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Southwest Border Patrol Agent Perceptions of Job-Related Threats and Dangers

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Heidi Hamburger

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Southwest Border Patrol Agent Perceptions of Job-Related Threats and Dangers

by

Heidi Hamburger

MAS, University of Denver, 2011

BS, Fashion Institute of Technology, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy & Administration

Walden University

November 2018

Abstract

The U.S. Southwest Border is associated with highly politicized topics, yet the lived experience of Border Patrol agents is not one of them. Border Patrol agents face risks to their personal safety and security as they attempt to safeguard the national security of the United States while implementing the policies of their organization, which are sometimes at odds with the beliefs and expectations of agents in the field. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore perceptions and lived experiences related to the threats and dangers that Border Patrol agents face as they protect the U.S. Southwest Border. The theoretical framework for this study involved McGregor's organizational behavior theory, Janis's groupthink theory, and the bureaucratic dissonance phenomenon. Data collected through semistructured interviews of 11 former Border Patrol agents with direct experience working along the U.S. Southwest Border were inductively coded and subjected to a thematic analysis procedure. On-duty risks, emotional toll, lack of community support, and separation from family are among the stressors for members of this profession. The key findings regarding threats and dangers included: perceived manpower shortage, fear of assaults, the very nature of the job, political and presidential administration conflicts, and lack of mobility (location and career advancements). The recommendations call for greater policy-and decision-maker understanding of the stresses and conflicts facing Border Patrol agents, which could effect positive social change by encouraging policies and regulations to improve job safety and security, and to inform training programs. The promulgation of the findings may contribute to improvements of the morale and safety of Border Patrol agents and enhance security of the United States.

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Dedication

This dedication is to my marvelous husband, life partner, and best friend for his unwavering support and faithful encouragement; I am forever grateful. I am incredibly blessed not to have only met a perfect gentleman, but to have been able to marry him, twice, and I would do it again; this one is for you love. Throughout this academic journey, I lost two members of my family: my grandmother Leona, the unwavering matriarch, and my father-in-law, who encouraged me to conquer insurmountable obstacles, both of whom were devout Christians and consummate examples of leadership. To all three of you, without whom I would not be where I am today, thank you from the bottom of my heart. For my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who has provided me with an incredible amount of tenacity from start to finish throughout this academic journey and most importantly throughout my life.

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Lastly, I would like to thank the border patrol agents who, on a daily basis, put on their green uniforms in support of the national security of the United States. A special thank you to the former agents who participated in this study, for sharing your experiences in support of academia and this study. It is with great hope and anticipation that this study will lead to positive social change, and I have you to thank. Without you, this study would not have been possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

My dissertation focuses on the lived experience of Border Patrol agents and the threats and dangers they face while working and living in the Southwest Border region between Mexico and the United States. I used a phenomenological approach in exploring the organizational culture of the Border Patrol, the bureaucratic elements in the working environment, and stressors encountered by agents during their everyday activities at work and off duty.

This research may enrich the lives of agents as well as those living in the community they patrol via policy changes and the recognition of dangers and obstructions faced by agents, residents, and decision makers in regard to the agents' duties. This study is relevant because there is limited research that explores agents' life experiences and perceptions of working in the Southwest Border region. While there is literature that addresses common law enforcement stressors, limited research exists that speaks to the unique stressors and threats faced by Border Patrol agents.

There are several positive social change implications that may result from the dissemination of my research. Positive shifts in the organizational culture may result as decision makers and administrators consider the results of the study in relation to their own work activities and make future policy decisions that could improve the working conditions and lives of agents. The results and recommendations, once considered by officials, could potentially have an impact on how agents in the field interact with leadership, arrestees, and members of the community. Thus, the recognition and

identification of threats, dangers, and acute stress faced by agents could positively impact policy development and improve the organization's efficacy. New policies and programs that address the consequences of stress, isolation, and dysfunctional organizational culture and leadership could positively affect the health and well-being of agents and their families. Chapter 1 contains subsections addressing the study's background, problem statement, purpose, research question, theoretical foundations, nature, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations, as well as the study's potential significance.

Background of the Study

The threats and dangers that law enforcement professionals face both on and off the job are not always visible publicly. Since 9/11, the U.S. Border Patrol has gone through changes, including reorganization and growth in numbers of agents employed. The U.S. Border Patrol, founded on May 28, 1924, was placed under the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2002, along with 21 other entities (DHS, 2015). Due to the increased demand for safeguarding the national security of the United States, manpower has grown to approximately 20,000 agents, doubling the Patrol since 2004 (Farley, 2011). Agents are known to face many personal and professional conflicts and may experience high-speed chases with smugglers, armed bandit confrontations, and encounters with corpses rotting in the heat of the desert (Blaine, 2008). While illegal immigration is a highly politicized topic, the media may not cover issues that pertain to the lived experience of border patrol agents who are assigned to the U.S. Southwest Border.

The security threats that Border Patrol agents experience while working along the U.S. Southwest Border are not limited to those covered in the media. In addition to organizational obstacles, there are external stressors and dangers that agents encounter while off duty. The profession of law enforcement lends itself to a set of unique challenges and stressors. Woody (2006) detailed inherent issues with the career of law enforcement officer (LEO), illuminating the culture surrounding the job and ways in which stress can be mitigated. More importantly, Woody noted the social stigma felt by some members of the LEO community in relation to reaching out for psychological help and offered ways to maneuver around the stigma. Murphy (2008) initially suggested that a stressful occupation such as law enforcement could be measured best through quantitative analysis, specifically an anthropological approach. This approach allowed Murphy to work hand in hand with law enforcement professionals to better understand their points of view in order to best interpret findings. Later, Murphy found through his experiences that a quantitative approach would not properly measure the reality of what LEOs faced and that a qualitative approach would be a more all-encompassing methodology. With an internal perspective, he recognized that issues such as transformational leadership and emotional labor had to be addressed. Addressing these concerns can offer much-needed insight into the complexities of LEO careers and how to enhance the overall organizational environment, specifically that of Border Patrol agents.

Based on a review of pre-9/11 Border Patrol policy, Barry (2011) suggested that agents along the U.S. Southwest Border have been predominantly focused on and trained for illegal immigration incursions and narcotic seizures, rather than terrorist threats.

Barry further mentioned that illegal immigrants from countries of interest are apprehended regularly by Border Patrol agents. The daily threats that agents face occur not only at work; agents face threats outside work alone or with their families. Although it is unlikely, Barry (2011) posited that it is possible for terrorists to sneak across the Southwest Border. However, Barry noted that it is more likely that terrorists would try tactics similar to those in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, using visas and entering via an airport.

In law enforcement, stress and burnout are serious concerns. It is essential for LEO leaders to know how to guide employees through trying times in order to not only maintain organizational effectiveness, but also ensure the safety and security of officers. Due to limited resources available pertaining specifically to the stressors and dangers faced in the lived experience of Border Patrol agents, this study provides keen insights for scholars and policy makers alike.

In the summer of 2014, there was a rare influx of illegal immigrant entrants along the Southwest Border. Jeh Johnson, the former Secretary of DHS, indicated that during the summer of 2014, there were an unprecedented number of illegal immigrant unaccompanied juveniles who entered the United States via the Southwest Border who were attempting to reunite with family members (Homeland Security, 2014). Johnson claimed that the intention of these juveniles was to gain a better life in the United States and that they were in search of family members. Publicly, the legal status of the parents and/or family members remained unknown. Given the organizational culture and bureaucratic inertia of the Border Patrol, obligating agents to reunite apprehended juveniles with their illegal immigrant family members in the United States could have

negatively impacted morale and overall job satisfaction. Through interviews, agents were asked how the organizational culture was influenced based on these types of circumstances and if this impacted agents' stressors and ability to do their jobs.

Bureaucratic inertia and organizational culture play a key role in stress that employees endure in fulfilling the requirements of their jobs. The bureaucracy in the Border Patrol and its overall culture may have an impact on agents' overall sentiments toward their work experiences. Agents may claim that policy flaws are why morale and retention rates suffer (Monitor Editorial Board, 2016). For example, Shadwick (2016) discussed a mandated release protocol for criminal illegal immigrants postarrest and observed that the "notice to appear" is often a "notice to disappear," suggesting that once released, defendants will not return to court. Agents felt that risking their lives at work only to see the release of those whom they arrested hampered morale and overall motivation among the ranks. This is an example of the potential complexities and contradictions that agents face on the job that cause stress and resentment. The sources of these frustrations, if better understood, could play a role in creating policy and practices that improve the personal safety of agents and enhance national defense.

Bureaucratic inertia and the organizational culture of the Border Patrol can have a direct impact on an agent's lived experience. It is important to address the psychology behind employee behaviors and emotions. Hulin and Judge (2004) created a variety of methods and models to identify information pertaining to workers' behaviors and attitudes. In their study, it became evident that employees' attitudes about their positions can have a dramatic impact on many elements of their jobs, as well as on the organization

in which they work. The relationship between employer and employee can be fragile, and this fragility may be amplified when employees put their lives on the line everyday when they wear the uniform and badge and carry a firearm. Organizational commitment is described as employees' psychological relationships with their work organization (Allen, 2007). This quality of this relationship is important not only to the employee, but to the employer as well. Employees' commitment, overall work attitude, and job satisfaction should be analyzed within the context of their organizational commitment and culture. This type of job satisfaction, or lack thereof, among agents could ultimately affect their organizational culture and influence their working environment.

While limited research is available that specifically addresses the lived experience of agents in terms of threats to homeland security and their personal safety, there are studies that have depicted a day's work in the field. Rivera (2015) provided a voice for Border Patrol agents through an ethnographic study depicting the reality of an agent's life and job obligations. Rivera noted that the majority of society is unaware of the emotional turmoil, conflicts surrounding organizational politics and job expectations, and overall challenges to self-worth that agents experience. Rivera found that agents provided unique insights into the legal and moral obligations of their job.

This phenomenological study is needed to address a gap in the current understanding of the phenomenon reflected in the knowledge base. Possible social implications from this research include the improvement of homeland security policy and administration and improvement in the well-being and retention of agents who have the task of safeguarding the nation.

Problem Statement

U.S. Border Patrol agents encounter homeland security and personal threats along the U.S. Southwest Border and face serious physical risks, assignments to remote locations, and separation from friends and families. Dangers and risks include direct personal violence, exposure to contagious diseases, inclement weather, inhospitable terrain and environments (Rivera, 2015), inadequate or faulty equipment, and low morale and burnout (Hohmann, 2014). The attrition rate in 2008 among newly hired agents was at 29.6%; on average, new agents who leave their positions do so within the first 18 months on the job (Spagat, 2008). Ultimately, consequences exist for unrealistic perspectives in policies regarding the risks and dangers that agents face that can be measured in potential costs in lives and taxpayer dollars.

Public perceptions, however, are influenced by the mass media and Hollywood, where agents are often portrayed in drug interdiction activities or illegal immigration enforcement. Their primary official mission, however, is to secure the border from the incursion of terrorists and the transport of terrorist weapons into the United States (U.S. Border Patrol, 2013). Even though agents have been asked to defend the United States from terrorists and terrorist weapons, it may be that most agents typically encounter neither of those two scenarios. In fact, the threats and immediate dangers that agents face are not generally those known to the public, and are perhaps not even known to policy makers.

Although some of my evidence is personal and anecdotal, I can attest that agents are at times disgruntled, emotionally depressed, and discouraged. Having spent more than

5 years along the Southwest Border as an agent, I am equipped to make general statements regarding agents' potential experiences. Agents may feel alienated in their work. After putting their lives at risk, they may question why they should continue to do their jobs effectively when they perceive that their leaders and the public are not supportive (Monitor Editorial Board, 2016; Rivera, 2015). It makes good public-policy sense to arrive at a deeper understanding of the perceptions of agents in terms of how they see the threats to their personal safety as well as what they perceive to be threats to broader national security.

There is minimal scholarly research, except from outside the United States (Chhabra & Chhabra, 2013; Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2006), on the lived experience of border patrol agents. Limited scholarly research exists about the agents who serve along the southwestern border of the United States. In order to best comprehend the perceived threats and dangers along the Southwest Border, it is reasonable to ask the men and women given the task of safeguarding it. A phenomenological study is a logical methodological approach to exploring this topic. Therefore, my research focused on Border Patrol agents who had more than 1 year of experience (within the last 3-5 years) and their perceptions of personal, organizational, and national security threats and their effects on their physical, emotional, and psychological health and well-being.

Purpose of the Study

Due to the nature of the job, agents' duties include the interception of illicit activities; however, agents' responsibilities are not limited to this. In addition to complexities on the job, agents experience secondary issues based on the political

leadership within the Border Patrol. Agents face a variety of stressors, including isolation from their families and the cyclical political reorientation of organizational priorities, objectives, and goals that shift with different administrations. These issues raise critical questions relating to the health and retention of agents (Hohmann, 2014), national security concerns that require exploration and greater scrutiny. In this study, I examined agents' perceptions of the risks and dangers they faced, potentially clarifying understudied portions of this topic, in turn providing a proper basis from which administrators and Congress can make informed decisions. I explored those perceptions, specifically in the context of groupthink and bureaucratic dissonance, in an attempt to better understand agents' lived experiences. The findings from this research could result in positive social change if policy makers and administrators have a more complete understanding of how to improve policy implementation and efficacy.

Positive social change may result from this study through the identification of unexpected perceived threats and dangers that agents face, which could ultimately influence policy and administrative decision making. Policy that reflects a more realistic understanding of agents' lived experiences may improve quality of life for agents and their families, as well as improve the safety of Border Patrol agents. This may in turn make the agency more effective in carrying out its law enforcement duties and homeland security mandates.

Research Question

The central research question was the following: How do Border Patrol agents who work along the U.S. Southwest Border perceive threats and dangers to their personal safety and to homeland security?

Theoretical Foundation

Theory is essential to help researchers frame how to best understand the phenomenon under study. The research was explored via the theoretical lenses of groupthink and bureaucratic dissonance. These two theories were suitable for examining the lived experience of Border Patrol agents due to the unique nature of this study and the limited research available in this area.

Identifying the constructs and principles within organizational behavior theory, specifically bureaucracy and groupthink, provides a lens to view the complexities of an organizational culture such as the Border Patrol. McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y focus on employee and management relationships and not the agency or organization. McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y oppose some of Weber's six basic principles. These theories are lenses that explain the phenomenon—in this case, the diverse experiences of the agents. The theoretical frameworks outline the implications for social change and offer insight into how theory plays out in the inner workings the Border Patrol's organizational culture, and how bureaucratic inertia plays a key role within its makeup. I examined bureaucratic dissonance through the organizational behavioral lens/theory.

Bureaucratic dissonance, a phenomenon within organizational theory, is commonly found in government entities. Weber (2009) is known for his theoretical

approach toward bureaucracy, noting six basic principles found within a functioning design. Du Gay (2002) noted that Weber's six basic principles are organization by specialty, hierarchical authority, management by rules, impersonal relationships, a focused mission, and employment based on specific qualifications. One element that impacts Border Patrol agents is the formal hierarchical structure principle. According to Shafritz and Ott (2015), within a bureaucracy, there are levels where decisions are made outside of subordinates' input; it is here that Border Patrol agents are adversely affected. These characteristics of bureaucratic dissonance mirror similar constraints found within groupthink, in that agents feel unable to voice their opinions to the appropriate senior staff member due to communication constraints. These potential constraints and lack of communication lead to the development of impractical and unstable policy as it relates to agents' safety and security.

Groupthink, often used within law enforcement entities, has been shown to have both positive and negative effects. Keebler (2015) suggested that the constructs of groupthink environments could wreak havoc on an organization's productivity and its overall success. Keebler also noted that a leader's responsibility plays a key role in maintaining the organizational culture and an environment where employees feel comfortable enough to share their opinions and ideas. Groupthink can be seen within terrorist entities as well. Tsintsadze-Maass and Maass (2014) suggested that groupthink has played a key role in the success of terrorist radicalization due to hierarchical constructs in the decision-making process. Miranda and Saunders (1995) illustrated groupthink as a plague for all policy-making groups and identified a "group support

system” that combated the constraints of groupthink. These examples of groupthink and its influences within diverse organizations provide insight into how vast its impacts can be. The Border Patrol, as a bureaucratic organization with hierarchical constructs, occasionally suffers from the negative aspects of the groupthink phenomenon.

Suggestions from agents in various levels of management may not reach the appropriate decision makers due to limits within lines of communication, thus negatively impacting the organizational culture.

