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A REPORT FROM THE TEXAS BORDER

SURVEY ON WHAT RESIDENTS OF WEBB COUNTY NEED AND WANT FROM ELECTED OFFICIALS



FOREWORD BY ILSE HERNANDEZ, TEXAS REGIONAL ORGANIZER, IMMIGRANT LEGAL RESOURCE CENTER

As a mother, a resident, and a community organizer in Laredo, Texas, I’ve witnessed firsthand the stark realities of living in a community overlooked by investment and infrastructure development. It’s a daily struggle to reconcile the vast sums poured into “border security” while basic necessities like streetlights, roads, and access to clean water remain unaddressed.

This report is not merely a collection of statistics; it’s a testament to the voices of our community, echoing the frustrations, fears, and hopes of those who call this place home. The Immigrant Legal Resource Center (ILRC) developed a structured bilingual survey and collected responses at community events or through one-on-one conversations held in 2023. We uncovered the urgent needs and deep-seated concerns of our neighbors, such as a constant fear due to a heightened police presence and a deep worry about the lack of access to basic infrastructure. Their stories paint a picture of resilience in the face of neglect and determination to seek solutions that prioritize people over politics.

At its core, this report is a call to action—a plea for equitable investment and sustainable development that uplifts every member of our community. It challenges the status quo that prioritizes militarization over community well-being and demands accountability from those in power.

As I reflect on the findings of this survey, I’m reminded of the unwavering spirit of our community—a spirit that refuses to be silenced by indifference or overshadowed by hateful rhetoric. It’s a spirit that propels me to continue the fight for justice, equity, and dignity for all residents of Laredo.

BACKGROUND

In March 2021, Texas Governor Greg Abbott launched Operation Lone Star (OLS), a new border policy regime that in just three years’ time has grown into an unwieldy, unaccountable racket thrust onto border communities in the name of security. OLS is an unconstitutional and deadly Texas law enforcement scheme that has spent nearly \$12 billion to target migrants for arrest, jail, and deportation. Over the course of a few years, the state has sent concertina wire, razor blade buoys, and an unprecedented deployment of military and police personnel to South Texas to rapidly deport migrants who seek safety, refuge, and prosperity in the United States. OLS violates the Constitution, promotes racial profiling, fuels the mass incarceration of people of color, and encourages white supremacist rhetoric that is harmful to all Texans. It also disrupts Texas’s border towns and misappropriates billions of Texas taxpayer dollars with total disregard to the actual needs of communities like Laredo.

Since the start of OLS, Laredo residents have seen their community flooded by a new wave of state law enforcement and the National Guard. Then in July 2021, Webb County, a border county in south Texas

which includes the city of Laredo and the towns of El Cenizo and Rio Bravo, joined OLS by issuing an [emergency disaster declaration](#) about migrants in the county. Since then, Webb County has received \$2.4 million in law enforcement grants to co-sign this racist regime and artificially bolster its local credibility. Under OLS, Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers are arresting migrants, and DPS officers are doing more traffic enforcement.

While politicians enact and reenact their reckless border theatrics, the ILRC surveyed border residents about their actual needs and how the influx of law enforcement efforts has affected them. We found that while the state of Texas spends more and more money on police and prisons, local governments are starved of funding and communities lack the most basic services, including clean water, paved roads, and street lights.

METHODOLOGY

From August to December 2023, the ILRC's Texas Regional Organizer, Ilse Hernandez conducted 91 in-person surveys of Webb County residents to better understand the impact of OLS. Survey respondents all live in Webb County, within or near the city of Laredo, in the five zip codes that overlap with the city.

- 28.6% of respondents lived in the two zip codes most central to the city (78040 and 78041).
- 67.0% of respondents lived in the more rural zip codes west and south of the city center. These include the majority of "colonias," including Pueblo Nuevo, La Presa, Los Aguilares, San Carlos, and Tanquecitos. Colonias are land parcels outside city limits, often in flood plains and without infrastructure such as electricity, running water, sewage, and paved roads.¹

The survey collected the input of Webb County residents most in need of additional services and who are the most harmed when resources are wasted implementing unnecessary, harmful programs like OLS.

