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Data Biography

**Civilian Surveillance at the Border**

**Introduction**

A border studies scholar created the dataset Civilian Surveillance at the Border. It is a geographical and historical dataset of civilian outposts constructed along the U.S./Mexico border in New Mexico, Texas, and Arizona from the 1980s to 2022. The following is a data biography detailing how the dataset was created.

Who made the data?

A leading sociologist and border studies scholar collected the data for Civilian Surveillance at the Border. This scholar is primarily interested in international migration, discrimination, education, and Latin America, specifically Mexico. They have worked on other digital projects, such as the Latin American Migration Project and the Mexican Migration Project, for several years. These research projects look at migration flows originating in Latin American countries. Data for these projects were amassed through ethnosurvey questionaries applied in three stages.

The creator of this dataset was interested in plotting where civilian outposts were created along the border and determining how close the outposts were to U.S. Customs and Border Protection facilities. Perhaps the two most well-known civilian groups are the Minutemen Project and the United Constitutional Patriots. These groups comprised civilians who voluntarily and illegally patrolled the border themselves while armed with pistols, rifles, or guns. Therefore, this border studies scholar studied the timelines of some of the most well-known civilian groups, including the timelines of the Minutemen Project and the United Constitutional Patriots.

The primary motivation behind the creation of this dataset was to determine where, when, and how often civilian outposts popped up along the U.S./Mexico border. How close were these outposts to U.S. Customs and Border Patrol sectors? How many miles did these outposts stretch? Did a new outpost pop up after two, five, or 10 years?

Civilian outposts peaked in the early 2000s, but groups of vigilantes have operated at the U.S./Mexico border since the 1980s with the mission to stop undocumented migrants. However, a few groups have become infamous and were among the biggest vigilante groups. These groups are the Minutemen Project, Ranch Rescue, the Arizona Border Recon, and the United Constitutional Patriots.

The Minutemen Project was founded in 2004 and described itself as a “citizen’s Neighborhood Watch on our border.” In 2004, volunteers guarded a 23-mile stretch of the border and prevented migrants from crossing for 30 days. Volunteers slept in tents or homemade lean-tos and were armed with pistols, rifles, and revolvers. Many volunteers were retirees, veterans, or homemakers.

Ranch Rescue was established in the 1990s by a former Arizona Sheriff. At this time, the Ranch Rescue detained over 12,000 immigrants from 1996 to 2006. Volunteers would dress in uniforms resembling legitimate U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents and carry weapons. The Arizona Border Recon is similar to this group.

The United Constitutional Patriots took to detaining migrants every Tuesday in certain areas of New Mexico. Though these groups reached their zenith in the 2000s, the Minutemen and the United Constitutional Patriots have been active as recently as 2019. Both groups would “hold” and threaten migrants until the Border Patrol arrived.

Radar chart

Description automatically generated with medium confidenceWhat’s in the data?

Civilian Surveillance at the Border contains 300 data variables along the U.S./Mexico border. This number represents U.S. Customs and Border Protection processing centers and vigilante outposts.

This data represents information about outposts that were active at some point, including which civilian group or which individual created the outpost, its location, and its approximate dates of operation. Some outposts are no longer active, and that factor is represented in the data.

Figure 1: An example of what the dataset might look like visually. This map chart was created by Skye Gould and Andy Kiersz for Business Insider. The graph documents where along the border pedestrian fences, vehicle barriers, and walls have been erected.

As seen in the data, some outposts overlap each other; therefore, an outpost created by the Minutemen Project might now be manned by the United Constitutional Patriots or another vigilante group. The dataset contains geographical coordinates for these outposts that were geocoded.

How was the data created?

The creation of this dataset is broken into two stages: questionnaires and data processing.

The border studies scholar created a questionnaire detailing which outposts were active and how many members were in the civilian outposts during a certain year. They reached out to both the leaders of past and present surveillance groups and U.S. Customs and Border Protection sectors to determine and identify members of each organization. Once they had a list of individuals, they collected data from members of these groups.

A particularly important task in the questionnaire was to record the total number of outposts along the border, as well as the first and most recent outpost, the duration of the patrols or outposts, and the location of the outpost. The sources for these data variables have been individuals involved in patrolling the border and the interviewer themself.

Though locations were and are subject to change, the scholar did not capture these changes in the dataset. Some data could not be proven to be in one exact spot; some individuals would remember patrolling the border five miles west, and others would remember the location further east. Therefore, location changes are generalized within a certain radius.

Unless otherwise stated, state names are abbreviated (for example): NM, TX, and AZ. The civilian groups are also abbreviated: as MMP, UCP, ABR, and other prominent groups.

There are explanations for some data entries, based on which are active and not. Below is a list of some of the external controlled vocabulary:

* (ACT) – Active: groups and/or outposts marked with this determine whether or not the group or outpost is active as of 2022.
* (N.ACT) – Not Active: groups or outposts marked with this explanation detail that this group or outpost is not active as of 2022.
* (MMP) – Denotes if a specific variable was or is a part of the Minutemen Project.
* (UCP) – Denotes if a specific variable was or is a part of the United Constitutional Patriots.
* (ABR) – Denotes if a specific variable was or is a part of the Arizona Border Recon.
* (RR) – Denotes if a specific variable was or is a part of the Ranch Rescue.
* (ThreePercenters) – Denotes if a if a specific variable was or is a part of the Three Percenters, a group part of the Patriot Movement.
* (UA) – Denotes if a specific variable is unaffiliated with any big or bigger civilian groups.

Data Processing

To turn this data into a spatial dataset, the data had to go through the process of geocoding (an assignment of geographical coordinates to each civilian outpost). The scholar had graduate students help him turn this data into geographical coordinates.

First, scholars and graduate students attempted to take an outpost, the group it was affiliated with or created by, and the state it was located in and look for a corresponding match in geographical coordinates.

Then, the scholar created a radius for visualization purposes for outposts that may have been five or 10 miles to the west or to the east of a certain outpost. Therefore, even if individuals or Border Patrol agents could not remember the exact location of an outpost, the scholar could determine whether the outpost fell within a certain radius. Moreover, because of the specific locations of these outposts, it is relatively easy to determine that a border outpost in New Mexico is not likely located in a state geographically situated away from the border, i.e., Kansas.

How should I use the data?

Since this is just one dataset about the border, the data should be used with a pinch of salt. This data is not all-inclusive. Nor will it represent every civilian who has or is still patrolling the border. However, the data can help readers/viewers visualize outposts along the border and detail how often civilians decide to survey the border themselves.

A picture containing map

Description automatically generated

Figure 2: Another example of what the data could look like when visually presented. This graph shows how many migrant apprehensions took place in each major sector/state in 2011. This graph was found on the blog Musings on Maps.

The option to zoom in or out of the map can visually show how close outposts were to each other and to U.S. Customs and Border Patrol facilities. Similarly, the option to view the data in increments by selecting and deselecting map layers in the legend shows when outposts popped up and when they were dismantled. The years are in two-year increments since many vigilantes would patrol the border in monthly rather than yearly increments.

While each outpost is merely a dot on the map of the U.S., that dot says nothing about how many people were involved in the group. To see how many individuals were involved in each civilian patrol group, it would be helpful to read the data/documentation as well as view the visualization of that data.