



# HIDALGO COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

## SHERIFF J. E. "EDDIE" GUERRA

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Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office  
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Crisis on the Texas Border: Surge of Unaccompanied Minors

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. My name is Eddie Guerra and I am the Hidalgo County Sheriff. I have under my command nearly 800 personnel to include deputy sheriffs, detention officers, and administrative personnel. We are eighth largest county in the State of Texas and are tasked with patrolling 75 miles of the international border.

I would like to begin by thanking you for giving me the opportunity to testify before you here today. It is my opinion that the recent surge of illegal immigration has proven to be a challenge for our federal partners. As Sheriff, my primary duties lie with the preservation of the peace, which can be at times challenging given our proximity to the border. The reality is that immigrants; both legal and illegal have become a part of the fabric of our society. I believe that the immigration issue I am here testifying on before you today is a federal issue. That isn't to say that we will not share in the responsibility, in fact, even today we continue to cooperate with our federal partners by using state and federal funds in support of their mission. To that end, associating my agency with the enforcement of immigration laws would be counterproductive as often times undocumented persons hesitate to come forward as victims of crimes for fear of deportation. As such, I have directive to my deputies to assist our federal partners in conducting rescue operations and to assist them in dismantling the transnational criminal organizations that are exploiting these immigrants.

Mr. Chairman, the influx of immigrants has impacted my office in very specific ways. Currently, the immigrants crossing are turning themselves in and are not committing any state crimes. Should one of my deputies come across any undocumented person, we refer them to The U.S. Border Patrol, which will respond and take them into custody. My greatest concern is the immigrant deaths we respond to. There are several immigrants that have attempted to make entry with hopes of freedom and opportunity and have died in the process. In 2012, we responded to 19 immigrant deaths and in 2013, we responded to 25 immigrant deaths, a 31.5% increase from the previous year. In 2014, to date we have responded to 14 immigrant deaths. These bodies are found in the river or

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the brush; many in deplorable conditions. Most of these immigrants died from drowning or heat exposure. Most recently, we responded to the death of an eleven year old from Guatemala whose decomposed body was found in the brush. He was likely abandoned by the human smuggler that was hired to bring him across. I am saddened to report he died within a quarter mile of a residential neighborhood where he could have received help. Make no mistake, the South Texas conditions are harsh and unrelenting and the trek, as in the case of the eleven year old child, is deadly.

Earlier I commented that the immigration surge is affecting my agency in very specific ways, my agency responds to various calls for service to include: false imprisonment, sexual assaults, kidnappings, criminal mischief, and burglaries. For the most part, the offenders are not the undocumented immigrants coming into the United States, they are the victims. The offenders are the transnational criminal organizations who employ criminals to do their bidding. Time after time, my staff briefs me of "stash houses" in which undocumented persons are held, often against their will in deplorable conditions, traded like a commodity among these criminal organizations for profit. At times, these human smugglers sexually assault the women, who as victims often feel they have no voice because of their illegal status and the crimes go unreported. There are instances where these criminals will hold for ransom undocumented persons; once again some of those crimes going unreported.

On the occasions in which the undocumented persons are taken into the ranch lands of South Texas to traverse the back country, the undocumented persons have no choice but to break into ranch homes in search of water and food. The South Texas conditions are beautiful, but harsh.

As I previously stated, I am willing to accept my share of the responsibility and we have managed the situation only through the cooperation and partnerships that have been established with our federal, state, and local partners. It is my hope that the increased attention to this issue brings to bear much needed resources to the area. I realize the challenges that immigration reform brings, but for me these victims are more than just statistics: they have faces and names, and I firmly believe the solution lies in a change in policy.

With that, I would like to close by once again thanking you for the opportunity to speak to you today and would like to take the opportunity to answer any of your questions.