

# SHERIFF & DEPUTY

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## The View From the Border

A visit to Cochise County illuminates issues of smuggling and trafficking in both humans and drugs

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# The View From the Border

A visit to Cochise County illuminates issues of smuggling and trafficking in both humans and drugs

By Grant McDougall

**M**y knowledge and interest in the struggles at the U.S./Mexico border weren't much different from most Americans. I understood that there is a problem that needs attention, but I lacked the knowledge, understanding, and experience to offer any credible solutions or suggestions.

But since I have made a career out of supporting those who serve and protect, I'd pay special attention to the men and women in law enforcement in the background of those scenes when watching news

channels run reel after reel of the suffering and tragedy at the border. If law enforcement was the subject of one of these news stories, it was rarely shown in a positive light.

A year ago, I spoke at the National Sheriffs' Association's Winter Conference in Washington, D.C. There, I met Cochise County (Arizona) Sheriff Mark Dannels and was invited to attend a meeting of NSA's Border Security Committee, which he chairs. I wasn't surprised to see sheriffs from border counties express their anger and





Photos: Drew McDougall

frustration in that meeting. What did surprise me was the number of sheriffs from places like Massachusetts, Illinois, and Montana who expressed similar frustrations.

Those sheriffs spoke about issues that are exacerbated by illegal border crossings and impact their own communities, including the fentanyl/opioid epidemic, human trafficking, and relocated undocumented immigrants. After the meeting, Sheriff Dannels and others invited me to “come take a look for yourself.”

Later that year, I spoke at the Indiana Sheriffs’ Association’s Annual Conference. There, I met Sgt. Tim Williams of the Cochise County Sheriff’s Office (CCSO), who leads the office’s Southeastern Arizona Border Region Enforcement (SABRE) team. His unit engages in border-related incidents such as human and narcotics smuggling, gathers intelligence, and shares it with local, state, and federal agencies. Sgt. Williams gave me a firsthand account of what it’s like to police the border, and after speaking with him, I booked a flight to Tucson, Arizona.



## CONTINUOUS CROSSINGS

I had no political agenda in mind as I traveled to Cochise County to spend time with the SABRE team in the field; I only wanted to gain a better understanding of the struggles and challenges of front-line officers. I specialize in law enforcement psychology and have a specific professional interest in cumulative trauma and chronic stress in first responders.

But one of the many things I learned during the journey was that it is nearly impossible to escape the political forces at play in this issue. There are opposing viewpoints that seem to have become more entrenched and immovable in their positions. What seems indisputable is that the system, as it stands, is broken.

I arrived in Sierra Vista, Arizona, and was greeted at a local gas station by Sheriff Dannels and a few of his deputies. Sgt. Williams then proceeded to take me on a tour of the jurisdiction's segment of the border, where there are areas with "the wall," as well as vast open areas without a wall or any formidable barriers.

I asked Sgt. Williams when the best time was to see individuals crossing the border illegally. "Any time," he said. That was a point he proved over the next few days.

I did little research before traveling to Cochise County. I expected to see what I had been seeing on the national news: groups of immigrants flooding across the border and surrendering to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers. I expected to see families, unaccompanied children, and individuals seeking a better life. I believed these individuals constituted a large percentage of the people trying to enter this country. But Cochise County is different.

The SABRE team operates a network of cameras along the U.S./Mexico border. When they get an automated "hit," an image is transmitted to team members instantaneously. The team then pursues the border crossers and notifies CBP.

The team members I accompanied in the field were an eclectic group of officers with a range of experiences—some are cowboys, some are trackers—and all seemed to be excellent law enforcement officers. It was clear that SABRE team members are chosen carefully. They were also different. They are put into situations where trust in one another and their experience are paramount.

