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PUBLISHED ON MAY 25, 2006:

Death and Taxes

The grisly toll of illegal immigration on Pima County

By [SAXON BURNS](#) ✉ and [JIM NINTZEL](#) ✉

An ID card. A small stack of pesos. A battered watch.

These are the final possessions of an illegal immigrant who didn't survive his trek to the United States. They've been neatly bagged and spread out on a tray at the county morgue, waiting to be catalogued and used to identify the dead man, so his family can be notified that he perished on his quest for the promised land.

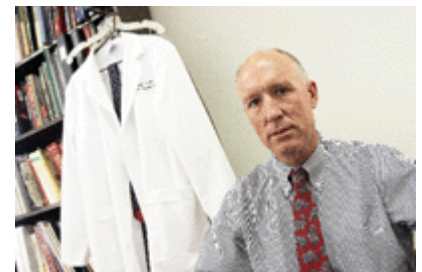
Dr. Bruce Parks, Pima County's medical examiner, oversees the grisly tasks of recovering the ever-growing number of bodies of illegal immigrants who die from exposure in the desert.

Over the last six years, at least 848 bodies have been brought to the county morgue, located in the shadow of Kino Hospital on Ajo Way. While some were killed in car wrecks, most died from the brutal summer heat or the winter chill, says Parks.

Identifying the bodies is often a challenge, because border crossers don't always carry ID, and they can be severely decomposed by the time the forensic team arrives.

"When they're out there and it's 104 degrees, it doesn't take long for them to start to break down," says Parks.

As a result, bodies of illegal immigrants often go unclaimed for years, despite efforts by county and Mexican officials. Parks says some of the bodies now stored in the morgue have been there since 2004.



Jason Swift

Dr. Bruce Parks: "Border crossers have altered the way we work."



Jason Swift

Pima County Medical Examiner Bruce Parks hopes to build a permanent storage facility behind the morgue.



Tricia McInroy

Pima County Administrator

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"Border crossers have altered the way we work," says Parks, who estimates the cost to the county over the last six years--after reimbursement from various sources--has been more than a half-million dollars.

Last year, so many illegal immigrants perished that Parks ran out of room in the morgue, which can hold 120 bodies. The county had to rent a refrigerated truck--at a cost of \$1,000 a week--to hold the overflow of anywhere from 30 to 50 bodies.

A few months ago, Pima County used a \$60,000 grant from the Department of Homeland Security to purchase a new refrigerated 55-foot truck to contain the bodies. Parks hopes to construct a permanent building to house the bodies in the future.

More expenses are on the horizon. Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry, who is finishing the fiscal year with an estimated surplus of roughly \$40 million, has recommended that \$20,000 be used to pay for an all-terrain vehicle to retrieve bodies in remote areas of Pima County.

"We've torn up two vans going out to pick up people who are dying in the middle of the desert," says Parks. "The roads aren't so good."

Huckelberry is also asking the Board of Supervisors to increase the medical examiner's budget by \$160,000 to deal with increased caseloads, including \$125,000 for a forensic pathologist and \$34,000 for a morgue operations supervisor to deal with growing caseloads related to illegal immigration.

The increase in costs for the Medical Examiner's Office is just part of the burden illegal immigration continues to put on Pima County taxpayers. Huckelberry estimates the cost of dealing with illegal immigration has risen from roughly \$8.3 million in fiscal year 2000-2001 to an estimated \$12.3 million in the fiscal year that ends next month.

Huckelberry's figures are based on a report prepared by county officials that shows during those six years, the county spent somewhere in the neighborhood of \$62.5 million, mostly in the areas of criminal justice, health services and environmental cleanup. Huckelberry estimates that money could have paid for 153 deputies at an understaffed Sheriff's Department.

That's a particularly apt comparison, because most of the increased spending has been in law enforcement, where the costs of dealing with illegal immigrants have climbed from \$6.6 million in the '01 budget to \$10.4 million this year.

Ron Jee, a financial analyst with Pima County's jail, says the cost of incarcerating illegal immigrants, combined with administrative costs, has gone from about \$5 million six years ago to nearly \$7.5 million today. Jee calls that a "conservative estimate," based on the calculation that illegal immigrants make up roughly 8 percent of the jail population. He suspects the actual number is

Chuck Huckelberry: "Our law enforcement should be dealing with major crime, not border trespassing."



Jason Swift

Pima County used \$60,000 from the Department of Homeland Security to buy a 55-foot refrigerated truck to store the overflow of bodies of border crossers.

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higher, but officials don't keep a precise count.

As expenses have increased, there's less federal and state money to offset costs. Six years ago, the county got more than \$847,000 in revenues to help counter expenses. This year, Jee estimates the county will get about \$658,000.

The federal government has been cutting back on the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program that reimburses state and local governments. The Bush administration has routinely tried to zero out funding for SCAAP, which has left Huckelberry incredulous. "It's amazing that a governor from Texas would cut the SCAAP program," he says.

Congress has traditionally restored some level of funding, but the federal dollars are "less each year," says Martha Cramer, corrections director of the Pima County Adult Detention Center.