Nature of the Study

This phenomenological study explored the lived experience of agents who had worked for the U.S. Border Patrol in the Southwest Border region. To better understand their experiences, I conducted interviews with former Border Patrol agents who had intimate and direct working experience. My research explored the lived experience of the participants and how it affected their lives both on and off the job, specifically in relation to the threats and dangers that they faced. The data collection strategy included audiotaped telephone interviews of 9-12 agents. Organizational behavior theory, groupthink, and bureaucratic dissonance were the lenses through which this phenomenon was explored.

Assumptions

The following assumptions are important to the overall research integrity of the study. Assumptions can be found in the methodology chosen for this study as well as in the conceptual framework. It was assumed that participating agents were truthful and forthcoming about their experiences. It was also assumed that agents answered interview

questions based on their own experience, and not based on stories of fellow agents.

Creswell (2009) described a qualitative approach as best being presented through the researcher, who establishes the significance of a phenomenon through the perspective of participants. I assumed that the former agent participants wanted to share their experiences yet for confidentiality purposes were not allowed to discuss certain encounters or exposures.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study encompassed an exploration of the lived experience of Border Patrol agents along the U.S. Southwest Border, specifically pertaining to threats and dangers to Border Patrol agents and overall homeland security. I selected agents with at least 1 year of experience within the past 3-5 years for interviews. These constraints were specific because agents with less than 1 year of service would not have enough time posttraining to have their own individual experiences. Selecting agents who worked along the Southwest Border within the past 3-5 years from the time when the interviews were conducted allowed for a timeline. This timeline is important from a policy and organizational perspective; considering administration and organizational changes, this means that the participants worked in similar timelines. I chose this study not only due to its uniqueness, but also for the opportunity to explore agents' lived experiences.

An area of delimitation included focusing on agents who had worked along the Southwest Border, not the Northern Border, in that lived experience could vary due to location differences and stressors faced. Because I interviewed agents who had experience along the Southwest Border, there was potential for obtaining uniquely

informative data specific to that region. In order to explore what agents face in the field, this phenomenological study allowed for interviews to address these issues, including the impacts of organizational culture and overall familial isolation. Using interview data from my participants was a delimitation; however, the focus of this study was the experiences of the specific agents interviewed. Organizational behavior theory was used to better understand the phenomenon being researched. The transferability of the results of my research could impact Border Patrol organizational culture, agents' overall safety, and/or policy changes. Results of the research based on experiences along the Southwest Border may not be transferable to coastal and northern borders. The small sample size limits transferability; however, in-depth information from this phenomenological research could inform future quantitative studies, which also appear to be needed.

Limitations

The type of study and the research questions to be explored could be seen as natural limitations within the research process. A phenomenological research approach is known for its limitations in reliability and challenges with data interpretation when compared to other methodologies. I chose phenomenology for its constructs in exploring lived experiences. According to Patton (1999), limitations are equally important as quality and credibility when addressing the special intent within qualitative inquiry. Within this research, while the Border Patrol as a whole is responsible for nearly 6,000 miles of land borders, including the U.S. Southwest Border with Mexico and the Northern Border between the United States and Canada, there are an additional 2,000 miles of coastal waters that are also manned. Future research could augment this study

due to the variations in agents' experiences along different Borders and coastlines throughout the country.

Asking the right questions could be seen as a limitation. As the researcher, I can assure the reader that the agents interviewed had the opportunity not only to answer interview questions, but also to elaborate if they felt that it was important. Open-ended, semistructured interview questions are an essential element of a phenomenological study so as to understand the lived experience of the participants of the phenomenon at a deeper level. Ultimately, my research was limited to the perceptions of agents based upon their individual experiences along the U.S. Southwest Border, in that their duties and responsibilities varied greatly from those of agents working in other locations away from the border. According to the U.S. Border Patrol (2012), it is along the U.S. Southwest Border that the majority of apprehensions/arrests, drug seizures, assaults, and other illegal activities occur.

Given that the gap in research is both qualitative and quantitative, I chose this approach due to the potential for more in-depth findings. Although surveys could have provided insight into the agents' lived experience, interviews allowed for follow-up questions and elaboration on any unclear details provided by the participants, facilitating a more robust analysis.

Significance of the Study

The importance of this research resides in its provision of information that identifies a gap between policy and field experience. This research unveiled the deeper reality of the lived experience agents' lives and security risks they face daily while on

and off the job. The research provides insight for scholars and recommendations for policy makers when considering future policies and regulations. An insider's perspective could provide a conduit by which policy and field implementation can become collaborative for not just the agents, but also the organizational border patrol culture as a whole, thus creating the potential for positive social change.

My research could have a significant social change impact, if there are important insights and lessons to be learned that could be implemented by leaders and decision makers. My research focused on the lived experience of agents and probed the boundaries of their experience with job-related stress. Better understanding of those stressors could help save money and lives, such as by informing efforts to address and lower suicide rates among agents (Vanderpool, 2010). This research study is significant, given that few studies have addressed the implications of the dangers and potential threats perceived by agents along the Southwest Border. The limited research conducted on agents has generally consisted of ride-along/job-shadowing studies. Scholarly research specific to the lived experiences of agents with a focus on personal and homeland security has yet to be published.

Agents receive internal surveys from their agency looking for feedback. Agents may claim to be reluctant in completing these surveys; confidentiality is questionable because surveys are sent to agents' personal email inboxes. In a border violence survey conducted by Osowski (2014), most of the agents interviewed indicated that the federal government was perceived to lack adequate manpower and weapons for agents to defend themselves in the event of Mexican drug cartel retaliation. In recent years, the mass

media have covered smuggler vehicle accidents, cross-border rock throwing, and shootings as common dangers that agents encounter, yet the media have failed to address existential threats to the United States. Fluctuating political environments regarding immigration and strengthening the border, economic driving forces, and international developments may all have an impact on agents' lived experience.

Summary

The overall environment of U.S. national security has changed as global threats have transitioned. In the era of increased terrorist attacks, DHS, specifically the Border Patrol, has been tasked with the primary responsibility of securing the United States from terrorists and terrorists' weapons. Due to the nature of their job, Border Patrol agents face dangers on as well as off duty. In the background section in this chapter, I discussed the wide array of threats and dangers that agents face. The problem statement elaborated on the focus of the study, identifying problems and the reason that this research was necessary.

The purpose of my research was to identify what Border Patrol agents believe to be the biggest threats to national security and their personal safety. The research question, theoretical framework, and nature of the study alike provide a foundation on which the reader can anticipate the overarching theme of the research and how the methodology and theories apply specifically to the agents' lived experience. Assumptions, delimitations, and limitations were addressed. The sections within this chapter on the significance of the research and implications for social change provide a connection to the following chapters, justifying why this study is significant and unique. It is through the lived

experience of Border Patrol agents that future research and policy can be impacted and ultimately augmented.

This phenomenological study, which generated data through open-ended interviews with former Border Patrol agents who had firsthand experience along the U.S. Southwest Border, may allow scholars and policy makers alike an insider's perspective on the reality of these threats and dangers. Dissemination of the study, its results, and recommendations could have an impact on public policy and decision making, which might help to improve organizational communication between agency leadership and staff. In Chapter 2, I explore the literature and identify a gap in available research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The dissertation explores the perceptions of the dangers and national security threats posed by the porous border shared between the United States and Mexico. Daily, border patrol agents have the task of safeguarding the Southwest Border against illegal incursions, often of an unknown nature. Annually, thousands of undocumented illegal immigrants are apprehended attempting to enter the United States undetected (Office of Immigration Statistics, 2014). Border Patrol agents have a variety of complex job responsibilities and must contend with isolation and lack of local and familial support due to geographic isolation and the nature of the job. Some Border Patrol stations along the Southwest Border are located in small towns in the open desert; these locations are known for illegal incursions due to their secluded and isolated nature (International Boundary and Water Commission, n.d.). Moreover, agents' personal safety and security are at risk as bureaucratic inertia, policies, and overall organizational culture arguably have an impact on their wellbeing. In Chapter 2, I discuss the literature search strategy, the theoretical foundation of my research, and the literature surrounding the phenomenon.

Literature Search Strategy

I used an array of keywords in a multitude of databases while searching for pertinent, timely, and peer-reviewed articles that comprised the knowledge base of my research study. It appeared that there was limited scholarly literature that addressed border patrol agents' perceptions about threats to homeland security and their personal safety in the field. The body of knowledge within these topics was explored by accessing

a variety of research through the use of Google Scholar, legal databases, EBSCOhost, and Walden Library databases, as well as the International Security and Counter Terrorism Reference Center, Military, and Government Collections. Homeland Security Digital was also used in this research. Multidisciplinary database searches included Thoreau Multi-Database Search, ProQuest Dissertations, and WorldCat.

Keywords included *United States Southwest Border, Border Patrol agents, national security threat, isolation, illegal incursions, personal safety, bureaucratic inertia, policies, organizational culture, terrorism, infiltration, lived experience, terrorism infiltration Southwest Border, job satisfaction, turnover intent correction officers, organizational commitment, unaccompanied illegal immigrant juveniles, dirty job, Southwest Border lifestyle, conflicts in law enforcement, internal and external pressures on law enforcement, organizational leadership, law enforcement stressors, leadership methods law enforcement and military, coping mechanisms law enforcement and corrections officers, organizational stressors and culture, bureaucratic inertia, family stressors of LEOs, DHS policy implementation, motivating LEOs, GAO, ISIS in Mexico, Brian Terry, border security, Fast and Furious, got away accountability, phenomenological approach, and lived experience of LEOs.*

It was my aim to contribute to this literature by exploring the lived experience of Border Patrol agents. The literature review provides context and relevant existing research, which may help readers to better understand the phenomenon of interest in this study—the lived experience and perceptions of threats and dangers, both to the field agent's person and to national security.

Theoretical Foundation

This study focused on exploring the lived experience and perceptions of the threats and dangers that Border Patrol agents face when working along the Southwest Border. Bureaucratic inertia seems to play a key role in how hierarchical mandates may not logistically align with the reality of fieldwork, including the threats and dangers that agents face (National Border Patrol Council, 2011). The theories discussed are tied to the problem and are best suited to address the phenomenon.

Organizational behavior theory embodies principles that remain applicable to today's work culture. McGregor (1960) established organizational behavior theory as a way to better explain organizational behavior and human nature when people work in groups. Within the organizational behavior theory stream, there are several related theories that focus on understanding workplace behavior. To better understand the phenomenon of Border Patrol agents' perceived threats and experience, my study focused on the theories of bureaucratic dissonance and groupthink. McGregor suggested that every managerial act can be explained by an actual theory made up of hypotheses, generalization, and assumptions. If McGregor's perspective on managerial acts is accurate, this may help to explain any potential complexities found in the organizational culture of the Border Patrol's senior staff members. Furthermore, McGregor also suggested that it is of fundamental importance that a manager be competent in a specific arena in order to effectively manage the professionals within it. The issue of effective management is significant within this phenomenological study, in that Border Patrol agents may perceive that they are more competent and informed compared with senior

management and leadership, thus leading to contrary, insubordinate behavior and lack of confidence in leadership.

Bureaucratic dissonance and groupthink theory were used to understand the widening disparity between reality and what leadership believes it to be. A major theoretical proposition provided a lens to understand policy implementation and the reality that agents face on the job. This included the assumption that Border Patrol agents would be able to discuss the threats and dangers that they may have faced while identifying potential policy mishaps.

There are many complexities in organizational behavior that scholars attempt to use theories such as groupthink to explain. Within human resource theory and organizational behavior theory, groupthink, referred to as the “for consensus at any cost” approach, best illustrates the suspected issues surrounding the potential threats and dangers identified in this study (Shafritz et al., 2015). A basic tenet of groupthink involves maintaining a high level of loyalty by committing oneself to extant policies, regardless of potential negative impacts or consequences. It is important to use the theories that are the “best fit” in order to understand groupthink and assure that they are applicable to a particular study such as my research.

Groupthink theory may have a reputation based on national historic events, yet its applications are vast and may often be misunderstood. One historical event used to illustrate groupthink theory is President Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs crisis, seen as a failure stemming from a lack of actual critical thinking; the outcome proved how groupthink can greatly impact a society and countries (Raven, 1998). Groupthink is often seen within

government and military settings. Janis (2015) described groupthink as having eight primary symptoms: invulnerability, rationale, morality, stereotypes, pressure, self-censorship, unanimity, and mind-guards. Janis's description of groupthink theory provides insight into why and how decisions are made; this may provide a lens through which to better understand the dynamics of Border Patrol culture.

Border Patrol agents may find themselves in dangerous predicaments based on policy makers' inability to understand what these agents face along the border and creation of policy based on a groupthink rationale. Groupthink's applicability within the Border Patrol can be seen through the Patrol's hierarchical structure and the flow of communication within it (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2015). Furthermore, if direct leadership and other senior staff members operate under groupthink, the dangers and threats faced will remain unchanged and potentially grow in the future, depending upon rank-and-file opposition.

Despite the fact that groupthink persists and continues to plague organizations and leadership, researchers continue to try to understand and find solutions to groupthink behavior. Janis (2015) suggested that groupthink continues to exist for several reasons, positing that one of the most common reasons is loyalty. This type of loyalty refers to upholding policies that the group already had in place even if in unfavorable circumstances and outcomes. Rose (2011) suggested that groupthink is a system in which participants agree with leadership for personal benefit. One reason that groupthink theory may continue to thrive within the Border Patrol is agents' desire for career advancement. Not raising objections or perhaps praising ideas posed by supervisors or senior staff

members could guarantee a higher degree of favor and offer potential career advancement.

Identifying the constructs and principles within organizational theory, specifically bureaucracy and groupthink, provides a robust perspective into the complexities of an organizational culture. Parker (2009) analyzed the application of groupthink within weak and strong members. Parker concluded that weak members suppressed opinions if they thought that other members would disagree with them, whereas strong members stated their opinions regardless. In my research, agents were asked if they believed that groupthink played a role within their organization. This type of study, using the theoretical lenses of organizational theory, groupthink, and bureaucratic dissonance, may help to provide readers with insight into the phenomenon. Ultimately, this study was about discovering new knowledge. These theories were used to provide a lens to better understand the phenomenon. These theories aided in the exploration of the lived experience of Border Patrol agents who worked along the U.S. Southwest Border. The Border Patrol organizational culture can be better understood through the lens of organizational theory, groupthink theory, and bureaucratic dissonance.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Potential challenges that agents face and key concepts addressed in the literature review include the following: foreign analogs, the need to always be on alert, politics and bureaucratic inertia, psychology of the job, and stressors of the job.

Foreign Analogs

Border policing is not a concept unique to the United States, but rather a global concern with many complicated facets. The Israeli border and its personnel present a different international dynamic, yet similarities exist in the experiences of border security officials in Israel and the United States, such as high levels of stress and burnout. According to Malach-Pines and Keinan (2006), although the Israeli Border Police (MAGAV) has faced conflict situations, shown through high levels of stress and increased rates of burnout, job satisfaction has remained high because there is a level of fulfillment among field agents. Malach-Pines and Keinan sought to address stressors faced by MAGAV agents, describing it as an understudied area in research. Similar to that of Border Patrol agents, while LEO stress is a saturated topic, stress and burnout are two areas of similarity between both entities.

Increased levels of stress among law enforcement officials can be understood as normal, yet their effects are not often revealed. Malach-Pines and Keinan (2006) identified three general areas of stress for MAGAV officers in Israel: physiological, emotional, and behavioral. MAGAV officers differed from U.S. Border Patrol agents in that their roles were multipurpose, including police duties along with border security tasks. MAGAV used tactics similar to those of the Israeli army, yet they also had policing responsibility. Malach-Pines and Keinan surmised that the top four stressors among MAGAV included low and inadequate salaries, lack of means to adequately do their job, responsibility overload, and slow promotion potential. After riding along with Border Patrol agents while on-duty, Rivera (2004) surmised that the significant stressors unique

to their job were an agent's likelihood of exposure to combative individuals, guns, and narcotics. While MAGAV and U.S. Border Patrol roles and responsibilities may differ in terms of authority, similarities may be found in the fact that both groups are law enforcement agents working within border regions.

Although MAGAV officers identified varying degrees of stress, they also reported high levels of job satisfaction. They reported their priorities as saving lives, the security of Israel, and preventing terrorists from entering their country (Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2006). The relationship between the level of job satisfaction and the diversity of job responsibilities could mirror the experience of Border Patrol agents.

The MAGAV officers were interviewed at a time of peak stress during the height of a violent Palestine uprising. While the situations and lived experiences described by the MAGAV officers may differ from what Border Patrol agents face, there seem to be correlations, in that both groups are LEOs contending with similar stressors, including rock throwers/attacks, coping needs, and behavioral attitudes. Low salary, responsibility overload, and lack of resources to appropriately conduct their job responsibilities were indicated as primary stressors for MAGAV officers (Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2006). Similarly, Border Patrol agents may indicate a lack of resources to appropriately conduct their jobs. For example, Elbel (2014) noted that due to lack of adequate resources, Border Patrol agents face additional dangers from faulty equipment. Even though these LEOs are on opposite sides of the globe, they share similarities within their lived experiences while being tasked with safeguarding their nations.