WEBB COUNTY AND LAREDO AREA:

A growing number of Texas counties are affected by OLS as the state's footprint grows and more local governments issue emergency proclamations. Laredo, the largest city in Webb County, is an important case study on the effects of OLS because of its location on the border, its high percentage of Hispanic and immigrant residents, and its economic needs.

Ethnically, Laredo is more than 95% Hispanic².

According to the American Immigration Council's analysis of the 2022 American Community Survey, 41,800 immigrants lived in Webb County in 2022, out of a total of about 270,000 residents. The analysis found that 37.4% of households had at least one noncitizen resident and an additional 14.6% of households have at least one resident who is a naturalized U.S. citizen. Thirty-nine percent of



1 Hoffman, Meredith, "Inside Las Colonias, the Texas Border Towns Without Electricity or Running Water," VICE, November 18, 2015, <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/8gkpd4/inside-colonias-the-texas-border-towns-without-electricity-or-running-water>>; Attorney General of Texas, "Colonias,"

2 <https://www.texasattorneygeneral.gov/divisions/colonias>; "Las Colonias in the 21st Century: Progress Along the Texas-Mexico Border," Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, <<https://www.dallasfed.org/~media/microsites/cd/colonias/index.html>>.

children under the age of 18 lived with at least one immigrant parent.

Despite being one of the largest inland ports in the United States and benefiting from cross-border trade with Mexico, more than 20% of Webb County residents are below the poverty line (54,000 of the total 270,000 residents). Nearly 40% of people lack health insurance.² Still, like in all communities, Webb County residents make significant tax contributions and households led by noncitizens paid \$173.9 million in federal taxes, paid \$104.2 million in state and local taxes, and held \$961 million in spending power in 2022.

The greatest problems facing Laredo are not related to immigration or crime. In fact, Laredo’s crime rate is lower than both the Texas and national average.³ In reality, Laredoans are plagued mostly by a lack of investment in public services and infrastructure. In 2022, 125,000 Laredo residents, half of the city’s population, had no access to water for at least four days, while the rest of the city was also affected with low pressure and contamination concerns. The 2022 crisis was only the latest in a series of [major interruptions in water service](#) in both 2019 and 2021. To fix water interruptions, Laredo would need to both repair existing infrastructure and create an emergency pipeline to bring additional water supply.

Other infrastructure challenges abound. Multiple school zones in Rio Bravo and Laredo lack sidewalks for children to safely enter and leave school grounds. Aging pipes cost Laredoans [\\$1.4 million](#) in repairs in 2023 alone. The influx of commerce at U.S.’s number one port [demands](#) a near-constant monitoring of roads, bridges, and railway infrastructure. There are the real challenges facing the community, yet they are neglected by the state in favor of overwrought border theatrics.

SURVEY FINDINGS

PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS ENCOUNTERING EACH ISSUE

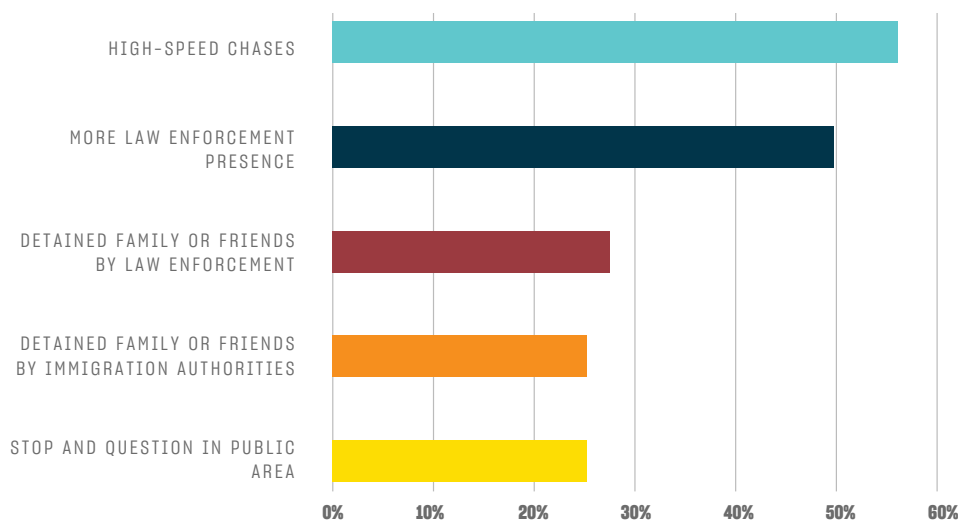


Figure 1. Percentage of survey respondents encountering issues related to OLS law enforcement presence in Webb County.

