



EXPLAINER FOR
ADVOCATES

THE UNTENABLE COSTS OF OPERATION LONE STAR



OLS's has cost Texas taxpayers billions of dollars. This explainer delves into the financial waste of the troubling operation.

FEBRUARY 2025

INTRODUCTION

[Operation Lone Star](#) (“OLS”) is an unconstitutional and deadly Texas law enforcement scheme that wastes vital state resources to target migrants for arrest, jail, and deportation. Created in March 2021 by Texas Governor Greg Abbott and backed by nearly \$11 billion of Texas state funds as of 2024, OLS is designed to criminalize and rapidly deport migrants, many of whom are seeking safety in the United States. OLS violates the Constitution, promotes racial profiling, fuels the mass incarceration of people of color, and encourages toxic white supremacist rhetoric that is harmful to all Texans and the country at large.

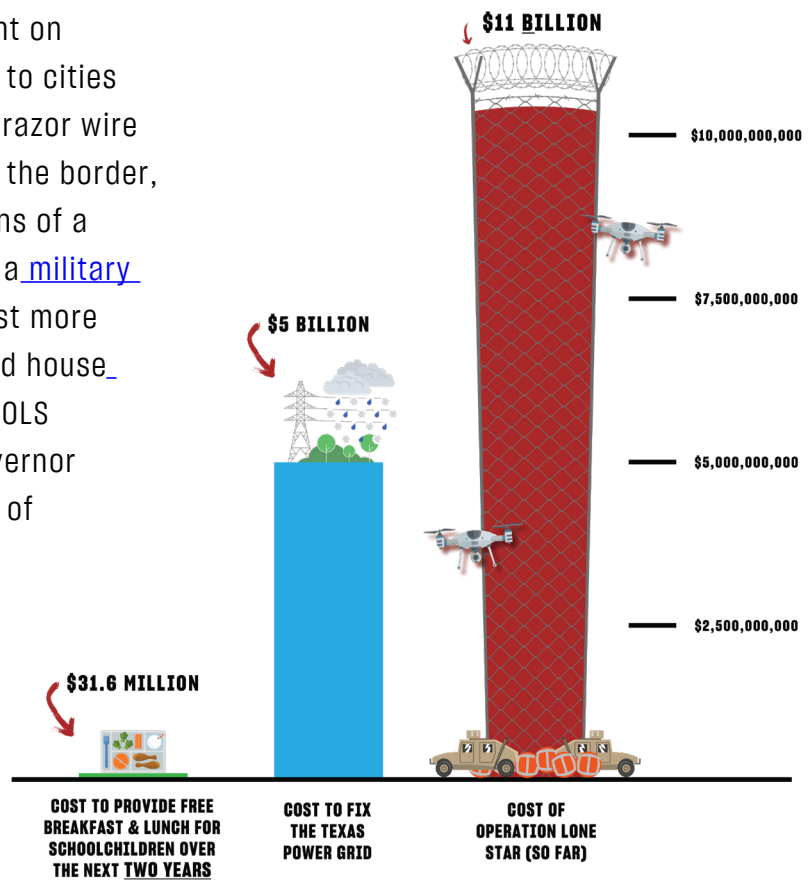
This brief delves into just how misguided OLS has been for Texas from a financial perspective as it enters its fourth year in 2025. Implementing OLS’s immigration enforcement scheme has cost Texas taxpayers billions of dollars since 2021, diverted desperately-needed funding from Texas communities, funneled money to well-connected contractors, and physically harmed and emotionally traumatized thousands of migrants who have been swept up in the furor of the operation. Even National Guard members deployed to the border have called OLS an “[ineffective use of resources](#).” Governor Greg Abbott continues to ride the coattails of the gruesomely anti-immigrant Trump Administration, seizing the opportunity to militarize vast swaths of the U.S.-Mexico border with impunity—and using taxpayer dollars to do so, with no end to the runaway spending in sight. As OLS spending spirals out of control, leaders of communities in Texas are speaking out about how those state-administered funds could instead be reinvested to drastically change the lives of everyday Texans who [need](#) strengthened public services and infrastructure.