Studies that address the lived experience of an underacknowledged group can provide intrinsic insight for other groups to learn from. In an effort to analyze a broader range of border security issues, Chhabra and Chhabra (2013) concluded that among the Border Security Force in India, personnel face stress and even potential homicides due to their working conditions. Similar to the potential working conditions of U.S. Border Patrol agents, the Indian Border Security Force face long working hours, lack of certain accommodations, management issues, and physical separation from their families (Chhabra & Chhabra, 2013). When considering the roles and responsibilities of border officials globally, it may not be immediately evident that one should consider the impacts that familial separation can have on a person in a dangerous job, yet this impact is noteworthy. While U.S. Border Patrol agents and Indian Border Security may face many different stressors within their line of work on different continents, the similarities in their experiences are worth noting.

There are many stressors that law enforcement officers across the globe can face within their professions. Although Chhabra and Chhabra's works were published in 2013, it is important to note that their actual study was conducted between 2008 and 2009. At that time, 100% of the Indian Border Security personnel were men, thus differing from the U.S. Border Patrol, which employs both men and woman. Chhabra and Chhabra (2013) noted that the primary stressors specific to the Indian Border Security included factors intrinsic to their responsibilities; their role within the organization; relationships or lack thereof at work; lack of career development; organizational structure and climate, including low levels of job satisfaction; and organizational interface with the outside,

including familial issues. Within the plethora of similarities, herein lies one stark difference between MAGAV of Israel and the Indian Border Security personnel; MAGAV agents expressed high levels of job satisfaction due to understanding that their role was necessary and impacted the overall safety and security of their nation (Malach-Pines & Keinan, 2006). Participants from this study were asked about their levels of job satisfaction or lack thereof to better understand their lived experience, based on the complaints about limited transferability, this seems to be a trend among border security professionals globally.

The Israel and India research demonstrates the degree of complexity of and variations between border officials, jobs, and border concerns globally. Adams (2016) discussed several different land borders, including the following: a 200km border from the Gaza Strip to the Red Sea between Israel and Egypt, an 1800km fence between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, a 4000km border between India and Bangladesh, the border between Kenya and Somalia, and Hungary's fenced borders with Serbia and Turkey. Border similarities and differences demonstrate the potential for diversity within border security tactics and personnel globally. Adams reviewed these international borders to learn what technological tactics and/or lack thereof had worked best within these diverse border regions. These geographic locations illustrate the complexities of attempting to secure borders around the world and the differences in job experiences for the officials responsible for the safety of these regions.

Egypt and Israel share a 6-meter-high steel mesh fence anchored in cement topped with concertina wire spanning 200km from the Gaza Strip to the Red Sea. The

technology implemented within this structure alerts officials anytime the fence is touched. If this type of technology were adopted in the United States, it could possibly make a Border Patrol agent's job safer and more efficient. My research allowed former agents the opportunity to discuss the dangers of their lived experience and their potential recommendations to better the conditions if need be. Haystead (2015) illustrated that although there are a variety of physical barriers that are useful in safeguarding the border, something that is beginning to gain popularity for its functionality is signals intelligence (SIGINT) technology.

Correctional officers also face similar stressors as LEOs. Griffin et al. (2013) suggested that a corrections officer's work environment, the quality of supervision, organizational support, and officer safety all play some role in high turnover rates within the profession. Through interviews, agents could reveal innovative methods of safeguarding the border based on their experiences that could potentially improve their individual safety and national security as a whole.

The Need to Always Be On

The responsibility of LEOs goes beyond enforcing the law; while off-duty, some feel a need to continuously remain alert and remain aware of their surroundings as a result of work routines and habits. Agents face various threats as a result of their choice of occupation both on and off duty. Those assigned to the Southwest Border, Border Patrol agents encounter high-value targets including illegal immigrants, potential terrorists, and drug smugglers. Several politicians and scholars have suggested that there

is a high probability of terrorism infiltration through the Southwest Border (Bartel & Gray, 2012).

The amount of human and narcotic smuggling conducted by transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) highlights the demand and the ease with which these organizations can operate within the Southwest region (Department of Homeland Security, 2013). As LEOs, Border Patrol agents face the dangers that these felonious organizations present. In 2012, Customs and Border Protection seized over 5 million pounds of narcotics along the Southwest Border (U.S. Border Patrol, 2012). On and off duty, agents can feel threatened or targeted by drug cartels and crime organizations active north of the border, who blame agents for arrests or seizures of contraband.

While Border Patrol agents face work-related dangers they also face serious personal risks due to: the sensitive nature of the job, isolation, and separation from friends and families. Because of policy shifts within the organizational culture due to new or altered initiatives and mandates, Border Patrol agents feel that their personal safety and national security are at risk due to the lack of regard for actual field experience in implementing those policies. While actual external personal security threats exist, there is lingering emotional turmoil that agents face due to the difficult experiences of those they encounter (River, 2010). Interviews with Border Patrol agents will help to narrow this gap in scholarly research. My findings emerged from analysis of interviews with agents about their perceptions of the threats and dangers that agents face in the field.

Politics and Bureaucratic Inertia

Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. Border Patrol has undergone an agency change and greatly expanded its manpower. Secretary Johnson (2014) stated that since 2000, the Border Patrol has grown in personnel and infrastructure to include roads, lighting, fencing, sensors, aircraft, vessels, and surveillance equipment. My research explored if these advancements increased agents' perception of security about their personal safety in the field, and their perception of these assets' ability to reduce the threats to overall homeland security.

Agents face life-threatening situations in their national security careers, but they also face issues with internal agency political turmoil including organizational inertia and the shifting of bureaucratic interests potentially manipulating job responsibilities. An example of this could be different presidential administrations and DHS secretaries. Elbel (2014) explained that policy implementation issues come not only from a lack of appropriate recordings of apprehensions, including illegal immigrants who evaded arrest, but also how this inappropriate accounting has led to safety concerns for the agents in the field, along with an overall negative impact on the organizational culture. When it comes to recording annual statistics pertaining to apprehension rates from the field, it is important to identify how these numbers are quantified.

Annual budgets are created for the Border Patrol and DHS as a whole. Budgets are quantified based on statistics from prior years. If there are inaccuracies, in the reporting of the number of illegal immigrants who evaded apprehension, also known as "got aways" and/or "turned back south" into Mexico, it may then appear that these

regions of the border are not busy, thus affecting additional funding prospects (Elbel, 2014). As a result, equipment such as new vehicles, firearms, and other essential gear are not acquired or replaced as a result of inaccurate statistics. When this happens agents face the unnecessary danger of faulty gear and equipment, along with emotional turmoil, poor relationships with their senior staff members, and stress.

Agents feel that quantifying border security results is an unrealistic approach to determine apprehension levels, illicit activity, and overall levels of policy efficacy in specific border regions. One reason is because something unseen cannot be easily accounted for or justified as successful (Starr, 2010). In Secretary Johnson's (2014) speech about border security, he mentioned that apprehension rates have decreased alongside an increase in the number of Border Patrol agents. My study explored agent's perceptions of the impact of "numbers games" and what the reality of their lived experience is in terms of policy shifts and living with "command and control" national policy mandates.

McCaul (2013) stated that after 2010, border security initiative reports were no longer quantified in the same manner as they were under the prior Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano who held her position from 2009 through 2013. Thus potentially obscuring transparency, or at the least confounding accurate analysis. A change in how annual results are quantified influences the organizational culture to include: staffing, new equipment, enforcement efforts, security measures, policy creation and ultimately agent's security.

Accurate accounting of those crossing illegally into the United States via the Southwest Border is difficult, as there is an inherent ambiguity in this metric, because it cannot be assumed that everyone crossing is counted or precisely estimated. Massey (2005) suggested that due to the increase in agents along the border, illegal entrants are using riskier paths to cross the border resulting in more deaths. Agents are at greater risk because they must also endure the same conditions to either rescue or apprehend these individuals.

Media reports suggested that one FBI agent was aware of the threats that Bin Laden posed before committing the 9/11 attacks, yet senior staff members in Washington DC did not take action (Ryan, 2002). Agents feel similar disconnection from leadership and when providing new knowledge about threats, stressors, and dangers that exist due to compartmentalization and siloing.

In light of violence on both sides of the Southwest Border, the Border Patrol awarded agents who sought to use less than lethal types of force in an effort to keep violence to a minimum. According to Price (2016), agents were reportedly outraged at the lack of regard for their lives and they thought that the award was a joke. Some agents surmised that this was another attempt for Customs and Border Protection officials to placate political agendas and show disregard for their safety in the field (Price, 2016). Mitchell (2014) reported that Chief Fisher of the United States Border Patrol has instructed agents to reanalyze and consider less than lethal alternatives if they were found in a dangerous encounter. Agents may argue that it is through incentives such as this that play a role in agents getting hurt and represents the lack of training, trust, and not being

supported by their agency. Other agents may appreciate this type of incentive as an attempt to decrease violence and reward positive behavior.

In 2010, Border Patrol Agent Terry was murdered by armed bandits while working in mountainous terrain near Nogales, Arizona. Agent Terry and his colleagues were not equipped with the appropriate weaponry to defend against this attack; as opposed to a rifle with live ammunition, Agent Terry was carrying a shotgun loaded with a bean-bag projectile (Diana, 2012; Jonsson, 2011). Three weapons were later found at the crime scene, weapons that were discovered to be part of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF) Operation Fast and Furious (Stewart, 2012). Price (2014) encountered similar outrage from agents who felt less than protected by their employer in the face of potential deadly force situations. Participants were asked to share any deadly force or dangerous encounters they may have experienced while working for the Border Patrol, how this encounter affected them, and how their agency may have responded to this incident.

Agents are responsible for more than simply arresting illegal immigrants; they often have to provide life saving support, conduct interviews, search and rescue, work long hours in harsh climates and serve a public who is often less than understanding and supportive. When describing the vast scope of a Border Patrol agent's job duties, Rivera (2015) stated that even though agents work directly with stigmatized populations, including smugglers and illegal immigrants, and are mandated to provide first responder care when needed, the public may have a negative view of agents because the public is generally unaware of what agents do or get their impressions from the mass media.

Rivera provided insight into the emotional aspects of a Border Patrol agent's job. This first hand exposure reflected in Rivera's interviews with agents shows the gap between reality and stereotypes, and brings to life the humanity and reality of Border Patrol agent's lived experience, specifically while working along the Southwest Border.

Bureaucratic inertia can be a challenge within law enforcement agencies. Norvell et al. (1988) suggested that supervisory police officers often face undue stress due to the bureaucratic inertia within their organization. Norvell et al. found that supervisory police officers, while commonly enduring the same stress as line officers, also find themselves battling the organizational culture, caught between the direction of senior staff members and esteem of their subordinates. The impact that bureaucracy plays within the Border Patrol may mirror that of police officers. Du Gay (2000) described one of the tenets of Weber's bureaucracy theory within governmental organizations as having hierarchical constructs this being ideal for operations. Further exploration of this phenomenon and its impact on governmental agencies could provide a framework for future understanding of theory implications.

The variety of threats and dangers that agents face are vast and often unique based on the dynamic across the Southwest Border. Former Security Napolitano stated publically that people from countries with ties to terrorism come into the United States crossing the Southwest Border (Star, 2010). The United States House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, as well as the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, discussed the issue of Hezbollah operations in Central and South America and the subsequent impact this may have on the national security of the United States via

the Southwest Border (McCaul, 2012). Former agent participants shared their experiences with encountering these types of individuals and if they believe that there are increased risk factors associated with this unique threat.

The number of people who have gained undetected access into the United States and/or have entered the country legally but remained after their permitted stay, visa “overstays,” remains unknown. Kane and Johnson (2006) suggested that three of every 100 people within the United States were undocumented as of 2006, including illegal immigrants and visa overstays. In 2006, Kane and Johnson further indicated that the illegal immigrant population within the United States was growing annually by approximately 700,000 people, thus illustrating how porous the borders truly are. Politzer (2007) similarly stated that at least one third of the illegal immigrant population in the United States are from visa overstays. These numbers indicate that even though some illegal immigrants are visa overstays, the number of people who bypass the Border Patrol, evade detection, and enter the United States remains unknown thus keeping the threats and dangers these people may have presented unknown.

The number of individuals who face consequences based on their violation of law could affect an agent’s ability to appropriately do their job; the following concepts could be utilized to better understand the phenomenon: organizational theory, groupthink, and bureaucratic dissonance. Maril (2004) observed agents along the Southwest Border where he witnessed firsthand that while the smuggling of illegal aliens was a common occurrence, it was also not unheard of for agents to confiscate guns, grenades, laundered drug money, and cocaine. Politics and internal culture may play a key role in

organizational mandates and directives, which in turn could impact agents' capabilities or desires to carry out their mission.

One may argue that travelling to Mexico then entering into the United States illegally would be less challenging for terrorist entities seeking anonymity rather than arriving directly in the United States. Maril (2004) detailed the reality of terrorism infiltration through the Southwest Border and how post-9/11 challenges have transitioned policy implementation as well as impacted agents' safety, lives, and families.

Immigration and visitation laws differ from country to country; even though the United States may have a person on a terrorist watch list, this does not mean that countries such as Honduras or Guatemala do (Hecht, 2016). Bartell and Grey (2012) discussed the reality of terrorism in Mexico to include Hezbollah and Al-Shabaab. Bartell and Grey found that these terrorist organizations assimilate into the Mexican culture via different forms of training, to include learning the Spanish language, and working alongside Mexican drug cartels. Bartell and Grey argued that due to Al-Shabaab and Al-Qaeda's presence in Mexico, they might be able to target the United States with ease. This is an example of a threat that agents may experience.

Reports seem to conflict with one another regarding claims pertaining to this type of research. Adams (2016) claimed that the Southwest Border fences do not affect well-funded drug cartels and terrorist groups alike because these entities have sufficient resources to use safer methods, such as utilizing false documents at a port of entry to gain access into the United States. Moreover, Ramsay and Kiltz (2014) suggested that known terrorist entities have entered into the United States through the use of falsified passports.

McCaul (2012), however, reported that the Southwest Border is a potential gateway for terrorist entities to gain undetected access into the United States. McCaul noted that as opposed to using a document to enter the United States through a port of entry, a person could utilize the border for illicit entry because there would be no record of their presence. This may represent some of the stressors that Border Patrol agents experience and potential insight into safeguarding national security.

Isolation

Due to the location and isolated nature of many Border Patrol stations along the Southwest Border, agents find themselves living and working in environments with which they are unaccustomed. Lambert et al. (2010) described social support as having a network and connections to other humans for support or help. Due to the conflicting nature of their job agents potentially face an unsupportive general public. Border Patrol agents may or may not feel that isolation plays a role in the stress that they experience. Illeff and Steed (2000) postulated that a lack of social support could leave employees feeling isolated thus leading to an increased probability of succumbing to workplace stressors and ultimately burnout. The isolated posting to the Southwest Border could contribute to their occupational stress.

Isolation and the lack of social support systems can be linked to stress and increased levels of burnout. Ray and Miller (1994) described extra-organizational systems as social support systems that includes friends and family and intra-organizational support as supervisors, coworkers and management. There may be a correlation between a lack of intra-organizational support and understanding how

organizational theory plays a role in agents lived experience. Lambert et al. (2010) suggested that management plays a key role in burnout when they allow employees to believe that the organization does not value them. Former agent participants provided insight into how intra-organizational support plays a role in their position and experiences.

Psychology of the Job

The psychology of an agent's job is unique. Some agents may claim that the most challenging aspect of their job is being away from home and family while being posted to the Southwest Border, and others may claim that due to low morale and lack of enforcement, they do not see the point in risking their lives to do their job to their fullest. Light (2007) discussed what it means to work for the DHS while being voted one of the worst agencies to work for within the federal government, specific to management, leadership and job satisfaction. Piccolo et al. (2010) presented an argument that leaders, dependent upon how they operate, shape an employee's intrinsic motivation.