"There's a pie, and more and more people are applying for a piece of the pie, so our piece of the pie gets smaller," Cramer says. "It's a hunk, and we're glad to get it, but it's nothing compared to the real cost of dealing with that many people."

Gov. Janet Napolitano has been fighting with the U.S. Justice Department over SCAAP funding for more than a year. She's sent a number of invoices to the federal government, saying they've shortchanged the state more than \$71 million to cover the cost of incarcerating illegal immigrants in Arizona prisons since July 2003.

While illegal immigrants are in Pima County Jail, taxpayers are also responsible for their medical care. The bill has climbed from an estimated \$116,000 in 2001 to \$576,000 this year.

Cramer says the dramatic increase is the result of the county using a contractor and spending more on health care for all inmates to avoid liability.

"Five or six years ago, the county ran its own health care, and it was woefully inadequate," says Cramer. "We had one doctor and a couple of nurses here a few years ago. It's just unthinkable that we were trying to get by with such a small staff."

Cramer adds that illegal immigrants often have serious medical problems.

"Poor people--even people who are legal--have a lot of things they haven't addressed for many years, and when they get to jail, then it's time for new teeth and all those kinds of things," says Cramer. "Something hurts, and we're in a position where we have to address it."

Over the six years, costs have similarly climbed for indigent defense, prosecution, court administration and probation, although the estimates are less dramatic.

The march of illegal immigrants has also left portions of the 160,000 acres of county-managed land a mess, according to officials with the Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department. Last fiscal year, the county spent nearly \$28,000 cleaning up the Empirita and Canoa ranches.

The real cost to the county comes from having a limited number of staff members trucking back and forth to far-flung regions. They do a variety of jobs, from monitoring property damage to trying to make a dent in the amount of rubbish littering the desert.

"We're trying to do a little bit of everything when we're out there," says Kerry Baldwin, natural resources division manager.

But the trash buildup appears to be one of the biggest headaches. Baldwin says the litter often isn't visible when sticking to Pima County's rural byways.

"You may drive down a dirt road and say, 'This isn't so bad.' But if you get out and walk into some of these washes or places adjacent to the road, you'll see," he says. Along a two-mile stretch of road, there may be 40 trails with fresh footprints and little piles of trash marking the path like breadcrumbs, Baldwin adds.

Squads of volunteers regularly make trips to areas frequented by illegal immigrants, including Altar Valley and Canoa Ranch. In one morning, they can fill up to five Dumpster-sized bins with water bottles, backpacks, bicycles and other refuse, yet "it's sometimes hard to really see that they've made an impact," Baldwin says.

"It literally covers the ground one or two layers thick," he continues. "I had no concept of the immensity of the trash problem until I really got down onto the ground myself. It's amazing what's down there."

It's not just the illegal immigrants who put a strain on the environment, either. The huge Border Patrol presence in some areas takes its toll on the land.

"Just them driving back and forth across roads--and occasionally going across country in pursuit--has its own environmental impacts that are a part of it as well," Baldwin says.

Other damages must also be factored in. According to Baldwin, illegal immigrants cut fences on the 40,000-acre Rancho Seco lands north of Arivaca on a nightly basis; campfires are sometimes left to burn out of control; and, when the mercury soars during the long summer months, water becomes a critical issue.

"We've had (county-owned) tanks essentially lose 10,000 gallons of water, because someone took a large rock and just kept pounding on the piping until it broke off," he says.

County employees frequently run into thirsty illegal immigrants begging for water. Ominously, three or four bodies are discovered on the Canoa Ranch property each year, Baldwin says.

"That's a pretty common thing our officers have been running into--dead folks out there," he says. "I anticipate with more open-space properties, we'll be running into more dead folks. It's just inevitable."

Huckelberry prepared his analysis of the costs of illegal immigration to help shape the county's legislative agenda. While the state has helped with some financial burdens--such as the purchase of the refrigerated truck at the morgue--

that's been mostly thanks to Gov. Janet Napolitano, who provided \$1.5 million to Southern Arizona counties as part of her declaration of emergency along the border last year.

State lawmakers haven't offered much help this year. With some of their proposals--such as the push to make being in the country illegally a crime--legislators are actually doing the opposite, says Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik: They're creating more of a burden for local government.

"We don't need trespassing legislation," says Dupnik, who adds that his deputies can already detain illegal immigrants. The problem: Border Patrol officers don't have much of an interest in taking them into custody.

But if lawmakers made it a state crime to be in the country illegally, then Pima County deputies would have to take them into custody.

"We would have to house them," Dupnik says. "It would throw the jail into crisis overnight."

Huckelberry dismisses the legislative approach as: "Let's pass a bill and make it a crime, and we'll assume the world is Pollyannaish, and it's going to solve the problem. All it does is transfer the cost to the local taxpayers. Our law enforcement should be dealing with major crime, not border trespassing."

And while the Bush administration started making another big push on illegal immigration last week, Huckelberry finds the federal government's approach to have been "fairly schizophrenic."

"On the one hand, they want to basically deny any responsibility to assist the local governments, and the local taxpayers are bearing the burden. And on the other hand, they want to basically, quote, 'take control' of this border that we've never had control over.

"It's bizarre. I just don't understand it."

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