## MORE THAN A WALL NEEDED

Every law enforcement officer—federal and local—with whom I spoke adamantly supported the building and maintaining of a border wall. Most stated that a higher wall with integrated fiber optics and other technological advances, similar to the newest segments, seems to be more effective. While I can't speak directly to that point, I can say that there is a significant psychological difference between older sections of the 20-foot wall and the newer 30-foot wall.

Most frontline officers also said that simply constructing and maintaining a wall isn't enough to stop illicit drug smuggling, human trafficking, and other crimes, however. To that point, we stopped alongside the wall to observe the evidence of an attempted entry that had been aborted. Less than 10 minutes after we left that spot, a SABRE camera detected a group of what law enforcement refers to as "military-age" males cutting that same section of wall

with a blowtorch and coming through; they were pursued but not apprehended.

Some would argue this is proof that a wall doesn't work. However, as are most things on the border, it is more complicated than "wall" or "no wall." A more productive debate would view the wall as mitigation, not elimination. Nothing will fully eliminate the ongoing occurrence of illegal border crossings, but border walls do mitigate the volume and frequency of crossings. In remote areas where there is no wall or other substantial barrier, there are well-worn trails where thousands of people have come across. Where there is no wall, the difference between the U.S./Mexico border and a private cattle rancher's fence is often indistinguishable.

In December 2021, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas spoke with Sheriff Dannels regarding the completion of the wall in Cochise County. In July 2022, the Biden administration approved a plan to complete a section of the border wall near Yuma, Arizona, but that plan did not include Cochise County. With limitations in law enforcement staffing, personnel, funding, and patrols, county deputies and CBP are tasked with the impossible job of securing 83 miles of border and 6,300 square miles of land in Cochise County. Sometimes, it's a life-and-death version of whack-a-mole.

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## CASH FOR CARTELS

Before I arrived, I was somewhat aware of multinational drug cartels' involvement in criminal activities at the border. What I learned on this trip was that the cartels possess a sophisticated level of organization and logistical prowess. The Sinaloa Cartel—considered to be the most powerful drug trafficking organization in the world—runs operations in Cochise County.

In the field and along the highways, we came across countless numbers of camouflaged backpacks, clothing, and shoe coverings designed to hide footprints. The cartel includes these items as part of the fee charged to their "customers" to facilitate illegal border crossings. Once an immigrant is picked up by an arranged transport or no longer needs these items, they are discarded. That evidence is everywhere.

