

basis for evaluating the program's efficacy and its broader implications for border communities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of civilian oversight is imperative to mitigate the adverse impacts of disproportionate policing on Latino communities and uphold the principles of equality and justice in border regions. We urge policymakers to take decisive action to safeguard the rights and dignity of all residents in Texas border counties. With the passing of SB4, it is essential now more than ever to have legal and fair policing in our border communities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gov.texas.gov/operationlonestar>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.texastribune.org/2024/07/03/texas-mexico-border-wall-greg-abbott-progress-cost/?utm\\_campaign=trib-social-buttons&utm\\_source=copy&utm\\_medium=social](https://www.texastribune.org/2024/07/03/texas-mexico-border-wall-greg-abbott-progress-cost/?utm_campaign=trib-social-buttons&utm_source=copy&utm_medium=social)

<sup>3</sup> Texas Military Department. "Border Operations." Accessed March 9, 2024, <https://tmd.texas.gov/border-operation>.

<sup>4</sup> State Funding for Border Security. Legislative Budget Board.

[https://www.lbb.texas.gov/Documents/HAC\\_Summary\\_Recs/85R/3749\\_border\\_security\\_hac\\_february\\_2017.pdf](https://www.lbb.texas.gov/Documents/HAC_Summary_Recs/85R/3749_border_security_hac_february_2017.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-announces-over-36.4-million-in-funding-for-operation-lone-star-initiatives-in-texas>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/10/27/operation-lone-star-greg-abbott-budget/> ;

<https://www.elpasotimes.com/story/news/texasregion/2024/04/22/texas-has-spent-11-billion-on-border-security-is-it-working/73411136007/>

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Wallace, "Federal court upholds order for Texas to remove buoys along Rio Grande in major loss for Gov. Abbott".

Houston Chronicle, December 1, 2023. <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/border-buoys-abbott-ruling-18527584.php>; <https://www.usatoday.com/story/graphics/2023/07/27/texas-border-rio-grande-buoys-visual/70458101007/>.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Weber, "Supreme Court says US border agents can remove Texas razor wire." The Week, January 23, 2024.

<https://theweek.com/law/supreme-court-remove-texas-razor-wire>.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.texastribune.org/2024/07/03/texas-mexico-border-wall-greg-abbott-progress-cost/?utm\\_campaign=trib-social-buttons&utm\\_source=copy&utm\\_medium=social](https://www.texastribune.org/2024/07/03/texas-mexico-border-wall-greg-abbott-progress-cost/?utm_campaign=trib-social-buttons&utm_source=copy&utm_medium=social)

<sup>10</sup> <https://egrants.gov.texas.gov/fundingopp/operation-lone-star-grant-program-ols-fy2025>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/texas-lone-star-latinos-citations-border-abbott-rcna42022>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.