“[WASTE](#) OF TIME AND MONEY”: THE EXORBITANT COSTS OF IMPLEMENTING OLS

Since 2021, the state of Texas has allocated more than [\\$11 billion in taxpayer money](#) to OLS. Among other activities, including flooding the border with at least [10,000 state troopers](#) from the Texas

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Department of Public Safety (“DPS”) and the Texas National Guard, OLS funds have been spent on transporting more than 100,000 migrants to cities outside of Texas, planting 70,000 rolls of razor wire and deadly buoys in the Rio Grande along the border, erecting [100 miles](#) of unconnected portions of a [border wall](#), and starting construction on a [military base](#) in Eagle Pass, Texas which could cost more than \$400 million by 2026. The base would house [1,800 National Guard troops](#) activated by OLS “[to respond to Biden’s border crisis.](#)” Governor Abbott has publicly [justified](#) construction of the OLS military base by saying the camp will save taxpayer dollars from being spent on temporary housing or deployment costs for the National Guard in the future. However, [community leaders](#) in border communities like Eagle Pass are skeptical about the increased military presence and political experimentation on real lives: “It’s all a political show and they’re using Eagle Pass as a pawn for their political games[.]”



In 2022, the Texas Tribune [reported](#) that OLS cost taxpayers more than \$2.5 million per week, making OLS the “most expensive of the state’s border operations, and the one with the broadest mandate and scope.” Even in the earliest months of OLS, Texas DPS estimated its overtime, travel and fuel costs at more than \$2.3 million per week, according to a September 2021 [article](#) in the Washington Post. Indeed, one DPS officer made [\\$164,000](#) in OLS overtime pay. This same DPS officer was later publicly criticized for [trying to delay](#) emergency response to the Uvalde mass shooting.

In January 2023, [reporting](#) from the Texas Observer noted that in state budget proposals, the Texas legislature would keep OLS spending at \$4.8 billion for two years per its budget cycle. One billion dollars of that \$4.8 billion was slated to go directly to Governor Greg Abbott’s office–of which \$650 million would be dedicated to the continued construction of a “[solid continuous vertical structure](#)” between Texas and Mexico. Although Governor Abbott’s border wall funding is not solely derived from funds allocated to OLS, the Texas Observer [notes](#) that border wall construction could cost Texas taxpayers more than \$17 billion.

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OLS has reeled in not only Texas taxpayer dollars, but spending from the deployment of out-of-state law enforcement officers to Texas under the guise of Governor Abbott’s border “disaster”—a manufactured, faux crisis meant to drum up funding and public support for Governor Abbott’s anti-immigrant endeavors. In 2024, Florida [pledged](#) to send up to 1,000 members of the Florida National and State Guards to the U.S.–Mexico border, on top of the more than 90 officers from the Florida highway patrol, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and Florida Department of Law Enforcement who were deployed between 2021 and 2024. Similarly, the Ohio Department of Safety spent more than [\\$200,000](#) to deploy highway safety patrol officers to the U.S.–Mexico border. West Virginia spent more than [\\$900,000](#) to send National Guard members to support OLS in 2023. An [investigation](#) by the Texas Tribune found that by mid-2024, at least 13 other states had sent 921 national guard members, 37 other law enforcement personnel, and 10 state police officers to Texas in response to Governor Abbott’s perverse call to action. States had sent anywhere from 5 to 200 troops for deployments to Texas that could last months, with funding for such deployments typically coming from state budgets or emergency funds. The former chief of the U.S. National Guard Bureau [testified](#) before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense that, “There is no military training value for what we do [on the border].” Certainly, other states without budget surpluses would be wise to spend their taxpayer dollars on the critical needs of their citizens, instead of supporting deadly and costly anti-immigrant efforts.

In addition to exorbitant spending, OLS has also drawn the ire of some Texas legislators for the alleged mistreatment of Texas National Guard members deputized or deployed to the border under the operation. National Guard members [report](#) of pay delays, unsanitary conditions in camps, lack of appropriate equipment, and the [deaths](#) of at least ten soldiers deployed under OLS—at least four of which are suspected to have died by suicide.

As recently as June 2024, some Texas legislators in the state senate have begun [questioning](#) the viability of OLS. During a Border Security Committee, Republican Texas Senator Brian Birdwell asked OLS officials, “How long can we do this? Because the day will come when the comptroller is going to tell us there’s a (budget) shortfall; that means some tough decisions here.” Senator Birdwell asked about reductions in force and the potential for prolonged financial obligations. In [response](#), OLS officials indicated that OLS spending would have to continue for the foreseeable future.