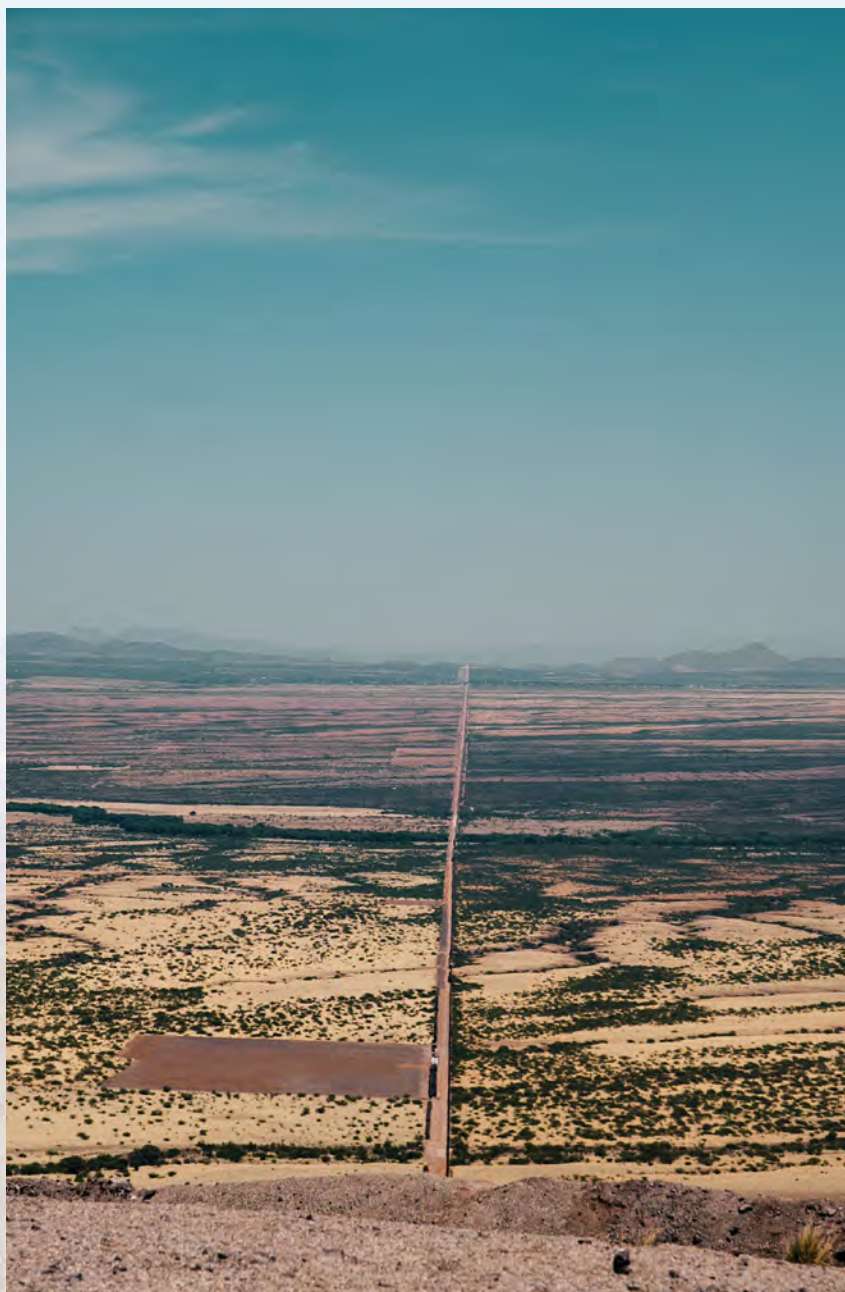
The cartel is strategic in its approach. We saw numerous observation posts on the Mexican side of the border, staffed by individuals who coordinate crossings to avoid patrols. This is constant. This is their cash flow. Once the border crossers are inside the U.S., it becomes a high-stakes cat-and-mouse game. I went into the field with the SABRE team to pursue a group of crossers—six military-age adult males in camouflage.

To say that the terrain presents a challenge for law enforcement is a drastic understatement. SABRE team members are tremendously



experienced; many grew up in Cochise County and are intimately familiar with the land. They are outdoorsmen. Yet, attempts to apprehend border crossers often fail. In May 2022, approximately 2,200 illegal crossers were apprehended, while 7,000 more were known to have crossed. Others were never detected.

Once the illegal crossers make it through the terrain to the highways, they usually meet a driver who is paid by the cartel. The cartel is now using social media to attract minors from Tucson and Phoenix to drive for fast cash, advertising on Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms. Why minors? Payments of \$1,500 to \$2,500 cash are a powerful motivator to a 16-year-old, and minors aren't usually charged as adults when tragedy strikes.



Cochise County has 63 miles of border wall to patrol.

High-speed escape attempts can lead to fatal crashes. I witnessed one play out as we left Cochise County on Interstate 10. A vehicle loaded with young men sped past us in the emergency lane at more than 100 mph, driving erratically. They were coming from the border and being pursued by state police.

For the cartel, it's a business—and a lucrative one at that. It is also a form of modern-day slavery. In Cochise County and other areas with significant cartel activity, would-be immigrants pay a fee to come across. According to intel gathered by deputies, that fee is currently \$8,000 per person and often includes multiple chances (usually three) to come across without apprehension.

