

24-Hour Checkpoint Vigil & Monitoring Statement By People Helping People in the Border Zone

We are here today standing 25-miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border at an inland immigration checkpoint holding a vigil for those who have died as a direct result of U.S. border enforcement. Since the late 1990s, the U.S. Border Patrol has been using a strategy called Prevention Through Deterrence to police undocumented migration. This policy has ordered the build up of walls, surveillance, and military infrastructure around international ports of entry in order to push the flow of migration into the remote, rural regions of the Sonoran desert. The aim of this policy is to make crossing into the United States more costly, more dangerous and more deadly. Inland Border Patrol checkpoints are an important part of this strategy. With checkpoints placed on all major roads up to 100 miles into the US interior, those migrating are forced to walk enormous distances without access to water, food, or rescue in order to enter the U.S.

As Arivaca residents living in the land of border enforcement, we witness first-hand the human tragedy caused by this policy. All of us have encountered the lost, the sick, and the injured at our doors, and we all live with the weight of knowing that many more are dying in the hills behind our homes. We have responded as any community would, by giving water, food, and care to those in need, regardless of status.

These white crosses represent some of the human remains that have been recovered from the Sonoran desert border region over the past decade. We are aware that the real number of deaths that occur is unknowable. Many bodies will never be found in this vast desert. We light these candles to remember their lives and to protest their deaths at the hands of the border security establishment.

We are holding this event at the Border Patrol checkpoint here on Arivaca Road. The checkpoint is a tool of Prevention through Deterrence that we, as Arivacans must grapple with everyday. In order to leave our community, to go to work, to take our children to school, to visit friends or to run errands outside of our small town we must stop here. We must answer the questions of armed agents about our citizenship status. We have found ourselves subject to prolonged and excessive questioning, warrantless searches, harassment and, at times, outright abuse. Racial profiling is systematic here. This checkpoint is a tool of community surveillance and a symbol of the loss of rights that all people experience in this zone of border enforcement.

In our own community we have responded by independently monitoring the checkpoint over the past nine months. In more than 2,300 vehicle stops, community members observed that Latino drivers are 26 times more likely to be prompted to show ID than white motorists. While comprising a small minority of motorists—some 11% of traffic through the checkpoint—Latinos are 20 times more likely to be pulled into secondary inspection by Border Patrol agents. This shocking evidence of racial profiling is undeniable. From Arivaca to Ferguson, we can see how militarized law enforcement is being used to target and harm poor communities and people of color with virtual impunity.

As a tool of surveillance, the checkpoint is used to profile and police the Arivaca residential population on a daily basis. This is made clear by the fact that in over six months of monitoring, residents have not once witnessed the apprehension of anyone crossing through the desert at this checkpoint. Neither have we ever once observed BP agents interdicting drugs or contraband from any vehicles. It is clear that the reason for the placement of inland checkpoints so far into the U.S. interior is not to increase apprehensions of those crossing into the U.S. Rather, they serve to extend the length of the journey through the desert, and to target borderlands residents with general policing operations that reach far beyond the jurisdiction of a federal immigration enforcement agency.

We have seen this checkpoint deteriorate the quality of life in our rural border community. With the area appearing policed and dangerous to the public, we have seen property values plummet and local businesses close their doors. We have watched our children become accustomed to interacting with armed agents in order to go to school. Helicopters swarm low over our properties and drone surveillance has become a given. With thousands of motion sensors buried in the earth and surveillance towers perched around our homes, life in our rural community has been radically altered by border militarization. Even so, we know that conditions in other border communities like those on the Tohono O'odham Reservation are only that much worse. We are here today to say that we are tired of being treated like criminals by a law enforcement agency that sees our vibrant rural community as its war zone. And we will not sit idly by as thousands more perish as the direct result of federal immigration policy.

With our 24-hour vigil and monitoring effort today, we are renewing our call for the immediate removal of this and all Border Patrol checkpoints. With President Obama's executive order to continue the massive build up of border security, this is a critical moment for border communities to push back. The removal of checkpoints will be a powerful first step in turning back the tide of deadly immigration enforcement in the southwest borderlands. Today is the one-year anniversary of our first public action when we marched on and shut down this checkpoint. Since that time, we have been steadfast in our efforts, and we have made some important allies in the process. For one, U.S. Representative Raul Grijalva has promised us an ad-hoc congressional hearing on our checkpoint here in Arivaca. We are certain that he will keep his word and that we have a date for that hearing in the New Year.

We are a strong community banded together by common values and shared experiences. Today we assert that we are still here and we will not be deterred from the pursuit of our goal. In the absence of responsiveness by Border Patrol and the Department of Homeland Security, we will continue to escalate our efforts. This spring we will be calling for a nation-wide day of action against Border Patrol checkpoints. We will not be stopped, we will not be discouraged, we will join together with communities across the southwest united under a single message: border militarization must end.