HOW OLS SPENDING DIVERTS ESSENTIAL FUNDING FROM COMMUNITIES

Texans, and especially Texans of color, face income inequality and poverty according to an analysis of the annual [U.S. Census American Community Survey](#) by Every Texan, a policy nonprofit.



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Per the latest estimates, Texas has the 10th worst poverty rate in the United States, with a 14 percent poverty rate averaged across the state. Thirty counties in Texas are classified as being in “persistent poverty” from 1989 to 2019, with poverty rates of 20 percent or higher over an extended period of time. It is no coincidence that most of the counties suffering from “persistent poverty” are [located](#) at or near the Texas–Mexico land border, because essential resources are too often spent on targeting migrants and not on addressing community needs. Texans of color—especially those who identify as Black and Hispanic—face poverty rates of nearly 20 percent, which is higher than the state average and almost double the less than 10 percent poverty rate of white Texans. Worst of all, children in Texas experience the [highest poverty rates](#) of all populations in the state. According to Every Texan, Texas legislators and leaders have consistently failed to implement critical anti-poverty policy interventions to better the lives of all Texans for too long.

It is clear that Texas communities are in dire need of people-centered policies. Instead, Governor Greg Abbott and the Texas state legislature are spending billions of taxpayer dollars on OLS with no plans to stop the waste. One of the most controversial aspects of the implementation of OLS in recent years was Governor Abbott’s sly [diversion](#) of emergency federal aid intended to combat the coronavirus pandemic that was redirected toward [OLS initiatives](#). In short, Texas rerouted [\\$975 million](#) in taxpayer funds away from the budgets of state public health agencies to the governor’s office in order to administer OLS. Texas then backfilled the public health agencies’ budgets with coronavirus aid from the federal government—instead of using that funding as intended to combat the virus. By diverting coronavirus relief funding, Texas took advantage of the federal stimulus money to push Texas taxpayer dollars into aggressive and unprecedented immigration enforcement measures. This federal funding could have been used to administer emergency public health [aid to border communities](#) who were some of the hardest-hit by the pandemic, and where access to medical care has historically been limited. Indeed, Governor Abbott’s director of policy and budget [told](#) the Texas legislature in 2022: “If we didn’t have federal dollars [referring to coronavirus relief funds], we would’ve had to make different decisions[.]”

Advocates decry the prioritization of immigration enforcement and the targeting of immigrants over sorely needed improvements to Texas infrastructure—like conducting proper maintenance of the state’s power grid to prevent a repeat of 2021’s [deadly power crisis](#) after severe winter storms. From 2000 to 2023, Texas [experienced](#) 210 weather-related power outages—more than any other state. The 2021 winter storm season and resulting power outages killed approximately [250](#) people, although some contemporary sources estimated the death toll could have been four or five times higher.

Further, in 2022 the state reallocated [\\$360 million](#) originally meant to supplement the needs of

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the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (“TDCJ”) to OLS. Of that funding, \$339 million went to the Texas Military Department to pay for Texas National Guard troops deployed under OLS, and \$20.6 million went to other agencies supporting OLS. This diversion of TDCJ funding came just three months after Governor Greg Abbott previously diverted \$426.9 million from the Texas state prison system to fund OLS. The additional TDCJ funding could have been utilized to improve living conditions for imprisoned Texans, who suffer from a lack of rehabilitative programming, understaffed facilities, and a lack of fire prevention equipment that could have [saved the lives](#) of four people who died between 2021 and 2022. The Texas prison system continues to be plagued by rising health care costs, and TDCJ officials there requested funding for staff raises. In 2021, TDCJ had only [67 percent](#) of its officer positions filled, and some prisons in Texas had less than 40 percent of officer positions filled.

To keep OLS up and running, the state has [previously diverted funds](#) from the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, which oversees child and adult welfare investigations, the state’s juvenile justice system, and Texas Health and Human Services, and other agencies. Reports about the Texas juvenile justice system describe how [understaffing](#) within the system has forced children in custody to relieve themselves in water bottles, food trays, and plastic bags—and nearly half of the incarcerated children were reportedly on suicide watch in 2022. In 2024, a federal judge [fined](#) the state of Texas \$100,000 a day until the state came into compliance with two court orders related to ongoing investigations of welfare and foster care facilities housing children with intellectual disabilities.