Understanding why new employees are likely to leave the job after a short tour of duty may encourage any agency to conduct a thorough review of their recruiting tactics in an effort to curtail retention rates. Some newly assigned Border Patrol agents resign within the first two years of employment; as thousands of dollars are spent training these individuals, federal employers would benefit from studying this phenomenon (Light, 2007). Light (2007) found that out of 36 federal agencies, DHS scored the lowest in leadership, management, and overall job satisfaction this all playing a key role in high turnover rates. Light suggested that the manner in which DHS was created post 9/11 is

why bureaucratic issues and lack of employee satisfaction exist, thus suggesting a high turnover rate. Moreover, Piccolo et al. (2010) presented the concept of ethical leadership, and offers several narratives explaining how fair treatment and integrity should be used when attempting to motivate a workforce. Andreescu and Vito (2010) discussed the importance of appropriate leadership response to employees in the time of stress and how this could impact unfavorable coping methods such as depression, addictions and suicides. Occupational stress and lack of organizational support has shown to impact employees in their assigned duties.

Border Patrol agents face deadly force situations on the job and have exposure to death of colleagues and of people they find in the desert while on-duty (Broyles & Haynes, 2010). Described by Broyles and Haynes (2010), examples of the life threatening situations faced by agents include search and rescue attempts of potentially hostile individuals while navigating through dangerous terrain and avoiding desert induced injuries, heat, and threats. This information is key to law enforcement: acknowledging the lack of motivation and desire for fair treatment amongst the ranks, coupled with unique job stressors, can lead to depression, substance abuse, internal corruption, and even suicide.

Stressors of the Job and Training

It may be commonly perceived that law enforcement is stressful, yet the specifics are often not discussed. Murphy (2008) explained his experience and qualitative research of law enforcement officials to be important to scholars and professionals alike, thus providing insight specific to stressors of the employees, work environment, and

leadership that they respect. My research is important as it could be used to augment future leadership training, creating a positive morale, increase of overall job satisfaction and addressing addictive behavior before it becomes a problem, specifically within this type of profession. Arnetz et al. (2013) analyzed a training program and its potential benefits to police officers. Arnetz et al. noted that in the past, police officers have suffered from mental and physical illnesses such as anxiety, stomach issues, heart disease and post traumatic stress disorder. The occupational stress that these law enforcement officials face have also lead to divorce, suicide, as well as drug and alcohol abuse, as seen in Border Patrol agents (Rivera, 2015). LEOs put their lives at risk on a daily basis; the relationship between them and their employer is key to their overall psychological health as well as the success of the organization.

Stress on and off the Job

The available literature illuminating the stressors and anxieties that law enforcement professionals experience is generally more specific to police officers. For instance, Newman and Rucker-Reed (2004) found that the stressors and stress-levels faced by U.S. Marshals differ from the average police officer. Newman and Rucker-Reed noted that the most common stressors indicated amongst U.S. Marshals were due to the bureaucratic inertia within their organization to include: issues with management, poor work environment, and “bad bosses.” It may be found that Border Patrol agents share similarities with various law enforcement entities, such as the U.S. Marshals and police officers; issues that appear unique to specific groups may manifest, in part or whole, in an agent’s duties. During interviews, agents may discuss if they face dangers off-work

similar to those experienced while working, thus perpetuating the need to constantly be aware and prepared while also combating increased stress levels. Hence, agents may relate to both the bureaucratic inertia incumbent with organizational stressors within the U.S. Marshals and inherit police stressors found within average police forces including uncontrollable and unknown work environments.

Corrections officers face unique stressors that may correlate with the diverse nature of what Border Patrol agents face as well. Lambert et al. (2010) suggested that the three primary causes of burnout amongst corrections officers include: emotional exhaustion, ineffectiveness, and depersonalization. Neveu (2007) described a lack of support as a form of resource depletion within correction officers, thus leading to stress and eventually burnout. It may be seen that the aforementioned issues are present and relevant in the lives of Border Patrol agents as they relate to stress internally and externally of their organizational culture.

How to mitigate and effectively address stress within law-enforcement has been a widely studied topic. A gap, however, still exists as it relates to the unique stressors Border Patrol agents experience. Price (2017) suggested that on a global scale, LEOs face suffering and violence of varying degrees and due to their job are at increased risks of personal injury and witnessing traumatic incidents. How stress is internalized and addressed can have lasting psychological impacts on LEOs in their work and personal life. Price discussed the importance and role stress reduction interventions can have on LEOs, reducing stress related psychological and medical conditions. This type of intervention could have an impact on LEOs and also organizational culture as a whole.

Rivera (2010) suggested that agents would benefit from receiving training that addresses the emotional aspects of their job due to its arduous nature. It is unknown if agents have any type of intervention mechanisms or support systems, internally or externally, that address stress.

Suicide Concerns

Since 2001, the Indian Border Security has had approximately 30 suicides annually, as compared to police officers in the United States that suffered from 143 suicides in 2008 and 126 in 2012 (Chhabra & Chhabra, 2013; Nanavaty, 2015). The suicide rate amongst LEOs, coupled with appropriate and effective countermeasures, has long beleaguered employers.

Numerically there are differences within the each agency, yet suicides in the ranks do not seem to be a rare occurrence. Weber (2010) reported that among Border Patrol's 22,000 agents, 15 committed suicide between 2008 and 2010. Furthermore, Weber noted that nationally in the United States, general law enforcement suicide rates were approximately 20 per 100,00 while the Border Patrol statistics would average between 20 and 30 per 100,000 (2010). Vanderpool (2010) reported that the Border Patrol would no longer release the specific numbers of suicides committed, and suggested that the limited available data were skewed. Vanderpool noted that common reasons for the high number of Border Patrol agent suicides were due to problems with family, finances, and divorce. This topic is deserving of additional study in order to affect positive social change in the lives of officials working along borders within and outside of the United States.

Lack of Available Scholarly Research

There is a lack of scholarly literature that concerns/references Border Patrol agents, specifically those assigned to the Southwest Border. Most of the books that focus on the Border Patrol are generally old “war stories” about when the author was an agent. While these accounts provide insight, they are more colloquial in nature, lacking proper academic and scholarly rigor. Similarly, a Google search will list results for “border patrol”, but the findings are commonly found to be emotionally charged limited to online news entities covering human rights and political issues surrounding illegal immigration, along with claims of moral and ethical injustices. The challenge in narrating the actual lived experiences of agents exists because there is a gap in the literature that elaborates specifically on the agents. In 2010, Rivera described Border Patrol agents as doing a job that is out of the public perception and stigmatized. Rivera described agents job as “dirty work”, specifying that their profession is socially, physically, and morally objectionable. This may be the cause for such scarcity within the literature.

A 2011 report completed by the United States Library of Congress pertaining to Southwest Border violence, specifically drug trafficking, found that policy makers are put in “uncomfortable situations” over violence plaguing the border region due to increased law enforcement presence (Finklea, 2013). It could be that this is why scant scholarly Border Patrol research exists because the actuality of their experiences and dangers faced makes others “uncomfortable”.

Job satisfaction has shown to be low within DHS and underrepresented within Border Patrol. In a 2017 study large federal agencies were ranked according to job

satisfaction rates, out of the 18 agencies, DHS was the lowest on the list at 18th place (Partnership for Public Service, 2018). Moreover out of 160-agency subcomponents Border Patrol was not on the list, yet other DHS entities such as Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement were included (Partnership for Public Service, 2018).

Another reason that limited research is available on this topic may be due to a lack of an internal academic voice. Border Patrol hiring standards do not demand higher-level educational requirements, generally desiring only a high-school diploma or its equivalent (Customs and Border Protection, 2018). As a result, those that may be best qualified to provide a proper account of life as a Border Patrol agent may be the least equipped to do so in an unbiased, scholarly fashion. The lack of an academic voice and the ability for agents to have their lived experiences documented is apparent in the shortage of available scholarly research.

Summary

In this chapter, I have elaborated on the most significant findings on this topic. The available research is limited but that is what makes this study unique and original. Border Patrol agents are at the forefront of border security issues, specifically the porous nature of the border and the threats and dangers that surround it. Agents who have first-hand experiences along the border may be considered by some as subject matter experts, as one could argue that their lived experience are reliable accounts of the type of threats and/or dangers faced. The complexities within this type of law enforcement career has not been widely studied or researched. This study represents what is known about the

lived experiences of Border Patrol agents along the Southwest Border while revealing what is potentially unknown. Limited information is available about the lived experience as a United States Border Patrol Agent, some foreign analogues discuss the lived experience of border security officials in other countries which may provide insight into this underexplored topic. Insight into foreign analogues and general comparisons to law enforcement officials provides a perspective by which the appropriate questions can be asked when attempting to understand United States Border Patrol Agents lived experiences.

This study may help fill a gap in the available scholarly research. The threats and dangers agent face can be seen on-duty, off-duty within their communities due to their position. The review of foreign analogues, bureaucratic inertia issues, and political climate is a glimpse into the complexities that shape a Border Patrol agents career. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the overall research design, role of the researcher, methodology, and any potential issues regarding trustworthiness of this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceived threats and dangers experienced by Border Patrol agents who worked along the U.S. Southwest Border and their lived experience of protecting national security. Improved national security measures have been needed since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (DHS, 2013). Moran (2017) noted that although the number of Border Patrol agents has increased, retention rates among new hires remain an issue. In reviewing the literature, I found limited research on the lived experience of Border Patrol agents.

I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to better understand Border Patrol agents' perceptions of their personal safety in relation to their work. The objectives of the study were twofold. First, the purpose of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences and perceptions of U.S. Border Patrol agents, which would ultimately contribute to filling the gap in scholarly research on this topic. Second, in its focus on positive social change, this research might increase agency and public understanding of the complexities of being an agent tasked with safeguarding the United States. In this chapter, I describe my rationale for undertaking this research, my research design, and my role in the research process. In addition, I discuss procedures for ensuring content validity, transparency, and the ethical treatment of participants.

Research Design and Rationale

The primary research question was the following: How do Border Patrol agents who work along the U.S. Southwest Border perceive threats and dangers to their personal safety and to homeland security?

Data collection was achieved using semistructured interviews with former Border Patrol agents. Following the advice of Diccico-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), I used interviews within the phenomenology tradition for data collection. A qualitative approach, particularly phenomenology, is appropriate to explore Border Patrol agents' actual experiences in the field.

I ruled out a broad quantitative questionnaire because I wanted to learn as much as possible about the personal experiences of Border Patrol agents in the field dealing with agency bureaucracy, policy conflicts, unseen dangers, and perceived risks. I really wanted to dig deep, in the qualitative tradition, into personal experiences and probe personal perspectives and perceptions of bureaucratic and political dissonance and threats and dangers in the field. Such in-depth, personal accounts align best with the qualitative tradition. Ethnography was also considered, but phenomenology was a better fit to the research focus. A phenomenological approach focuses on actual lived experiences of an individual, whereas ethnography focuses on a culture or society, with the researcher providing findings based on his or her observations. The choice to use a phenomenological approach was important for this research in filling the gap in available scholarly research specific to agents' lived experiences. The goal of this study was to explore the lived experience of the participants and how individual experiences affected their perceptions of threats and dangers in the field.

Role of the Researcher

The integrity of a qualitative study is dependent upon a researcher's ability to appropriately conduct his or her fieldwork and present it in a cohesive manner (Saldana, 2015). I selected this research topic because I was an agent myself. For over 5 years, I was a Border Patrol agent assigned to the U.S. Southwest Border. I am aware that my experiences may be different from those of my participants. However, I am confident that my previous work history as an agent aided the research process rather than being a detriment. As a Border Patrol agent, I received training and experience in conducting interviews, so I am aware that I have biases due to my experiences as an agent; however, I believe that this recognition assisted me in striving to be objective. I was mindful to be as unbiased and nonjudgmental as possible in the research process. I had no previous supervisory relationship with the participants, including an instructor relationship or power over the participants. If a participant was a prior acquaintance, I remained objective as possible and was mindful that the participant's experiences were unique to avoid personal bias. I am no longer employed as an agent and am not in any position of power with the organization. There should be no ethical issues or conflict of interest within this research.

Methodology

In this section, I describe the sampling approach, sample selection criteria, instrumentation, recruitment procedures, and data collection and analysis strategy. I purposefully sampled from informal networks of former Border Patrol agents. Through these informal networks, I contacted previous colleagues telephonically and by email

who might know of someone who had had left his or her position. The term *former agent* refers to an individual who was previously employed by the Border Patrol. I sought former agents as participants because I expected that being formerly rather than currently employed with the Border Patrol would allow individuals to be open and reflect upon their experiences. Procedures for recruitment and voluntary participation were listed and described in the consent letter provided to the participants. The 11 participants interviewed had at least 1 year of experience within the past 3-5 years. This timeline was selected to represent a similar policy and threat environment across participants and to ensure that relevant experiences would still be fresh in the minds of the participants.

Participant Selection Logic

Informal networks such as those involving prior colleagues who might have contact information for former agents provided a pool of potential participants for this study. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling of individuals who responded to requests to participate. I provided the participants with a consent form prior to conducting the interviews. Participation was voluntary, and participants' identities will remain confidential. I made participants aware that I would make audio recordings of the interviews. In advance of the interview, I allowed time for any questions or concerns participants had. If a participant had not been willing to be recorded, I would have taken notes during the interview, and immediately after each interview, I would have transcribed my notes to Microsoft Word files and logged any impressions or comments into my research journal. All 11 participants gave consent to be recorded. Although the sample size was estimated at nine to 12 participants, I had 11 former agents who were

willing to participate. If there had been outliers without saturation, then interviewees would have been added in increments of three. Outliers are identified as participants with opposing experiences. If needed, increments of three participants would have been added for saturation purposes; this odd number would have provided the necessary number of interviews for coverage of potential experiences.

Participants were made aware that there was no financial compensation for answering the interview questions. They were told that their insights could help in improving national defense policy decision making if results of my research demonstrated the need for such change to decision makers and administrators.

Instrumentation

I was the instrument in this study, and I developed an interview protocol, questions, and prompts. In order to remain transparent and accurate, I used narrative checking in the case that a participant did not want to be recorded to ensure the accuracy of interview results and lack of biases. I conducted interviews with an expert panel of five participants to validate and test my interview questions. Data from the expert-panel interviews were not used in this study. Each interview took between 20 and 60 minutes to complete. A full list of interview questions and prompts can be found in the Appendix.

Interview types can vary, thus impacting research results. Diccico-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) suggested that qualitative research interviews represent one of the most familiar formats in data collection. Using the qualitative tradition, I conducted semistructured interviews with Border Patrol agents regarding their lived experience while assigned to the U.S. Southwest Border. Semistructured interviews allowed for a

better understanding of the participants' perceptions and experiences by giving the participants freedom to introduce ideas, concepts, or experiences that the interview question might not have anticipated.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Interviews with nine to 12 former agents were proposed. Patton (1999) suggested that although qualitative and quantitative research methods are diverse within their constructs, sample size is dependent upon the concepts of the research itself. Specifically, for phenomenological research, Thomas and Pollio (2002) recommended six to 12 participants, suggesting that there is generally redundancy after the sixth interview. The interviews were audio recorded to assure transparency and accuracy. Facetime Skype and/or Google+ could have been used for those with Internet connection. For the greatest clarity, audio-recorded phone interviews were conducted.

Participants selected from informal networks were contacted via e-mail or by phone. I sent a letter to anticipated participants introducing the purpose of the research along with a consent letter requesting their participation in the study. In order to ensure that participants qualified for inclusion in the study, I asked a series of questions pertaining to their training and time spent working for the Border Patrol to verify their prior employment. Due to the nature of the job, male and female agents may have different experiences and/or perceive experiences differently. Previous male and female agents alike were interviewed; I distributed consent and confidentiality agreements, and I protected any potentially protected population to the best of my ability, per the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines and the National Institutes of Health (NIH)

certification. Other than potential pregnant women, I did not anticipate any protected participants. At the onset of the interviews, I asked female participants if they were pregnant and needed medical attention in order guarantee proper treatment of protected participants. All interviews were confidential. In the coding process, I assigned each participant's data with a numeric code rather than using the participant's name. Any tangible materials have been locked in a secure safe, and data have been secured via password protection. Prior to the interviews, participants were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the interview at any point.

Data Analysis Plan

The data was generated from 11 interviews with former Border Patrol agents. Narrative checking, if needed, provided an additional level of transparency when coding results. The preliminary themes revealed in the literature review were used in the initial coding, as recommended by Saldana (2016). Initial codes included the following: always be alert, politics and bureaucratic inertia, and stressors of the training and job. Emergent themes and concepts were identified in the initial scanning, reading, and hand coding of the interview data. I planned to use inductive coding and analysis. Inductive coding allows for new themes to emerge from the research data. Triangulation was used to support overall consistency when coding interview results.

