

**El Paso Times**

## **Illegal border crossings down: More officers, border wall deter immigrants**

**By Carina Bergfeldt**  
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The 23-year-old man standing in front of agents at the Federal Detention Center is visibly upset.

His eyes are searching the building. He is taking a good look at everyone in the room. He has short, dark hair and is wearing jeans and a white T-shirt with a few smudges on it. Signals that he has been running -- and been caught.

The man, whose identity is being kept a secret by the U.S. Border Patrol, chose the wrong day to try and cross the border illegally.

While attempting to cross over the Rio Grande's dried-up riverbed, the man was apprehended just in front of the El Paso bus station minutes after entering the United States.

Now, he is at the Federal Detention Center. In a few hours, he will be transferred to the El Paso County Jail and eventually will meet with an immigration judge and be sent to prison for a week before being sent back to Mexico.

This same story happens to about 30 people every day in the El Paso border region.

"We used to catch a lot more of them. Five years ago, we would find about 120 people crossing the border illegally every day," Border Patrol Agent Jake Nunez said.

In total, 12,251 undocumented immigrants were apprehended by agents in 2010, compared with 122,000 in 2004. Nunez said that figure will most likely be below 10,000 for this fiscal year.

Nunez attributed this decline to having more agents on patrol (2,700 agents, which is double what the sector had in 2005), new advanced technology to monitor border incursions (seismic, magnetic and infrared sensors) and the recently finished border fence.

"This is a big reason as to why we have fewer crossings," Nunez said, glancing at the fence while standing next to the 18-foot-high structure.

"There's only a few places left now where there are none. In the end, everything will be sealed up but there are still some issues with the Water Commissioner's Office and some environmental groups," Nunez said.

"It has cost \$3.3 million per mile, but you can drive a car into it at 60 miles per hour, and it will still stand. To cut it open with a bolt cutter takes 30 minutes. By then, we'll be here. We are usually never more than 15 minutes away."

He stomps with his foot in the ground. Four minutes later, one of his colleague arrives at the scene to inspect activities that set off the alarm, even though Nunez already alerted the Border Patrol over the radio that there would be "10-12's" (suspect visitors) in the area.

The new officer who arrived at the scene declines a photographer's request to take his picture. He then says goodbye and leaves.

"We try not to show our faces. It is mostly because of what is going on over there," Nunez said, nodding his head toward Mexico.

"Some people hate us. We don't want to inform the drug smugglers and traffickers, whose businesses we're trying to ruin, of who we are. We receive some threats, of course."

For fiscal year 2010, Border Patrol agents were victims of 63 assaults -- most of them involving rock-throwing incidents. However, there have been more serious situations.

"Once I was alone at night and encountered five illegals," Nunez said. "I apprehended one of them, but while I was trying to handcuff him the other four were coming toward me from behind to save their friend.

"I had to inform them that I am allowed to use deadly force before they finally fled the scene. I don't know if I'd call it being scared, but I'll admit that I was ... nervous."

While the amount of undocumented immigrants in general is declining, one group is increasing: juveniles.

Border Patrol agents are seeing more young people involved in illegal crossings than ever before.

"It is not unusual for us anymore to apprehend boys, only 10 or 12 years old, out by themselves" Nunez said.

"Children are smaller, which means they're more difficult to find and they know the area. Most of them are simply trying to cross over to get a job, but we have noticed that cartels now use more and more children to help in smuggling both drugs and immigrants. It is very disturbing. They seem to think that we are not going to charge them, but we do."

In 2010, the sector that covers West Texas and Southern New Mexico seized illegal drugs worth more than \$70 million.

Several people arrested carrying drugs were under 18. Last year, the El Paso sector initiated criminal smuggling charges against 12 juveniles.

"There is one young boy that I still think about," Nunez said.

"He was only 17 when I apprehended him. He was under the influence of some drug, and he told me that he had been paid \$500 by one of the cartels to bring narcotics into the U.S. His girlfriend was pregnant and so he agreed. When I caught him, he had illegal drugs worth about \$60,000 to \$70,000 in his backpack."

Nunez pauses.

"I do think about him sometimes," he said. "I mean, he was just a kid, and he was going to have a kid of his own. And now, instead of being with the mother and the baby, first he's going to go to prison for smuggling, and then he'll be sent back to Mexico. And owing that much money to the cartels ... well, there is a big risk that he is going to pay with his life."

Nunez shrugs his shoulders.

"Of course it is sad, but it is part of my job to arrest these people," he said.

But only part of the job.

Sunday marked the 10th anniversary of 9/11. Nunez said agents' job descriptions have changed a lot since then.

"Before, our job was to locate illegal aliens, but ever since September 11th, our main objective is to look for terrorists in this area," Nunez said. "Everything else comes in second place. We are firstly and mostly supposed to look for anything related to terror organizations, people with links to al-Qaida, things like that."

In the 10 years that have passed, Nunez said, they have caught zero terrorists.

"Yes. So I guess our secondary task is our main job after all," Nunez said. "It's OK. As far as I am concerned, my job as a Border Patrol officer is to keep the people of the United States safe. And that's what I do."