Prioritizing OLS at the cost of virtually all other state functions is having deleterious effects across the state, including on local law enforcement agencies. One resident of Kinney County, an area at the heart of OLS’s operations, [observed](#) that her local police focus on immigration enforcement instead of issues like domestic abuse that plague her community. She also witnessed local police engaging in dangerous and deadly high-speed car chases: “They are dedicating their every last resource to hunting migrants like wild game while my community suffers the consequences of neglect,” she [said](#). “This is the fire being fueled by Operation Lone Star.”

In 2023, as the Texas legislature was considering its 2024–2025 state budget, the proposed \$4.6 billion in funding for “border security” and OLS was put in sharp relief by a [policy and research organizer](#): Instead of bolstering OLS, \$3.9 million could be allocated for every school district in Texas, or \$500,000 for each school, or \$12,000 for every public school teacher, or more than \$15 million for mental health services in every county, or \$150,000 for each unhoused person in the state.

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Local advocates in border communities are also concerned that the state's out-of-control OLS spending is politically motivated and self-interested, at the expense of the dire needs of Texans. In an interview with CBS News, Amerika Garcia Grewal of the Eagle Pass Border Coalition [said](#):

*“People are coming at this, and they are saying-what can I get out of it? How can I improve my political ranking? [...] How can I get campaign donations? And they are not saying what is good for everybody. [...] **Roads all throughout Texas need attention[.] Our hospitals. Our infrastructure. Let's put the money towards that.**”*

In conversation with the ILRC, Garcia Grewal further noted:

*“Operation Lone Star was launched with the promise of enhancing border security; instead it's become a staggering example of government waste and misplaced priorities. **With a price tag approaching twelve billion, Operation Lone Star has failed to deliver on its core objectives.** Meanwhile border towns, like my hometown of Eagle Pass, continue to struggle with pressing issues such as inadequate healthcare, underfunded education, and crumbling infrastructure.”*

The ILRC published [A Report from the Texas Border](#) in June 2024, interviewing residents of Webb County, a border county in South Texas, about their urgent needs. One respondent stated:

*“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.”*

Even residents of border communities like Eagle Pass who were initially supportive of OLS have soured on the operation, as the reality of Governor Greg Abbott's campaign has impacted their lives. Residents [witness](#) National Guard members speeding through their properties, installing razor wire to cut off access to the Rio Grande, removing the bodies of drowned immigrants from the river, and touting sweeping OLS authority when questioned. The use of razor wire-which has mutilated immigrants since its installation-has even shocked local lawmakers. Eagle Pass's mayor, Rolando Salinas, Jr. has [revoked](#) his support for OLS, but only after he unilaterally agreed to declare certain parts of Eagle Pass private property so that state troopers could arrest immigrants for trespassing. Mayor Salinas eventually voted with the Eagle Pass City council to [reverse](#) his declaration. Unfortunately, DPS [seized](#) the private property at issue despite the city's wishes to “prevent immigrants from illegally crossing the Rio Grande into Texas.”



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Despite waning popularity and increased critiques from Texas legislators, there is no sign that Governor Greg Abbott intends to slow or halt OLS—even as Texans suffer from preventable harms and neglect under his administration.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

- The state of Texas should invest the \$11 billion and counting in taxpayer dollars spent on OLS into the Texas communities who need bolstered public services and infrastructure. Urgent community needs [include](#) improvements to water infrastructure, improvements in road paving and street lighting, improvements to the availability of public transit, updating and maintaining healthcare facilities and ensuring broad access to them, and the delivery of timely ambulance services, among others.
- The state of Texas should respond to the needs of local communities without requiring the acceptance of emergency declarations and local law enforcement cooperation with the OLS regime.
- The state of Texas must reimburse state agencies from which funding was diverted to support OLS operations since the inception of the operation, such as the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and Texas Health and Human Services.
- The state of Texas should pay reparations to victims of high-speed vehicle pursuits under OLS, and to victims of property damage caused by other OLS operations.

To learn more and get involved in ongoing advocacy efforts, please visit

<https://www.endlonestar.com/>.

All people in the United States, regardless of immigration status, have certain **rights and protections** under the U.S. Constitution.

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