³ Baddour, Dylan, “Laredo confronts drought and water shortage with minimal options,” Texas Tribune, August 22, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/08/22/laredo-drought-water-supply/>.

- 56% of respondents identified high-speed chases by various local law enforcement agencies as a significant problem in their area.
- 45% of the respondents shared concern over the increased presence of law enforcement agencies such as Customs Border Patrol (CBP), Department of Public Safety (DPS) state troopers, and local Laredo police officers, especially in public spaces such as grocery stores and bus stops.
 - One resident shares her experience: “I’m used to seeing agents asking questions to my friends and family. I used to be scared of walking to the store. You never know who will stop you and what will happen. I pray every night that my family is not going to be separated.”
- 27.5% of respondents identified the detention of family or friends by law enforcement as a problem, while 25.3% are concerned about the detention of family or friends by immigration authorities.

PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS REPORTING A LACK OF EACH RESOURCE, BY ZIP CODE

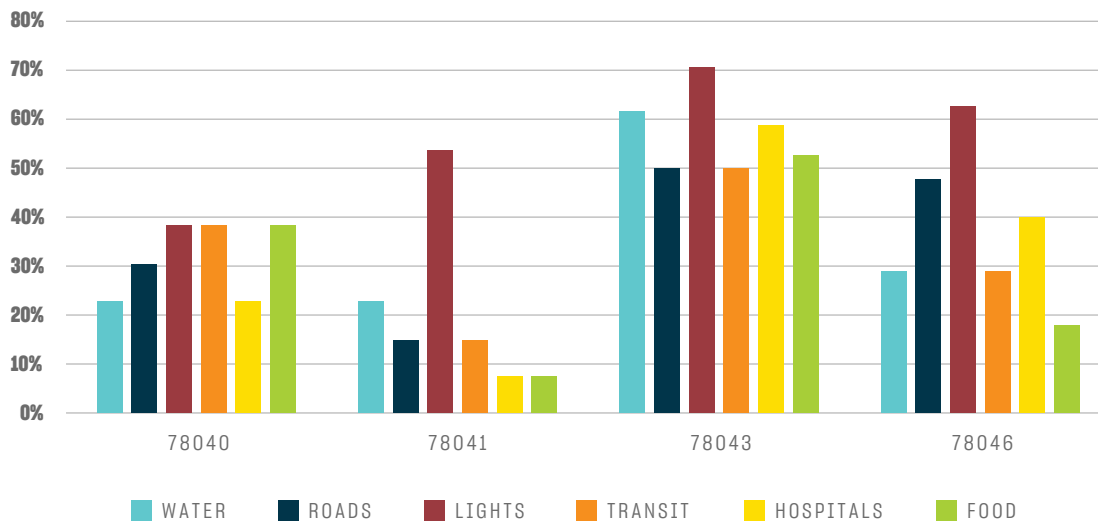


Figure 2. Percentage of participants reporting certain community needs by zip code.

- When respondents were asked about their current community needs, they identified:
 - Inadequate or nonexistent street lighting (60.9%);
 - Unpaved roads (42.5%);
 - Insufficient access to hospitals or clinics (41.4%);
 - Insufficient access to clean and potable water (40.2%);
 - Insufficient public transportation (39.1%); and
 - Insufficient or nonexistent access to grocery stores (34.5%)
- A smaller number of respondents cited additional concerns, including delays in ambulance services, a fear of calling the police, and a lack of financial resources.
- While increased infrastructure was identified as a need in all the zip codes surveyed, needs were especially high in the lower income zip codes: 78043 and 78046. In 78043, 70% of residents experi-

enced a lack of street lighting, while over 60% identified a lack of clean water as well as reliable water service and over 50% identified a lack of paved roads, hospitals, and grocery store access. Addressing these deficiencies in basic living standards should be a priority for Laredo and Webb County leaders, instead of wasting millions to carry out OLS duties.