I saw a group of several men who had been apprehended and were waiting for a CBP transport to a Tucson facility. I was struck by their seemingly carefree, almost nonchalant demeanor as they sat on the side of the highway in flex cuffs. When I questioned why they didn't look worried or distressed, an officer explained that there would likely be no criminal charges, and the men, once deported, would have an opportunity to return in the very near future. Many officers described this as a "revolving door."

A reasonable and often-asked question is how does a poor immigrant obtain \$8,000? The answer is, *they don't*. They pay what little they have, if anything, to the cartel and are indebted for the balance. SABRE apprehended an individual on his way to a landscaping job in Oregon arranged by a cartel recruiter. That immigrant had paid a fraction of the crossing fee to the cartel upfront and would pay the balance once he started earning wages. There's no written contract. There is no annual percentage rate. There are only the terms of the cartel.

## WHERE WERE THE FAMILIES?

I expected a trip to the border to include gut-wrenching scenes of large groups of immigrants suffering through unimaginable hardships to find a better life in this country—and this does take place daily along the border. To be clear, I'm a strong advocate for legal immigration and believe most of those individuals should have the ability to legally immigrate to the U.S., just as my family did generations ago.

But what is happening in Cochise County and perhaps in other areas along the border is not oriented around family units, large groups of women and children, or asylum-seekers turning themselves in to authorities once they cross. Nearly every contact we made or observed was with groups of single men, ages 18 to 45, fully clothed in camouflage. All appeared to be working with a cartel. All were evading law enforcement.



Sheriff Dannels explained that at least 75% of illegal border crossers in Cochise County are “military-age males”—single men, 18 to 45.

Oddly, Cochise County deputies can’t arrest an individual for crossing the border illegally. They have limited powers to detain an individual and can only do so if a local law is being violated. If they have the legal grounds to detain a suspected illegal crosser, they can only hold the person for a short period of time until CBP arrives and takes command. If CBP can’t respond, the individual must be released.

On one of our patrols, SABRE observed a driver picking up three men on the side of the highway near the border wall. They followed the vehicle until the driver pulled into a parking lot to make a call. SABRE set up surveillance until CBP could arrive, and CBP officers arrested the driver who was armed and had a criminal record. He was transporting the three young men to points inland, with no families or children.

When women, children, and families do cross in Cochise County, they are often victims of cartel trafficking. Sometimes, they perish in the desert after getting lost or being abandoned by their “coyote,” or guide/smuggler. But the business of the cartel continues.

## COMPASSION FATIGUE

I spent part of my time in Cochise County at the table of a rancher named John Ladd. His family has maintained a large cattle ranch along the border for generations. He spoke of times when his mother would feed and shelter immigrant families as they came across, and he has sponsored immigrants in their quest to attain U.S. citizenship. But now he’s seen enough.

Perhaps it’s compassion fatigue. Perhaps it’s years of destruction to his property and livestock. Perhaps it’s his fear of encountering known criminals on his property. He has seen dead bodies—some of them children. I believe he is still a compassionate man who cares for his fellow humans, but the environment at the border has made even the most compassionate person reach their limit.

Law enforcement officers, including members of the SABRE team, also struggle with burnout and compassion fatigue. Although no one complained about the chronic stress they encounter, the revolving door of apprehensions and escapes makes it inevitable. Much of what they can and can’t do is driven by policies developed thousands of miles away by people who likely have no firsthand experience with what’s taking place on the ground.

The solution is not a border that is completely secure and impenetrable, keeping everyone out including honorable and law-abiding people who are seeking to improve their opportunities and way of life. Nor is the solution a completely open border, with no barriers or laws to deter human and drug trafficking that victimizes the innocent. The solution lies somewhere in between.



*The author inspects a breach in the wall.*

As President Dwight Eisenhower once said, “Farming looks mighty easy when your plow is a pencil, and you’re a thousand miles from the cornfield.” There are no quick and easy answers to the border crisis. But I saw firsthand the nearly impossible task given to the men and women who patrol it. I believe that the best place to find solutions or strategies is among the frontline law enforcement officers who do so every day. 🌟

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