Atlas.ti software was used to further code, organize, and analyze the data. Atlas.ti is one of the leading qualitative data analysis software packages to code text, audio, and graphic images. I conducted preliminary coding by hand and then used the software to identify themes or ideas that paralleled my initial themes or emerged organically. Atlas.ti

can also generate word clouds that can help to illustrate the major themes and ideas generated in an analysis. Rigorous care and attention to detail helped to assure a superior level of integrity in transcribing, analyzing, and managing the data and results. The objective was to interview nine to 12 participants. Even if saturation appeared to be met with fewer participants, I continued to interview the remaining agents to ensure that there were no outliers. The security of the data collected is essential for the confidentiality of the participants' identities and data. All data have been stored securely in a Universal Serial Bus (USB) drive, which will remain in a locked safe for 5 years at my place of residence, after which the data will be permanently deleted. Security provisions were made to secure data throughout the data collection, transfer, and archival phases. These security provisions included password protection where applicable and a secure safe to ensure that I would be the only person with access to the data.

Table 1 lists the themes, along with supporting references in the literature.

Table 1

Themes and References

Theme	Reference
Always be alert	U.S. Border Patrol (2012)
Politics and bureaucratic inertia	Adams (2016); Diana (2012); Du Gay (2000); Elbel (2014); Jonsson (2011); Maril (2004); Massey (2005); McCaul (2012, 2013); Mitchell (2014); Norvell (1998); Politzer (2007); Price (2016); Ramsay & Kiltz (2014); Ryan (2002); Star (2010); Stewart (2012)
Stressors of the training and job	Arnetz et al. (2013); Illeffe & Steed (2000); Murphy (2008); Rivera (2015)
Validating effectiveness	Starr (2010); Johnson (2014)
Budgetary impacts/statistics	Elbel (2014)

Issues of Trustworthiness

There are four main components of trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Assuring transparency with issues of trustworthiness and ethical concerns was of paramount importance within my research. The credibility of this study was assisted through inductive coding as I compiled and organized data from the interviews I conducted. I coded the results; therefore, there was no intracoder reliability concern.

In order to establish credibility, triangulation and narrative checking were also used. Additionally, triangulation assisted in assuring dependability and reliability as I crosschecked and verified the accuracy of the data collected. Triangulation was a method that I used to establish credibility and validity in my research by arriving at a deeper

understanding of the phenomenon by showing consistency in the findings.

Transferability within a phenomenological study is generally limited due to the applicability of the research to similar situations. Dependability is addressed by the care and diligence of the researcher in maintaining transparency in data collection, analysis, and reporting processes. The strategies used within this study to ensure confirmability included triangulation, transparency, and clear delineation of all processes and procedures used to collect, analyze, and interpret the data.

Ethical Concerns

Ethical concerns are specific to the ethical implications related to participants. I had limited ethical concerns about my participants. I was not concerned with my participants divulging any potentially harmful information because they received training on what issues are to remain confidential. Although participants discussed life-and-death encounters, none of them became emotional in doing so. I remained supportive and aware of this potential outcome. Throughout the informed consent process, I made participants aware that their identities would remain confidential. Confidentiality was maintained at all phases of the study.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the research methods that were used. I provided information on the research design, the primary research question, and the reason that a phenomenological study was most appropriate for this research. The ability to interview former agents was an opportunity to fill the gap in available scholarly literature. As the researcher, I found that my experience as a former agent was helpful in this study and

was not a detriment due to potential biases. The methodology of this research was ideal, in that it afforded the opportunity to learn from agents' lived experiences through semistructured interviews. In order to reach potential participants, I sought individuals' contact information through informal networks.

As the instrument in the research, I created the interview questions based on feedback from an expert panel of five participants. I anticipated the use of purposeful sampling to select participants. This number of participants was ideal for saturation purposes. Inductive coding and Atlas.ti were used when compiling results from the interviews conducted. The methodology for this study was selected to best explore the lived experiences of Border Patrol agents.

Chapter 4: Results

In this chapter, I describe the purpose and objectives of the study, the interview setting, data collection, data analysis, and the findings of my research. The purpose of this study was to learn about the lived experience of former Border Patrol agents who had worked along the Southwest Border of the United States within the past 3-5 years. There were no outliers in the 11 telephone interviews conducted with agents.

Central Research Question

The central research question was as follows: How do Border Patrol agents who work along the U.S. Southwest Border perceive threats and dangers to their personal safety and to homeland security?

Place and Setting

Each of the participants interviewed had at least 1 year of experience in the past 3-5 years. This criterion ensured that the participants had an appropriate amount of experience to speak confidently and robustly about an agent's experience and perceptions. Participants were initially contacted with an invitational e-mail in which I provided a brief biographical introduction as well as the intent of the study. I provided those who confirmed their desire to participate with a consent form to sign, which advised them of their rights as participants. Before the start of any interviews, I confirmed with all participants that the interviews were voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point. All participants were interviewed over the phone and audio recorded.

Demographics

I conducted interviews with a total of 11 participants, including nine male former agents and two female former agents. Out of the 11 participants, one male participant had prior law enforcement experience, and two male participants had prior military experience. Of the former female agents, neither had prior law enforcement or military experience. The participants included individuals of Hispanic, African American, and Caucasian racial/ethnic backgrounds and ranged from 30 to 45 years old.

Data Collection

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn specifically about the lived experience of former Border Patrol agents. I completed a total of 11 interviews over a 13-day period. Potential participants' contact information was obtained through informal networks. All of the interviews were conducted over the phone. Participants were sent a consent form, which they signed prior to the start of their interview. Participants were made aware that they would be audio recorded during the interviews. Interview recordings did not include any confidential information pertaining to the participants' identities. Participants were asked a total of eight semistructured interview questions. Participants were asked to only speak about their own experiences. Interviews on average took approximately 25 minutes, with one lasting longer than 45 minutes. At the completion of each interview, I asked participants if there was anything they wanted to add or clarify. I transcribed each audio recording following the conclusion of each interview. There were no variations in data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3. I initially planned to conduct Internet and telephone interviews but found that

telephone interviews provided the best clarity for recording. Complications and deviations from original research objectives did not occur throughout the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The process of moving inductively from research data to larger representations of categories and themes took place through the use of manual coding and ATLAS.ti. Manual coding involved several steps. I took meticulous care throughout the coding process to ensure a rigorous analysis. I started by reading through each individual interview. I then created eight separate Microsoft Word documents, with each assigned an interview question, in order to analyze the responses for each question separately. I began by underlining any quotes and color coding keywords. Color coding allowed me to identify themes in my interview data. I continued this process through each of the eight documents to analyze the responses to each interview question. After compiling my results, I double-checked my work. Once I had completed manual coding, I used ATLAS.ti as a secondary coding method to verify results. Once the coding stages were complete, I created a visual diagram of the themes found for each individual question.

Quotations were used to highlight the importance of the agent's insight and experiences and are noted in the results section below. Themes were consistent throughout the interview responses. Though each participant represented unique experiences and locations along the Southwest Border, their answers were surprisingly consistent with one another.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In that I served as the research instrument for this study, it was essential that I accurately present the lived experience of Border Patrol agents through my research. In this qualitative phenomenological study, I examined the lived experience of former Border Patrol agents who had worked along the U.S. Southwest Border in the past 3-5 years. Once approved through Walden's IRB review process, I started the recruitment of former agent participants. I reached out to potential participants, explaining all aspects of the study.

Once the interviews were complete, I transcribed them. Participants were offered the opportunity to review their transcripts. No participant requested transcript changes to be made. I informed all participants that upon completion of the dissertation, they would be notified and provided with an executive summary.

Below, I discuss the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of this study.

Credibility

First and foremost, the credibility of this study was established by Walden's IRB review process. It is important to note also that the participants provided credibility in this study. All participants were former Border Patrol agents, none of whom were concerned that their participation in the study would have an adverse impact on their career. Their detachment from the Border Patrol created an environment for open and honest responses regarding their lived experiences. All 11 participants' responses, while unique, followed the same themes throughout the interview, thus indicating credibility. I

used triangulation and narrative checking to further establish credibility. Additionally, taking clear and justifiable coding steps and organizing data into visual representations helped to ensure credibility.

Transferability

The transferability of a study is of paramount importance. I used purposeful sampling in the participant selection process. Furthermore, I have provided elaborate delineation of the processes I followed in this study, including those for participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. The results of this phenomenological study are important, as there is a gap in existing research. Benefits that could result from the research's transferability include addressing administrative and policy barriers and leadership decision making, as well as adding to the limited scholarly research available on this topic.

Dependability

The dependability of this study derives from the care and detail used to maintain transparency throughout the data collection process. Dependability can also be identified in the previously detailed descriptions of the steps taken in transcribing interviews, coding, and analyzing data. Based on the clear delineation of steps taken in this research, this study could be duplicated. Furthermore, I assured dependability by maintaining interview records, audio recordings, interview transcriptions, and narrative checking results.

Confirmability

There were multiple cross-checking processes conducted to ensure confirmability of this study. These steps included clear delineation of all processes employed, triangulation, and transparency. I revisited and compared notes on interview recordings during the data collection and data analysis phases to eliminate assumptions or biases. By being aware of biases and past knowledge of the phenomenon, I ensured that participant results were accurately depicted.

Interview Results

I found all 11 participants' responses to be interrelated throughout the hand-coding process and secondary coding in ATLAS.ti. Although it was obvious that each individual participant had his or her own experiences, main themes emerged that are presented in my findings.

Question 1: Perceptions of Threats to Personal Security

I asked the following question: Based on your experience as a Border Patrol agent, what do you perceive were the greatest threats to your personal security? As this was the first question of the interview, it gave participants insight into what to expect for the remaining questions. It was not uncommon for participants to take a few moments for thought before answering this question. For those who needed prompting, I employed additional probes to address issues surrounding equipment, training, duty assignments, partners/teamwork, environment, perpetrators/civilians, and other factors related to personal employment tasks. The distribution of responses to Question 1 is illustrated in Figure 1.

1. Based on your experience as a border p what do you perceive were the greatest thr personal security



Figure 1. Responses to Question 1.

Question 1 brought about a range of similar responses. More than half of the participants stated that issues pertaining to manpower were the greatest threat to their personal security. Subthemes included lack of a partner, being miles from backup, being outnumbered, the porous nature of the border (the unknown nature of potential threats they might face), being assigned to an area of the desert at night without a partner, and being consistently watched from across the border.

Three participants stated that assaults—specifically, being “rocked” (having rocks thrown at them)—and encountering uncooperative individuals were their biggest security concerns. One agent stated that in his experience of working alone, “If a guy feels like he's got an out, he will fight tooth and nail to get away from you if he feels like he can get away.” This example provides insight into how lack of manpower and assaults are primary, overarching themes in this category.

Three participants discussed challenges that they faced with elements surrounding the community/public they served. “There is a lack of trust with certain ranchers,”

responded one participant. He further stated that a rancher in his area of operation was arrested for “firing shots” at agents. Another participant mentioned that in certain communities where he worked, if a U.S. citizen was detained (for nonimmigration-related issues), there was a group of more than 25 locals who would show up and verbally harass agents while awaiting local authorities. In addition to being harassed, these agents were generally outnumbered, with only two agents on scene. Another participant expressed feeling concern for his own safety when he worked directly with the public and came into contact with and arrested cartel members, smugglers, and traffickers; he recalled his concern about the possibility of being followed home. These responses demonstrated the diversity in the theme of community/public served, which varied based on the location of the stations where agents worked.

Two participants stated that a greater focus on functioning equipment and a sufficient quantity of equipment would increase agents’ sense of personal security. One remarked,

I remember a time that we were told you had to drive the vehicles unless the wheels were completely flat. The vehicle had to be driven, and at that time probably half of the vehicles in the parking lot had bald tires with the belt showing. Some of them, it was just belt all the way around and we were told to deal with it and drive them.

Even though equipment was a theme in some responses, there were two distinct aspects of the theme of inadequate equipment: faulty or old gears or vehicles and the lack of sufficient equipment for all agents.

The subthemes of vehicle accidents and loss of radio communication were shared by fewer than a quarter of the participants. Two participants stated that vehicle accidents were the biggest security threats that they faced. Specific examples mentioned by informants included high-speed vehicle pursuits, where an adrenaline surge could cause careless driving. Two participants noted that the actual terrain and the climate where they worked were the biggest perceived threats to their personal security. In addition to these elements and due to the remote nature of the job, it was not uncommon for agents to lose radio communication with their backup, which also created concern for their safety.

Agents attended a rigorous pre-employment training for several months, where they learned about important elements of the job, including physical fitness, law, and firearms, among others. One participant suggested that the initial Border Patrol training that she received at the academy was thorough but did not provide actual, practical field-implementation training, including preparation for working at night, working in the desert, being outnumbered, and being without radio communication. One participant stated that “aspects that surrounded the job itself” were potential threats. This is a vague yet important point as to why agents’ lived experiences may be misunderstood or underexplored. One participant suggested that Border Patrol agents needed increased intelligence access, including a mutual international fingerprint-sharing database. This type of access/collaboration would allow agents to have a better understanding of the individuals whom they are arresting.

The responses of the one participant who had previous law enforcement experience and the two participants who had prior military experience varied somewhat

but were not entirely inconsistent with those of the other participants. The participant with former law enforcement experience stated that equipment and increased shared access to databases would be ideal, while the participants with prior military experience stated that assaults, vehicle accidents, the nature of the job, and manpower were their biggest concerns. Those responses were consistent with those of the remaining participants, who did not have any prior law enforcement or military experience. It is important to note that even though there were 11 participants in this study, some shared more than a single response to various questions, which is why there were more than 11 responses for some questions, including the first interview question.

Interview Question 1 allowed participants to explore what they believed to be the biggest threats to their personal security when they were agents. For members of the Border Patrol as agents and law enforcement professionals, personal security threats can occur while on or off the job because the job role is considered by some to be a controversial one. This interview question elucidated responses that would suggest that the majority of participants' security concerns occurred while on the job rather than carrying over into their personal lives. The four primary overarching themes that emerged from Question 1 were manpower, assaults, elements of the job, and community/public reactions toward agents.

Question 2: Perception of Feeling Most in Danger

I asked the following question: When did you feel most in danger? It was evident in the participants' response times that their most dangerous experiences, for the most part, were at the forefront of their memory, in that they were quicker to answer than when

responding to other questions. In order to ensure a robust response, I asked the participants if they could expound upon the following questions: What made you believe this was a danger? How were you feeling at that time? Describe what you were thinking at this time. The distribution of responses to Question 2 is illustrated in Figure 2.

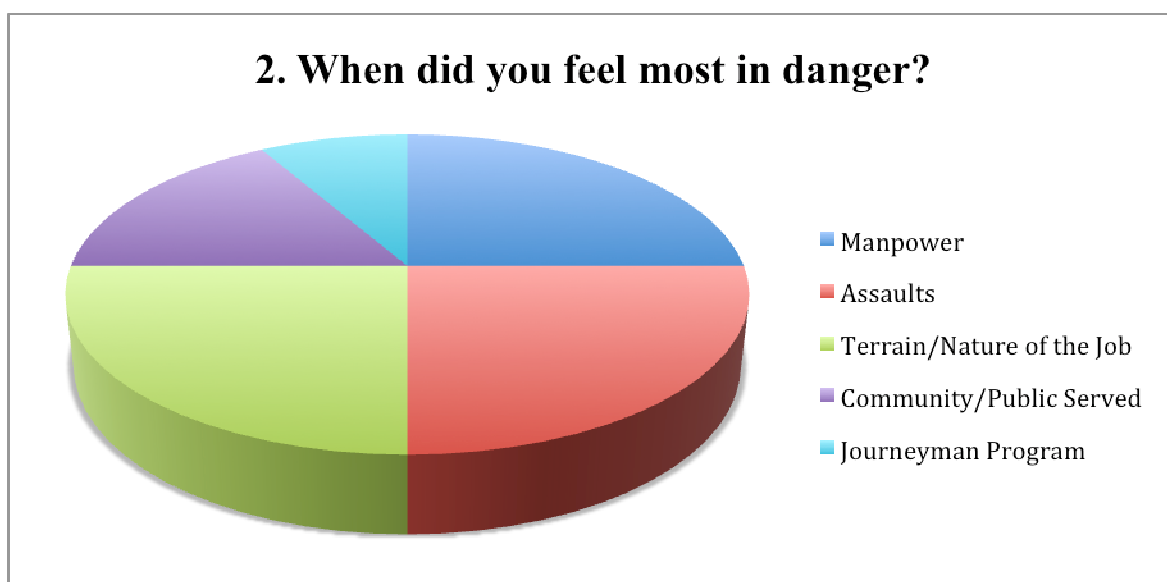


Figure 2. Responses to Question 2.