- *From one respondent: "In some colonias of Laredo, residents are over-policed while other emergency services, such as ambulances, are frequently unavailable," said Hugo, a resident of 78046. "This shows how the state neglects border residents' actual needs in favor of more and more police and border enforcement."*
- *A resident of the area in Pueblo Nuevo expressed his concern by stating "I found out the closest fire station that comes to our neighborhood is on Highway 59, which is not the closest service to us. As a father of young children, knowing there are closer fire stations services denied to us...it's disappointing. Our neighbors have to risk traveling and hoping for the best."*

REFLECTIONS

High-speed car chases

Human Rights Watch has [thoroughly documented](#) the violence and destruction of high speed chases in Texas, reporting that under OLS, nearly 10 people have been killed or injured in a high speed chase every month. Bystanders, including children, have been injured and killed as a result of these reckless pursuits. Two people were killed in Rio Bravo in February 2024, with four others severely injured in the incident. Human Rights Watch [further reported](#) that "81 percent of the vehicle pursuits that occurred in Operation Lone Star counties were initiated because of a traffic violation, 97 percent of which were traffic misdemeanors such as failure to obey an attempted stop by law enforcement, speeding, or not obeying traffic signals."

High speed chases have been happening in communities up and down the border, from El Paso to Laredo to Brownsville, and Texas families bear the consequences. In one particularly stunning case, an El Paso family traveling with their thirteen year old daughter home from a visit to Ciudad Juárez [was surrounded](#) by unmarked law enforcement vehicles, then forced into a car accident and off the road. Texas DPS troopers then came up to the family's car with semiautomatic rifles pointed at them. [In an interview](#) with local nonprofit news outlet El Paso Matters, the child's mother said of her daughter that she "had never seen her face so scared." DPS told the family that their car was similar to one that the department was tracking for an investigation. We continue to demand accountability for these egregious actions but so far none has been taken.



In Laredo, local TV news station KGNS [reported](#) in 2023 that a DPS high-speed chase resulted in an accident on a street corner in South Laredo, the third such time an accident had caused property damage to one family's home. The troopers raced through the residential area around the time children were being released from two neighboring K-12 schools, according to one resident. DPS's reckless

pursuit of suspected smugglers should not be prioritized over the safety of the community, and their policies should be reconsidered before any additional Texans get hurt.

Clean Water Access

Long-term drought and aging water infrastructure have put the City of Laredo and neighboring areas on the precipice of disaster. Laredo has [no groundwater of its own](#), meaning it relies heavily on pipelines that bring water from reservoirs upstream down to the city's homes and businesses. Like many throughout the state, the reservoirs that serve Webb County have faced lower and lower levels over the past decade, and it has been [over ten years](#) since the Amistad Reservoir, the [primary water source](#) for Laredo, has been full of water. The city's 50-year water plan [anticipates Laredo running out of water](#) by 2040. Fearing another summer of extreme heat and drought, the Rio Grande Regional Water Authority reports that some farmers won't plant at all in South Texas.

Laredo and Webb County need additional investment from the state to secure potable water for their residents for decades to come. State lawmakers' [\\$1 billion investment](#) in the newly-created Texas Water Fund is an auspicious start but will be no more than a drop in the bucket if the state does not get serious about the long term water security of communities like Laredo. That lawmakers will spend upwards of \$12 billion and counting on Operation Lone Star while communities across the state inch closer and closer to critical water emergencies is jarring for many in the area.

Increased Law Enforcement Presence

Since the start of Operation Lone Star in March 2021, communities up and down the southern border with Mexico have seen new, astronomical levels of law enforcement deployed to their communities under the guise of public safety and state immigration enforcement. By November 2021, Governor Abbott publicly stated that more than 10,000 National Guardsmen had been deployed to the border to implement OLS; although other sources have put the number closer to half that many.