This question brought about unique responses. While no two responses were the same, although many were comparable in terms of the general themes, specifically, a lack of manpower. Three agents stated the most dangerous position they were in while working as a Border Patrol agent was being very outnumbered when apprehending groups of unknown individuals. The participant with previous law enforcement experience recalled a time when they (Border Patrol agents) originally had visual confirmation of a group of 100 people. This participant indicated that due to the lack of agents in place after consistently watching the group for 12-16 hours, they were only able

to apprehend 40 of the 100 individuals. “Given the amount of time that they had been watching them, the agency had to get what I would say would be the appropriate amount of personnel in place.” This participant’s response is a good example of how themes and subthemes are not mutually exclusive, meaning nature of the job and low morale issues were also present.

One additional participant shared when she felt most in danger, being outnumbered. Even with adequate equipment and firearms in hand, being outnumbered by 30 illegal immigrants was a “massive security concern” by one agent. Based on interview responses, the likelihood of encountering large groups of illegal immigrants and being outnumbered was a common occurrence.

The following interview response is an example of how the nature of the job, terrain, and lack of manpower were overlapping concerns for one participant. This participant indicated that while working a midnight shift, and following a group of six unknown individuals using only his night vision goggles, he described the night as “pure blackness.” After having apprehended the group, one individual attempted to flee the area. Upon re-apprehension, after a brief chase, the former agent realized he and the individual ended up 10 yards of a cliff ledge. He described his backup being more than 45 minutes away. One participant with prior military experience recalled his most dangerous situation stemming from working in the “middle of nowhere,” with no hospitals, no cameras, and no partner nearby. On average he would encounter drug smugglers or groups of seven or so, with the largest group of illegal immigrants being 99. The primary themes of lack of manpower and nature of the job are consistent across most participants.

Themes of *assault and terrain* were identified in two responses. The other participant with prior military experience described his most dangerous situation, working day shift in an area known for human and drug smuggling. He was tracking a group of individuals when the two foot-guides (human smugglers) for the group came running towards him, attempting to run south returning into Mexico. Due to the terrain, they could not go around the agent – he was directly in their path. As they approached the agent, they began throwing rocks and mud, all while disobeying the agent’s commands. They then picked up a large branch and got closer to the agent. While the remaining details of this story were not disclosed, it could have easily become a deadly force encounter.

One former agent described what he recalled as being one of the more dangerous situations he had been in. “It was a confined space, you don't know if he has a weapon or you don't know how many are in there.” This participant described the lighting as “bad.” He continued, stating, “he was in camouflage and he fought - he fought hard. He was kicking and punching. I was at a disadvantage (due to terrain). I was kind of bent over trying to grab this guy, pull him out and he was kicking me in the face.” To conclude, he shared, “the funny thing was, after I was done with all of that, there was another guy in camouflage hiding directly behind me that I didn't see. He was actually tucked up underneath some brush – he didn't fight.” This play-by-play account of an agent being assaulted provides breadth into the reality of agents’ underexplored and lived experiences.

Another former agent spoke of times when working near the international boundary fence, he witnessed, experienced, and heard many stories of “rockings” and similar assaults. “One guy took a cinderblock to his face. I saw kitchen sinks come over the fence and also car tires.” This former agent described his most dangerous experience as a time when he was “rocked” near the fence, cracking a bone in his arm. He described the rock being the size of a cantaloupe, about 6 to 8 inches across. “I was hit, I thought I'd been shot, I couldn't move my arm or my hand, intense pain, shooting up my arm and there was quite a bit of blood.” The agent stated that he felt vulnerable because he was inspecting the location of a suspected hole made in the fence. The international boundary fence is an ideal location for rockings due to the lack of immediate access to the assailant.

Another participant described an example of how agents encounter rocking situations. Agents who are assigned to specific static positions, referred to as an “X”, would conduct their shift in a rock-proof vehicle. These vehicles have steel mesh material welded around the glass portion of the assigned unit to protect against rockings. Agents would be assigned to this vehicle while working at specific static X locations for an entire shift. The former agent described some of the challenges with being assigned to such a location for an entire shift. “In order to do your job, you had to get out of the vehicle.” He further elaborated, saying you would be lucky “to have another agent in your area that was able to come and relieve you for 10 minutes so that you could go to the bathroom; you might get one break during the shift to do that. Otherwise you hoped that you were in an area that had a little bit of tree coverage so you could step out and take care of business.” This interview provides insight not only into this agents lived experiences but

also the complexities of consistently feeling as though his physical security was at risk while working along the international boundary fence.

Dangerous situations posed by the community and public served is the theme present in the two following responses. One former agent described feeling most in danger when he was patrolling an area known for drug smuggling and illegal alien encounters. This participant witnessed a suspicious vehicle, the occupants were throwing stuff out the windows and driving erratically. This led the agent to believe that they were throwing contraband out the window. A traffic stop was initiated, it was discovered that both driver and passenger were U.S. citizens, both teenagers, and they both appeared to be “highly intoxicated.” The driver was detained and the agent called the local police to respond. In 15 minutes, 20-25 locals surrounded the agent and began questioning why a citizen was being detained. The scene was described as hostile and potentially dangerous. One participant described his most dangerous situation as responding to shots fired by what appeared to be a “drunk” Native American tribal member on reservation land. No further details of this event were described. Different station locations near and along the Southwest Border bring out diverse types of public served to include: ranchers, Indian reservations, property owners, and checkpoint drivers as examples. Regardless of land ownership in these locations agents are required to maintain a presence and patrol in these areas.

The following situations encapsulated trials experienced by agents due to the nature of their job. One participant had been assigned to a surveillance capable vehicle, he recalled the feelings of a heightened sense of awareness and being on guard. The

vehicle that he was assigned to remained in an exposed static position where he described the area as having no streetlights and located “in the middle of nowhere.” Sitting inside the vehicle operating the surveillance system, he was unable to see anything or anyone directly outside of his vehicle unless he actually stepped outside. The inside of vehicle has tinted windows and is completely enclosed. In order for these systems to be an asset the vehicle must be located in these desolate areas. While potentially dangerous and not ideal for agents’ safety, it is the nature of the job.

In a law-enforcement position, the nature of the job can prove to be the most dangerous aspect. A participant shared two experiences that were pivotal in her time as a Border Patrol agent. As a new agent, “I responded to a shooting, shots fired – to hear those words on the radio as an agent is always the worst thing you can hear. Immediate feelings of anxiety, fear, stress, everything all at once, chaos – that people are just shooting at us in the desert like a military type experience when people are shooting guns at you and you're shooting at them.” She also described the journeyman probation period (new employee requirements) as being one of the most high-pressure and stressful aspects of the job. When partnered up with a certain journeyman, she recalled a time as a trainee when she was left behind in the desert with no sight of her partner. “I felt many times like if I would have come across armed bandits or drug traffickers or even a group of illegal aliens, I would have obviously been outnumbered and been in a very remote area without radio communication.” She recalled feeling very alone, isolated, and unsafe at that time. Because there were a limited number of women in the Border Patrol, she knew that she could not vocalize her feelings without concerns of reprisal. While this

experience is unique to the participant individually, all agents are required to go through some type of new employee trainee post academy, which may vary per station.

It is important to note that the participants with former law enforcement and military experience shared similar sentiments with the other eight participants when detailing their dangerous encounters in their examples of lack of manpower and assaults. All participants responded to this question. Over all themes: lack of manpower, assaults, and terrain including nature of the job, the local community, the public served, and the journeyman program contributed to their most dangerous situations experienced. When it comes to agents feeling most in danger, the most prevalent three themes include: lack of manpower, assault, and terrain/nature of the job.

Question 3: Perception of Threats to Homeland Security

Question 3 was: Based on your experience as a Border Patrol agent, what do you perceive were the greatest threats to homeland security? Some participants spent a few moments in thought after being asked this question. For those who needed prompting, I employed additional probes to address issues surrounding terrorist infiltration, drug cartels, smugglers, and visa overstays. The distribution of responses to Question 3 are illustrated in Figure 3.

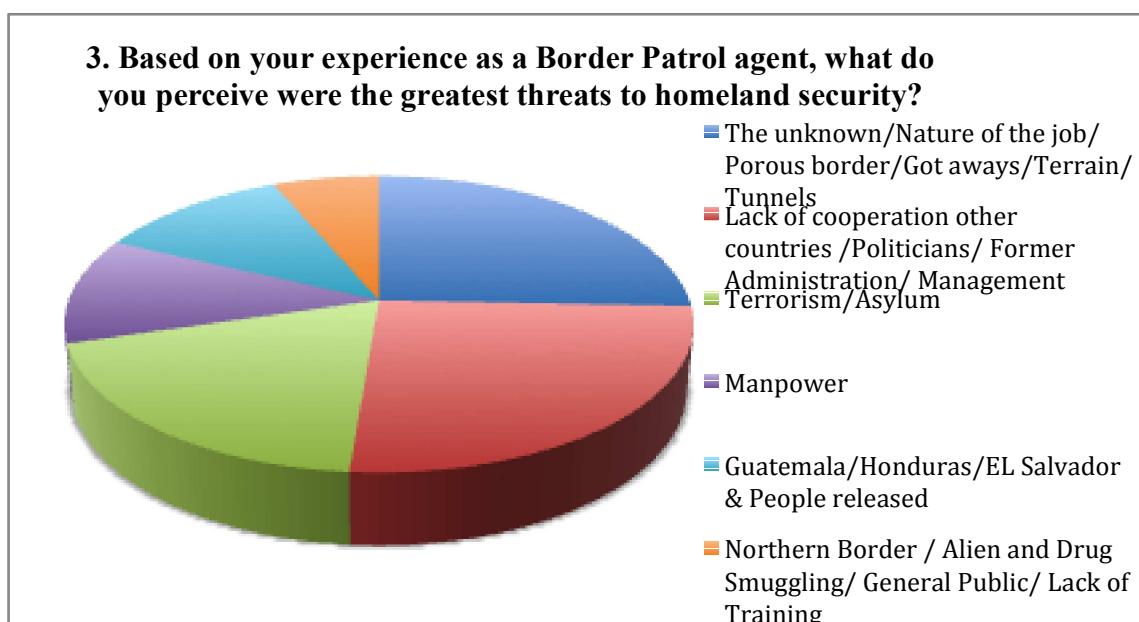


Figure 3. Responses to Question 3.

The former agent with prior law enforcement experience shared a diverse perspective in comparison to that of all other participants. He described the greatest threat to homeland security as the lack of cooperation from other governments. “We provide a lot of aid to a lot of countries and I just feel like they could do a much better job assisting us in our mission to ensure the public safety here.” He further stated that a lot of people who would like to do the United States harm could use the visa waiver program and or a visa to enter into the country and to further their plan. This participant’s unique perspective directly related to the primary themes of this question to include politics and terrorism/asylum.

While encountering terrorism may not be an everyday occurrence for agents in the field, the diversity of the individuals they encounter can vary. One participant shared that she believes terrorism to be the biggest threat to national security, due to lack of

manpower. In her experience along the Southwest Border, she has encountered illegal immigrants from North Africa and Bangladesh who paid up to \$40,000 to be smuggled through the effective and most desolate routes. She further believes that these individuals are often granted asylum if apprehended and is unaware of how they would be fully vetted without properly identifying them; having documentation neither verifies their true identity nor provides a basis to research foreign criminal history. She further stated “we may not have any terrorist threats when we talked to them initially before we pass them on for them to claim asylum. But, if you look at further research now the Canadians are saying Bangladesh is associated with terrorism.” Different station locations along the Southwest Border see an influx of illegal immigrants from varying locations, family units, and unaccompanied juveniles. Specific border locations are preferred for various reasons, to include the following: smuggling fees, accessibility into the United States, and likelihood to evade arrest.

One agent responded by stating that based on his experience, the greatest threat to homeland security is twofold. One reason is a lack of training for agents. Secondly, he elaborated on the porous nature of the border by stating “if people are in fact bringing weapons of mass destruction or any kind of material over the border, it's a needle in a haystack to find, and their methods are far more advanced than ours.” In further supporting his own opinion, he stated that the nefarious cartel criminal terrorist organizations are “on all the time – we were on 8-10 hours a day and we don't really change our methods (operations).” This participant suggested that the Border Patrol does

not readily change its methods and its adversaries' methods are perceived to be superior to that of the agents.

A former agent with prior military experience stated that the ignorance of the general public and the politicians is the greatest threat to national security. "It's a lack of coverage (manpower) and also the lack of the intestinal fortitude of representatives to actually allow us to enforce the law, let the patrol agents actually defend themselves, actually protect themselves, and get their job done." He gave an example: if an agent is getting rocked, the agency would have preferred rather than defend himself, that the agent run away and avoid confrontation. He explained that it was assaultive individuals (smugglers) activity, specifically "running drugs, people, criminals, terrorists, and whatever else they wanted to smuggle because they were very aware of our policies and had insiders." He further mentioned that the northern border is at great risk due to being wide-open. This is an example of how a lack of manpower, a porous border, and political impacts can hamper agent's jobs and national security.

The second participant with prior military experience shared a different view of terrorism crossing into the United States through the Southwest Border. A reason for different viewpoints could stem from working on different specialty units and locations along the Southwest Border. He stated, "I never felt like terrorism was a huge concern as far as terrorists coming in, because of the cartels – making billions. They're billion dollar corporations. They know if they allow that, we are capable of shutting down the border." Based on his experiences, he believes people coming from and traveling through Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are the greatest threats to national security.

One participant described the greatest threats to national security as illegal immigrants being released into the public after apprehension, despite prosecutorial efforts by agents. He stated, “people that we were required to let go of (release) we gave them a Notice to Appear. We would basically take these people who had criminal records or unknown criminal affiliations and walk them out the front door of the station and tell them that they had to report to court on X date in the future and some of those people were given court dates three, four, five years down the road and they're just allowed to live in the United States freely until they have that court date.” Moreover, he stated “All we knew was a little bit of information that we were able to gather on them at the station and know as long as they didn't have any felony history in the United States, they were free to go.” This is not only a national security threat example but this participant also shared the sentiment of why try hard to effect an arrest if they were simply being released into society.

Agents often lacked information to know if individuals about to be released had any foreign criminal history. One agent stated “during our questioning, if they told us no, we had no way of proving that they were telling the truth.” This former agent continued to describe the challenges faced when interacting with certain illegal immigrants who were dishonest about their true identity. “There were a number of times we catch people and they would give us a name and date of birth, but once we took their fingerprints it would come back saying that they had already been arrested in the US using a different name and a different date of birth. Sometimes people use six, seven different identities. If they're lying about their identity, be willing to bet that they're lying about their criminal

issues as well.” This interview response provides insight into the complexities of national security threats and agent’s lived experience.

One participant perceived that management acted more like politicians than caring leaders. “They kind of lose sense of the day-to-day operations and what it is to be an agent and come up with these ideas that may seem good on paper.” He felt that management should support agent decision-making, which could make agents less apprehensive and anxious about doing their job properly. In addition, this participant had concerns about the unknown nature of the job stating, “you never know who's coming across [the border] and what their intentions are, especially countries that are known to harbor terrorists.” This is an example of how the unknown nature of the job may be one of the primary national security threats, given the perceptions of agents in the field who are living the experience.

The following themes relate to former agents’ sentiments concerning “what we don’t know that we don’t know:” nature of the job and porous Southwest Border. One participant spoke about the inability of knowing the location and actual number of individuals entering illegally into the United States, stating, “there’s no proven method to knowing exactly how they are getting in, where they are getting in and who is getting in. We don't know how many got away. Somebody could have crossed with a dirty bomb five years ago. We'd have no idea because he could have just been one of the thousands of attributed got-aways.” The term porous border receives significant attention when discussing threats to homeland security. Throughout many interview results in this study the complexity of the porous border is a reoccurring theme.

One participant stated that in his experience the greatest threat to homeland security is “not knowing what we don’t know.” He elaborated on this point by stating “it’s the threats that get away,” meaning they are unknown, unidentified, and unaccounted for. He said, “we would see them from a couple of mountain ranges away and catch a glimpse of them. We would get over there and could not find them – they just kind of disappeared.” Describing the challenges of not knowing what you don’t know, he also described the complexities of tunnels. “They could smuggle through a device one piece at a time. Who knows what they’re bringing in?” In addition to the challenges posed by the terrain and tunnel smuggling activity, this participant shared insight into approximately how many people are identified. “We were catching anywhere from 10 to 50 percent and in groups of 20 to 30 to 50 – we were only getting about half the groups that came through.” The interviews suggest that, from a security perspective, when there are so many who evade arrest and with such a porous physical border, perhaps greater attention should be paid to these threats perceived by agents in the field.

Politics played a key role in the experience of some participants. One agent stated that the former presidential administration (2009-2017) was the greatest threat to national security. He elaborated, stating that during his experience in the field, it was evident that the former administration and political climate “promoted leadership that had no desire to properly protect the country and properly enforce the laws.” Agents were directly impacted by the political sway of the presidential administration.