The state has resisted efforts to require reporting and accountability for OLS personnel. Still, some information has been made available by the state and other parties. A review of 2021 DPS traffic stops conducted by Tarleton State University [found](#) that DPS disproportionately stopped and searched vehicles with Hispanic drivers while statistics showed that DPS found more contraband in vehicles with white drivers. After the study was released, a number of Texas organizations [urged](#) the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate. Anecdotally, communities with significant OLS presence have reported frustration and fear over:

- The threat of arrest, family separation, and deportation in public spaces;
- The risk of high speed car chases with DPS, as noted above;

“In some colonias of Laredo, residents are over-policed while other emergency services, such as ambulances, are frequently unavailable. This shows how **the state neglects border residents’ actual needs in favor of more and more police and border enforcement.”**

-Hugo, a resident of 78046.

- Racial profiling in [encounters with OLS personnel](#) disguised as routine traffic stops;
- The intrusion of DPS troopers on private property who either were [not authorized to make arrests](#) or who [refused to leave](#) when asked; and
- The costs of renting out [all of an area's hotel rooms](#) to OLS personnel at a lower government rate that forgoes hotel occupancy taxes and makes finding a hotel as a layperson difficult and costly.

Without strong data that is released to the public on a regular basis, it is difficult to assess the impact of OLS policing on communities. Raw numbers of encounters at the border in Texas [don't tell the full story](#) of global trends on immigration. State lawmakers have had the opportunity to adopt stronger reporting requirements as they've debated supplemental funding for OLS in recent years; however, the majority have resisted. The lack of transparency should be understood as a feature and not a bug of this unwieldy, unaccountable policy regime.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The State of Texas should invest the \$11 billion and counting in taxpayer dollars spent on OLS in actual community needs, including water infrastructure improvements, paved roads, street lighting, public transit, healthcare facilities and access, and timely ambulance services.
- The state must respond to local needs without the strings of OLS declarations and local cooperation with the regime.
- Water access recommendations:
 - The City of Laredo and Webb County should apply for federal [Inflation Reduction Act](#) funds to help them combat their local drought and water crises, instead of relying on OLS funds that help no one.
 - The City of Laredo should commit to transparency and accountability to local residents when it comes to water boil notices and when water is expected to be unavailable for extended periods of time. When there is no water available, the city should offer drinkable water drop offs to the impacted areas instead of forcing the colonia residents to haul water buckets from faucets located long-distances from their homes.
 - The State of Texas must continue to invest in water infrastructure and access beyond the \$1 billion allocated in 2023 for improvements across the state. Investing in the data and modeling that groundwater conservation districts need when making water management decisions [is one way](#) to set communities like Laredo up for a more sustainable future.
 - 2023's Senate Bill 4 continues to jeopardize the diplomatic relationship between the United States and Mexico. Border communities like Laredo share many of the same water sources as border communities in Mexico, and binational cooperation will be needed to solve the water issues plaguing both sides of the Rio Grande. SB 4 must be repealed, not only to protect migrants from rampant rights abuses but also to save these critical diplomatic ties.
- High speed chase recommendations:
 - Change DPS policy to restrict police chases to when high speed pursuit would save a life that is in danger, or establish an outright ban.
 - Create meaningful penalties for officers who violate any new policies and/or who



- recklessly endanger civilians or destroy private property.
- Waive qualified immunity and/or explicitly clarify that DPS troopers are not protected from liability for damages related to reckless, avoidable car chases.
- Build a culture of transparency at both state and local level regarding chase policies. Some local PDs have started sharing their policies with the public, and DPS should follow suit.
- Law enforcement presence recommendations:
 - Pull OLS personnel out of border communities.
 - Ensure local governments are not short-changed hotel occupancy tax revenue that would otherwise be collected from such extended stays at area hotels.
 - Require better reporting of the impacts of Operation Lone Star, not only on encounters at the border but also on the communities that are currently housing so much of the OLS activity across the state.

CONCLUSION

The state of Texas' overwhelming investment in OLS is further disenfranchising border communities. Border residents do experience a lack of safety, but it stems from the high-speed chases and the increased law enforcement presence, not an increase in migration. Advocates and elected officials should use this report as a tool to discourage further waste in OLS and invest in the unmet and basic life needs of Webb County residents.

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