One participant described her experience of becoming an agent as eye opening, saying “I joined the Border Patrol and my eyes were open to the fact that national

security is not at all enforced to the level that I felt like it needed to be.” She described the treatment people receive by cartel members as they are smuggled across the borders, asserting that “you have people making billions of dollars on the black market, shuttling these people (illegal immigrants), shuffling them across the border from babies all the way to 90-year-olds putting their lives in danger, taking advantage of them, raping them, starving them, giving them no access to clean food or water and making them hike days on end in the desert.” To conclude she stated that, “there's that element of putting those people in harm's way and taking advantage of them as well as charging them thousands upon thousands of dollars to supposedly smuggle them to their location in the United States.” Why this type of “nefarious activity” cannot be stopped is clearly a concern of many of the participants.

The same participant shared a few different responses to this question, elaborating on known complexities. She said that the unawareness should not stop with the idea of human smuggling but rather understand that along with it comes the violence that surrounds drug smuggling. “Drug smuggling brings a whole other side of violence and crime because drugs are typically guarded by guns and guns mean bandits and ex-military or militia type trained individuals and ultimately bringing drugs into the society – that's a whole other element of crime.” Having mentioned the porous nature of the border, she also said “the fact that if people can be shuffled across the border so easily and drugs can be shuffled across the border so easily, then what about weapons? Weapons of mass destruction, the chemical components, it goes on and on. If there's a will there's a way, and it can very easily be done because the borders are very porous and

there are not enough agents.” Her interview concluded with her statement, “smuggling and terrorist activity can easily take place on the southwest border because it is so vast and so porous; they are actually professionals at what they do.” Agents’ experience suggests that they have ongoing concerns that the Southwest Border is a vulnerability, in terms of national security.

This question brought about diverse answers in regards to the greatest threat to national security. All other question and participant responses correlated to a few specific themes. The most common theme present in the response to the greatest threats to homeland security was the unknown, nature of the job, porous border, got-aways, terrain, and tunnels. The second theme was terrorism and those seeking asylum.

Question 4: Bureaucratic or Political Problems

I asked the following question: Based on your experience as a Border Patrol agent, do you perceive any threats or dangers due to bureaucratic or political problems? This was the first question in the interview where a participant stated that they did not have a response. While other participants provided lengthy responses to this question. For those who needed prompting, I employed additional probes to address issues surrounding mixed messages from leaders, contradictory policies/implementation, changes in national or presidential policy/political appointees, and or other management problems. The distribution of responses to Question 4 are illustrated in Figure 4.

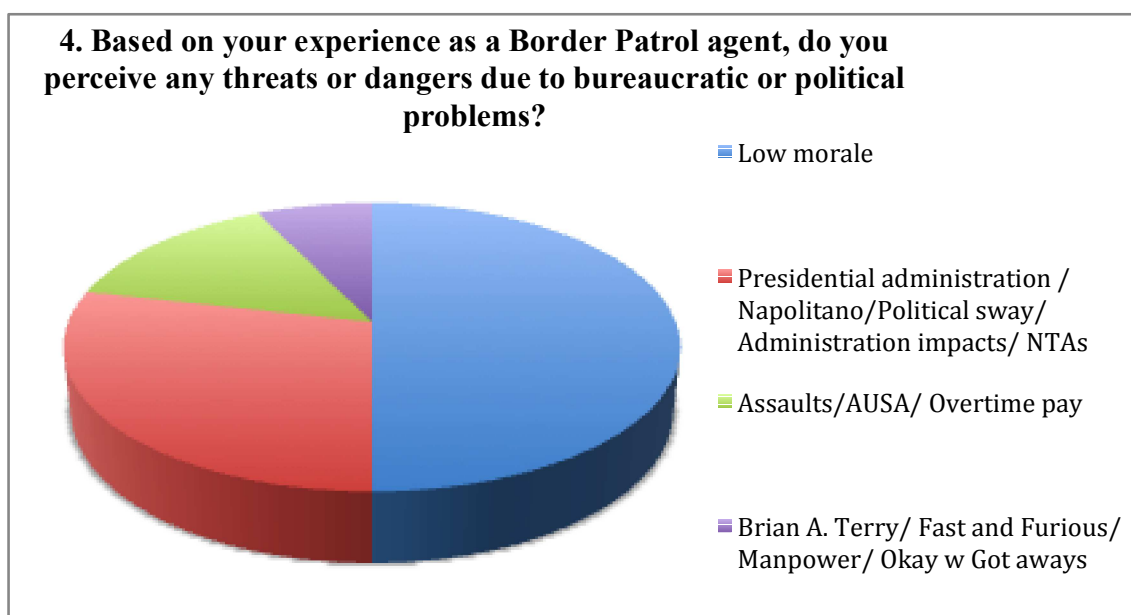


Figure 4. Responses to Question 4.

Responses to Question 4 included: the themes: low morale included -Internal hiring details/ Management (kingdom building)/ Not able to arrest locals/Management worried about liability (lack of support use of force) versus agents best interest/ Management just for pay/ Lack of trust in leadership from station managerial level.

Not all participants had an opinion or shared a response to this question. The one participant with previous law enforcement experience responded by saying that he did not have a response. One participant stated that she felt the impacts of certain enforcement capabilities curtailed due to political and managerial problems. She stated, “bureaucratically they didn't want you to go out and just clean up the streets of illegals in the neighborhoods that we were working.” The participant continued on, saying, “It makes you feel like your hands are tied. Your job is to enforce immigration law and you're in an area which is known for border crossings and other illegal activity.” She

believed that this is an example of why morale was low among agents. These experiences paralleled the two participants with prior military experience in regards to political climate impacts on agents.

A participant with former military experience prior to becoming an agent compared the Bush and Obama administration, “under President Bush the job could be done and under President Obama hands were tied and assaults increased because the AUSA wouldn’t charge them.” He further mentioned that during the prior administration (2009-2017) “there wasn’t the enforcement.” Elaborating further, he explained that it was “super frustrating because guys [illegal immigrants] knew once they got through and past us, the defensive line, essentially they were free to go.” He said, “they would get released on their own recognizance and nobody was going to come forward when they missed their court date.” In addition to the challenges seen by agents he mentioned “ICE really got their hands tied under that administration (2009-2017). There wasn’t the enforcement.” He summed up his response by saying that in all aspects agents were massively and rapidly impacted by the political climate. Another participant with former military experience stated that in his area of operations, there was a lack of prosecutorial consequences from the AUSA office for instances of assaults against Border Patrol agents. As a result, these individuals, most often foot-guides, became more “brazen” over time resulting in a more dangerous operating environment for agents. While participants shared many politically driven experiences it ultimately lead to the theme of decreased morale amongst these former agents.

Agents shared, issues pertaining to management also lead to decreased morale. One former agent shared his frustration with management promoting people based on nepotism as opposed to merit. He complained of not being able to use his skills and talents because there was no accountability in the internal hiring process (details and management). He said that this led to colleagues ill-prepared for leadership being placed in positions of power, resulting in situations where “when you need your backup, they're not there” because they were not familiar with operating under pressure or re-allocating resources when needed. He further described that the “catch and release with the Notice to Appear (NTAs), arresting people and letting them go, that was definitely a political issue and frustrating for agents.” This participant’s two-fold response provided insight into the complexities of how presidential administration level and station level politics directly impacted agent’s experiences.

One participant shared his experiences with his former management stating that due to a decrease in manpower, they had to centralize their efforts closer to town, disregarding areas further east and west. When agents were made aware of potential illicit activity in these unmanned areas, the participant shared how the situation would unfold, stating that he would “go ahead and answer that traffic and then a supervisor would get out on the radio and say, no, you stay in town.” He said that when agents were attempting to apprehend a group of illegal immigrants or drug traffickers and were about to work past their scheduled shift, they would be called in from the field because no additional hours could be worked. He described this experience as a “shame and a disgrace because when they would go in back to their station, there would be no one to cover them so

basically those people are just running freely (not apprehended).” He said “you're never going to get in trouble for not catching bodies versus going over your hours.” This example illustrates the perception of agents that management would place importance on following station rules over enforcement objectives of the Border Patrol.

One participant shared his frustration with inaccuracies in reporting the appropriate amount of nefarious activity in his area of operation. A certain reporting system was used to make it appear that the station area of operation was 100 percent effective (apprehensions at 100 percent), which agents knew was not the case. “The stats affect everything” he stated. Agents would not get assigned to areas that were reported as controlled, thus solidifying the 100 percent effectiveness nature of that area. This resulted in the loss of an overtime budget, less training, and less funding overall. He further mentioned the impacts of the statistics on “funding, training, pay, hours, quality, and life.” He said, “those stats are what justify the need for everything so when the stats show secure, everything stops – even down to details (internal jobs/assignments).” He added, “we would get details based on the fact that there was so much traffic (illicit). We don't get details anymore. So you're overworked or you're underfunded. It was ridiculous.” It was clear that some respondents felt that statistics were being used to support misguided management objectives and to serve political agendas, rather than fill the mission objectives.

One former agent described management as “kingdom-building” where promotions were not always based on merit, skill, and education. He described promotional system as lacking credibility, nepotistic, and seniority driven. “You could

have someone who essentially just sat in their truck for 10 years and succeeded in not getting fired,” alluding to situations where agents with more seniority would be promoted regardless of his work ethic, job skills, education, or other potentially valuable attributes. He remarked that management in his station appeared to be unable to make decisions and were more concerned with legal or political liability as opposed to “effectively enforcing the law.” Some interviews clearly indicated a frustration with management and leadership and a difference in perspective about values around enforcement.

In the application process to become an agent, a college degree is not a requirement. This does not mean, however, that there are no agents with advanced degrees. One participant suggested that due to a lack of education and training, agents are left vulnerable when it comes time to responding to a use of force situation and how to accurately document the encounter. Meaning many agents lack policy knowledge and the education to properly create the required memorandum. He further elaborated that it seemed management had a misunderstanding of what certain policies were, stating “agents had a fear of not knowing exactly how they should respond in less lethal situations due to contradictory messages from leadership.” He further described how this lack of support and policy knowledge can lead to dangerous situations for agents potentially questioning actions in the field. In situations where one needs to act quickly and correctly, and determine the appropriate level of force that needs to be used “you're in the middle of nowhere and you have 10 dudes around you – you're fighting for your life.” He suggested that this is not an ideal time to second guess training and one does what one can to defend oneself. One critical comment about management was: “I would

say by and large they don't want to work in the field anymore and are not good at it to begin with or they see it as a way to make money out of doing other jobs.” Training and management themes repeated during interviews illustrated the complexities agents face in potential deadly force situations.

A lack of trust in leadership at the station managerial level to the presidential administration level (2009-2017) is the overarching theme in the following example. This participant continued in saying “I'll never forget, Napolitano who was the secretary of homeland security at the time gave a speech the same year that Brian Terry was killed. She gave the speech in El Paso, Texas saying that the border was safer than it had ever been before. I just felt so angry and somewhat betrayed by that statement.” She elaborated in explaining that officials don't want the border to “look unsafe or out of control under their watch, everybody's trying to make things look good and always prove to their superiors that they're doing a good job.” This is an example that leadership can portray whatever image suits their needs and political agenda.

One participant stated the greatest threats and dangers to homeland security were due to bureaucratic or political problems of the former president (2009-2017). He remembered when apprehending illegal immigrants “if the administration wanted them released unlawfully they would. You couldn't enforce the laws.” He explained that as an agent apprehending these individuals he felt in the middle of it. He clarified in explaining that agents were required to follow the guidelines provided by senior staff regardless of the laws they were sworn to uphold. These guidelines would trickle down from administration level and directly impact the agents' ability to do their job.

The response to this question brought out an array of responses that directly related back to either the presidential administration at the time (2009-2017), politics at the station level, or assaults, training/lack of education, and the majority of these responses hampered morale amongst agents. When administrations change, agents perceive that they are directly affected.

Question 5: Isolation From Friends, Family, and Home Community

I asked the following question: Did you perceive any threats or dangers posed to you because of isolation from friends, family, or your home community? Two participants stated they did not have any experiences to share on this topic. For those who needed prompting, I employed additional probes to address issues surrounding: emotional or physical stressors and how they were able to cope? The distribution of responses to Question 5 are illustrated in Figure 5.

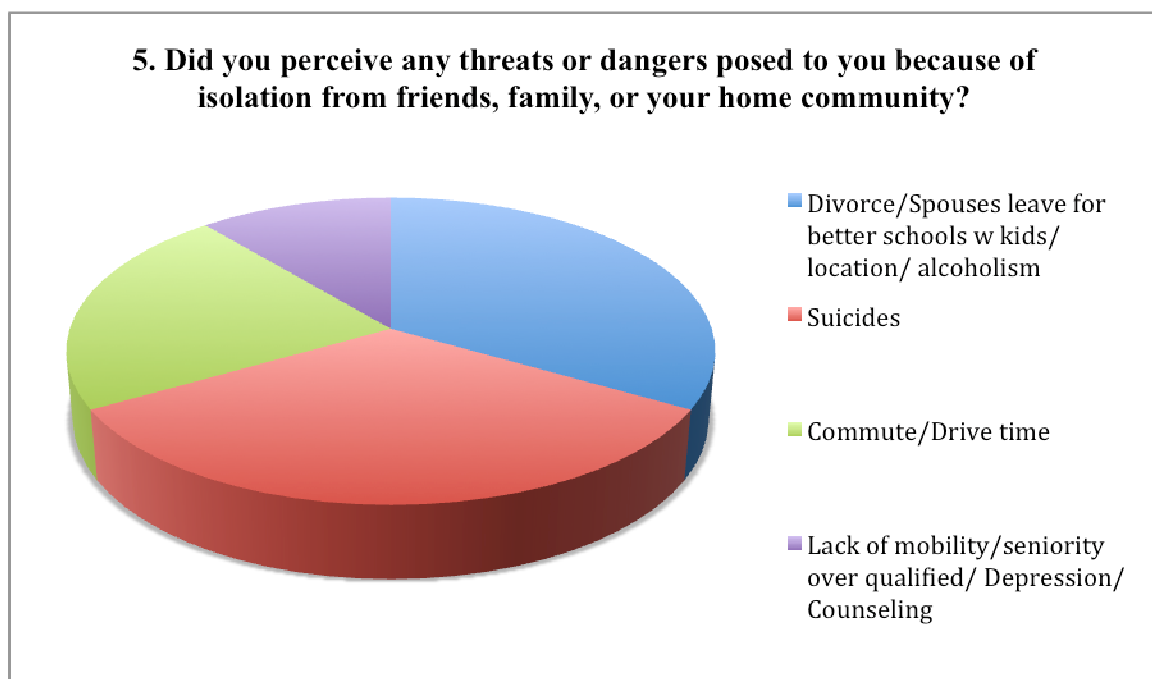


Figure 5. Responses to Question 5.

All 11 participants were from locations other than where they were stationed. The majority of participants missed their support systems and throughout the entirety of their career they looked for ways to get back home. The one participant with former law enforcement experience prior to the Border Patrol stated that while he missed his support system, the real reason that he left his position was due to the Border Patrol's lack of mobility. He further elaborated on this point and shared that the Border Patrol would "overlook your training and experience that you brought to the agency and pick someone with more seniority." He stated, "I also wanted to go someplace where I felt like my talents would be better utilized." The theme of location and lack of mobility are evident in this former agent's response. While the location was not ideal, the fact that he was a previous law enforcement official and was unable to obtain internal positions/details at his station due to a lack of Border Patrol seniority, where he could have used his talents, skills, and abilities, he ultimately left.

A few participants shared struggles that impacted family life based on available housing locations in an acceptable distance from their station. One of the female participants stated that she was able to create a sense of community with her colleagues. She said that many of her male counterparts struggled from high divorce rates. Elaborating further, she stated spouses were "taking their children out of the area because of lack of good schooling, people didn't want their children to grow up in the border areas – a lot of depressed agents because of their home situations." One agent stated, "I think it would've been very hard to raise a family out there being so far away from family." In

order to cope he passed the time by applying to different agencies in order to get back home as soon as possible. There are several themes present throughout this answer to include location and family.

One participant with prior military experience before the Border Patrol stated that because he lived in an urban area, he was able to leave work at work and “get lost in the crowd.” He mentioned that there were many agents who lived in other locations that struggled and that there were plenty of agent suicides that came in waves. Another participant with prior military experience simply stated, “I missed home, but I was never miserable there.” Even though the two former military participants shared different viewpoints on this topic, their responses were consistent with other participants.

One participant shared that the job takes a toll on the quality of life. “Your quality of life in the patrol was horrible,” he stated. “I miss it, but I would never go back to it.” This participant shared that he did use the assistance of a counselor and spoke with EAP, when having issues adapting to the job and working “crazy” hours. He mentioned that suicide rates, divorce, and alcoholism are common in the patrol. He further stated that while he was not concerned for his personal safety, his personal life was very difficult. In response to this question one participant shared that his commute was at least 1.5 hours in each direction. Another participant shared a similar sentiment and simply stated “drive time.” Commute was a common theme amongst participants, issues such as a lack of decent, safe, and affordable housing near their stations was to blame.

One female participant shared “I didn't really know what I was getting myself into” because she did not have any prior law enforcement or military experience before

the Border Patrol. Due to the changes in shifts and sleep irregularity, she stated that relating to the job, she struggled with depression. The irregular shifts made this participant feel unable to be a functioning part of society due to the inability to attend church services and other normal outings. In addition to shift work her commute and keeping in shape consumed the majority of her free time. “I just wanted to go to sleep and I didn't necessarily want to actively do anything to hurt myself, but I think I got to a point where I just was okay if I just slept all the time and didn't want to participate in my life anymore, was more of just in survival mode.”

This participant had a friend (agent) commit suicide, “It was very upsetting because as much as suicide is talked about in certain lines of work, it still hits you hard because you realize that we're all vulnerable even if we're trying to act tough and act adequate and strong and able to do the job.” She completed her answer to this question in saying “it's not a normal job.” The primary theme based on this interview question was divorce/alcoholism/location. The secondary themes were suicide and commute/drive time.

While the themes of home life, commute, suicides, and lack of mobility were evident throughout these responses. Suicide, divorce, and location concerns mentioned by participants all directly impacted agents' desire to remain in their location and ultimately their position as an agent. Minor changes such as career advancement opportunities could increase agents' morale and potentially retention rates.

Question 6: Additional Thoughts on Personal Threats or Dangers

I asked: Is there anything else you would like to share about the threats and dangers posed to you personally as a Border Patrol agent? This question mirrors Question 1; it simply gave the participants the opportunity to elaborate on any earlier remarks. For those who needed prompting, I employed additional probes to address issues surrounding: the border or any general thoughts they may have had. The distribution of responses to Question 6 are illustrated in Figure 6.

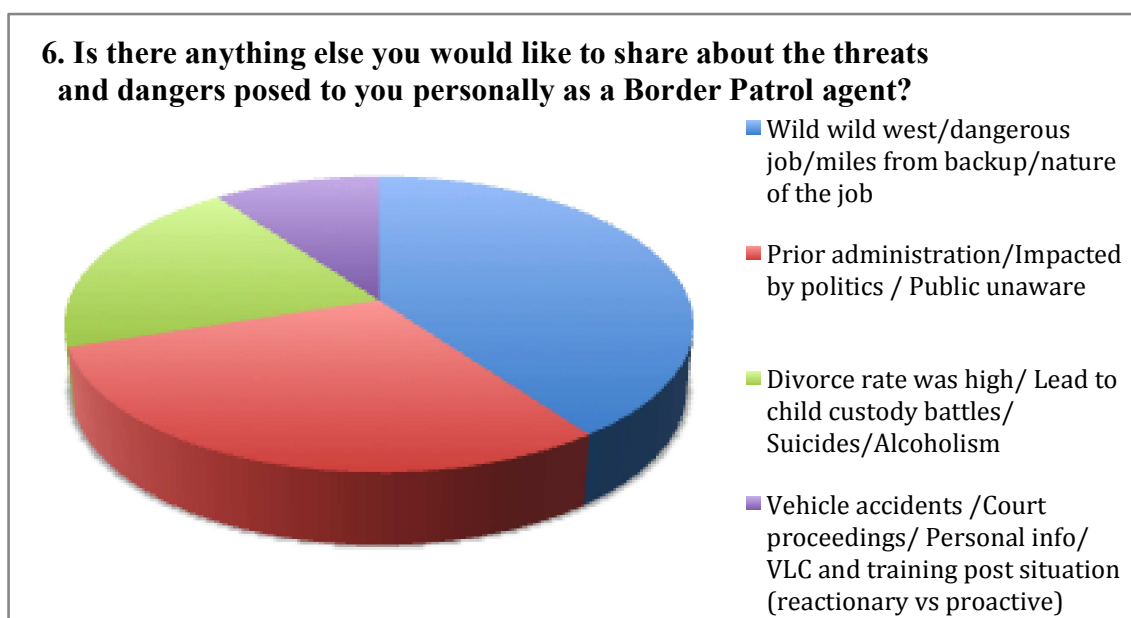


Figure 6. Responses to Question 6.

The safety and security of Border Patrol agents is best understood through interviews where agents are able to share their experiences. One of the female participants from this study referred to the border as “a very dangerous place – the Wild-Wild West.” She discussed encounters with illegal immigrants in the field, stating that

these groups take extreme measures to remained undetected, and if found, they will do whatever they need to do in order to escape, to include assaulting agents. “They hate you,” she emphasized. She described the border as “out of control” and that the public is completely unaware of the situation there. “I think that these people think politically about immigration reform and if they actually saw what really goes on down there and how people are getting across, they would have a better insight of what's actually going on because as a female agent or as an agent in general we've lived it.” She further described what has happened to agents and risks of doing their job. “It’s very dangerous what's happening and there's a lot of agents that lives are at risk every single day.” The themes: lack of public awareness, dangerous border, and assaults are evident throughout this response.

One participant with former military experience prior to the Border Patrol described threats posed to him personally, “We were so heavily impacted by politics and all the stress of the job.” He discussed that the divorce rate was high, which led to child custody battles and suicides. He described how this could impact an agent’s financial stability; starting with heavy drinking which lead to vehicle accidents, and divorce to include child support. He stated his financial stress “was more stressful to me than going out and having bad guys on the side of a mountain in the dark.” It is important to note that due to this participant’s prior military experience, this may be why financial stress versus apprehending a criminal on the side of a mountain at night weighed on him more heavily than it would for an agent without military experience.

One participant shared his frustration with the lack of accurate apprehension reporting and how this in turn had an impact on his personal security as an agent. "We had been told not to report people who got away from us," he said. He elaborated how this worked out logistically, stating "we were told instead of reporting they had gotten away, to report them as being turned over to a different station and that made it look in the books that they were still in the process of being worked. So we (station management) were able to report at the end of our shift that we were close to 100 percent apprehensions in our area." He further stated that falsifying the number of apprehensions had an impact on agents, as "it made it look like we didn't need any additional manpower and didn't need any additional equipment because we obviously had everything we needed to be able to catch everybody." In conclusion he said, "So had those numbers been reported appropriately, there's a possibility that we could have had additional manpower and equipment to be able to protect us." This is an example of how a qualitative study is ideal for this topic versus a quantitative study, where numbers could be manipulated.

One agent described threats as ever changing because once something happens to an agent, they change protocol for the short-term; it is a reactionary versus a proactive approach. "We might get a VLC (computer based training) or the use of force (a required quarterly training) might be geared to that quarter or two based on the particular incident that happened but there's no real change." He described a sense of feeling alone, stating, "you go out there you're pretty much alone, you're overworked, you're tired and stressed." He described sleep deprivation as a personal safety issue, stating, "You're working the midnight shift your sleep schedule is off." He mentioned there were a lot of vehicle

accidents at his station. It is important to note that there are shift rotations that stations require. Some stations require these changes on a monthly basis while others it can be quarterly as an example.

Agents are required to wear velcro nametags adhered to their uniforms with their first initial and last name visible. To some agents this may be a security issue; one agent has another example of personal security concerns relating to his name being public. One former agent stated that because he had been in a number of court proceedings, he was at risk personally because his name and identity were publically available. This is example of how agents' personal information makes them feel vulnerable.

The following two participants shared an example of how their personal security was impacted. One participant simply stated that "you're out there and you're by yourself and miles and miles from backup." One other participant shared that the prior administration (2009- 2017) "promoted illegal immigration" and he found this to be a threat. He further mentioned, "The biggest enemy is ourselves, and the bureaucracy, and red tape." These two examples of politics and lack of backup were not uncommon responses among participants.

One agent described how she felt in survival mode everyday. She elaborated, "feeling vulnerable and feeling threatened and feeling in danger, I just have to survive for today," were her common sentiments on the job. Additional stressors noted were the physical border threats, internal agency conflicts, and management. She described a level of heightened awareness due to elements that surrounded the job. "I even at times felt I was in danger just riding in the vehicle with a fellow agent driving because they're

driving erratically and the truck is old and the tires are bald. I felt like everything was dangerous.” This participant elaborated on additional potential threats of the job as the desert, terrain, weather, heat stroke and needing air support as a few examples. While participants touched on a variety of personal threats, it is important to note that most of these concerns have secondary or tertiary impacts. Often times these impacts have negative implications on their home life.

It is important to reiterate that this question mirrors that of Question 1, in that not everyone provided a response. The second participant with prior military experience and the former law enforcement official participant both stated that they had nothing specific to elaborate on in response to this question. In conjunction with one other participant who also stated that he had nothing to further mention for this question. The common themes for this question were elements relating to the job to include (wild-wild west/dangerous job/miles from backup/nature of the job) and external politics (prior administration/impacted by politics / public unawareness).

Question 7: Additional Thoughts on Threats or Dangers to National Security

I asked the following question: Is there anything else you would like to share about the threats and dangers posed to national security from a Border Patrol agent perspective? This question mirrors Question 3; it allowed participants to share any additional experiences they may have had. For those who needed prompting, I employed additional probes to address issues surrounding: the border or any general thoughts they may have had. The distribution of responses to Question 7 are illustrated in Figure 7.

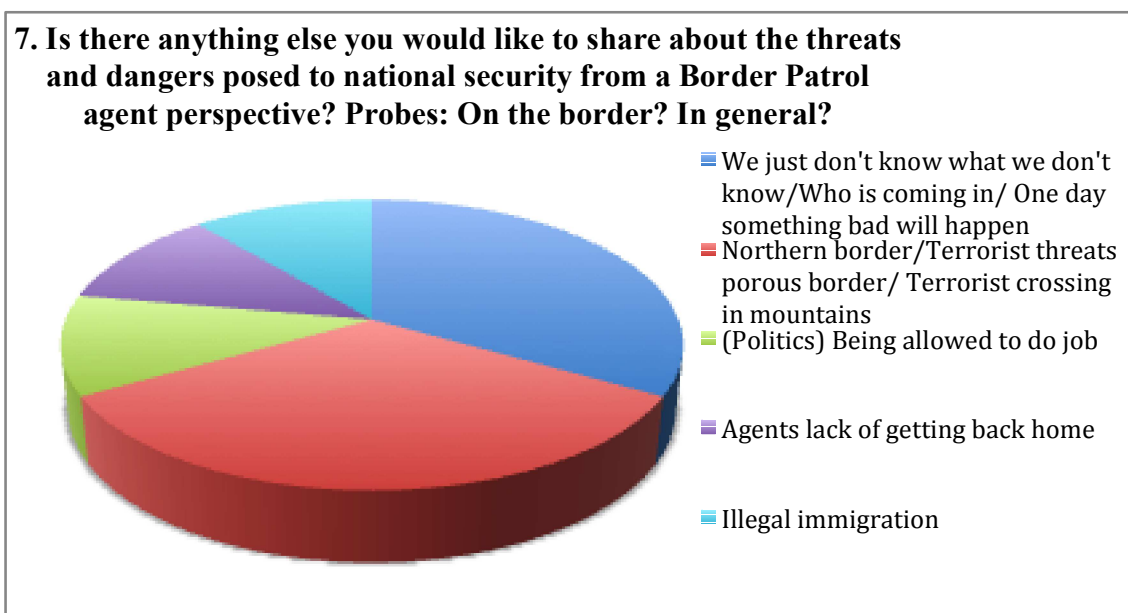


Figure 7. Responses to Question 7.

This study was specific to the Southwest Border, however, some participants had experience along the Southwest and Northern border alike. One participant stated that the lack of manpower and the border in general is the greatest threat to homeland security. She went on to say “I think that the biggest threat to national security is the northern border, especially due to lack of manpower up there, but also due to the lack of infrastructure up there; there's no fences, there's no walls.” She returned her thoughts back to the Southwest Border and shared that people from China and Bangladesh are “paying \$40,000,” referring to the smuggling fees. In her response she stated that for someone who wanted to remain undetected, it would be much easier to fly to Canada and obtain access to the United States that way due to the porous northern border, thus solidifying her opinion of the northern border being the biggest threat to homeland security. While the borders and infrastructure are different along the Northern and

Southwest Border, it is also important to look at immigration requirement standards (or ability to remain anonymous) in Mexico and Canada, as any potential illegal immigrants who cross either border would have to enter into one of those two countries before the United States.

One participant with former military experience prior to the Border Patrol stated that the biggest threats to homeland security continue because agents are not allowed to do their job. “If we're allowed to do our jobs and we're allowed to find the bad guys and get the bad guys out of the country, hit targets that they (agents) want to hit, but they (agents) can't because they're not allowed to.” He gave the example of the gangs in sanctuary cities. In conclusion he said, “We need to be allowed to use the tools that we have.” This participant’s example demonstrates when he was an agent, agents felt hampered by the administration and politics.

Throughout the research findings, the prior military participant’s experiences were similar with the majority of the other participants with one exception in Question 6. The other participant with military experience prior to Border Patrol stated that he believed manpower and the porous border to be one of the greatest threats to national security. “We don't know the unknown that could potentially come across the border.” He further mentioned, “Terrorist organizations could easily take advantage of the anonymity especially along the southwest border.” Another suggestion that he made was to allow agents to transfer back to their home region. Many agents mentioned that feeling stuck along the Southwest Border was a primary reason for leaving. For them, “stuck” means

both a lack of internal agency mobility and external, with no opportunity to get back home.

Manpower was a reoccurring theme throughout participants' responses in national security and personal security threats and dangers. One agent suggested that the secluded nature of his area of operation, such as mountainous regions, were not properly staffed and this was an area where "high value crossers" would cross to remain undetected. He described high value crossers as "aliens from special interest countries, specifically with known terrorist ties." He described that people from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq had been apprehended in those desolate areas. "You never saw them crossing downtown - they were always out in the mountains in the harder to reach areas." This comment suggests that these people were attempting to remain anonymous by crossing in areas where they were not expecting an agent's presence.

While politically, illegal immigration is at the forefront of news media, the reality of agents' lives and the dangers they face conducting their jobs are rarely mentioned. One participant stated that illegal immigration is the biggest threat to national security. Having lived it as an agent, he had a new sense of awareness and what illegal immigration entails. One former agent simply stated, "We just don't know what we don't know." Another participant stated that the biggest threat to national security stems from "being stretched thin and not knowing who is coming into the United States." He further mentioned that the Border Patrol lacked proper investigative capabilities. An additional participant mirrored the above sentiment by sharing "something's going to happen really

bad one day.” These comments concerning border anonymity stem from the difficult reality of accounting for a known unknown.

The last response to this question shared similar viewpoints with other participants and also highlighted how an uneducated public negatively impacts the border based on their naïve viewpoints. One participant shared that there was a feeling that something was going on, but agents were not made privy to sensitive information. She said, “I just got the sense that there was more going on or more that can be addressed.” Based on her experience she noted “I think that the average American citizen has no idea whatsoever what's really going on at the borders and don't realize how potentially dangerous they are to our national security.” In addition to the unknown this participant also shared that the trafficking of people done by the cartels is a threat because there is a much bigger network to look at as far as operations. While this participant brought up three separate ideas, her in-depth explanation about American citizens not knowing what is going on at the border highlights the opinion that even though immigration is in the news the reality of the border remains obscured.

The unknown nature of the border was the overarching theme from participants for this question. As a researcher I ask myself, is the reason for such ambiguity due to the lack of manpower along the Southwest Border? Agents mentioned the terrain throughout their responses as being a challenge to traverse and therefore unable to see what lies ahead? Are the camera technologies stations are equipped with not sufficient? Herein lies an example of the complexities that Border Patrol agents face in their line of work and why the unknown nature of the border remains the biggest threat to national security. One

participant stated that he had no additional experiences to share about this topic. The other three primary themes amongst these responses related to terrorism, lack of relocation, and agents being able to do their job.

Question 8: Suggestions or Recommendations for DHS or Border Patrol

I asked the following question: Do you have suggestions or recommendations to DHS/ Border Patrol to improve agent's personal security? Similar to that of Question 2, participants were quick to answer this question without pause. There were no probes for this question. All participants did provide a response to this question. The distribution of responses to Question 8 are illustrated in Figure 8.

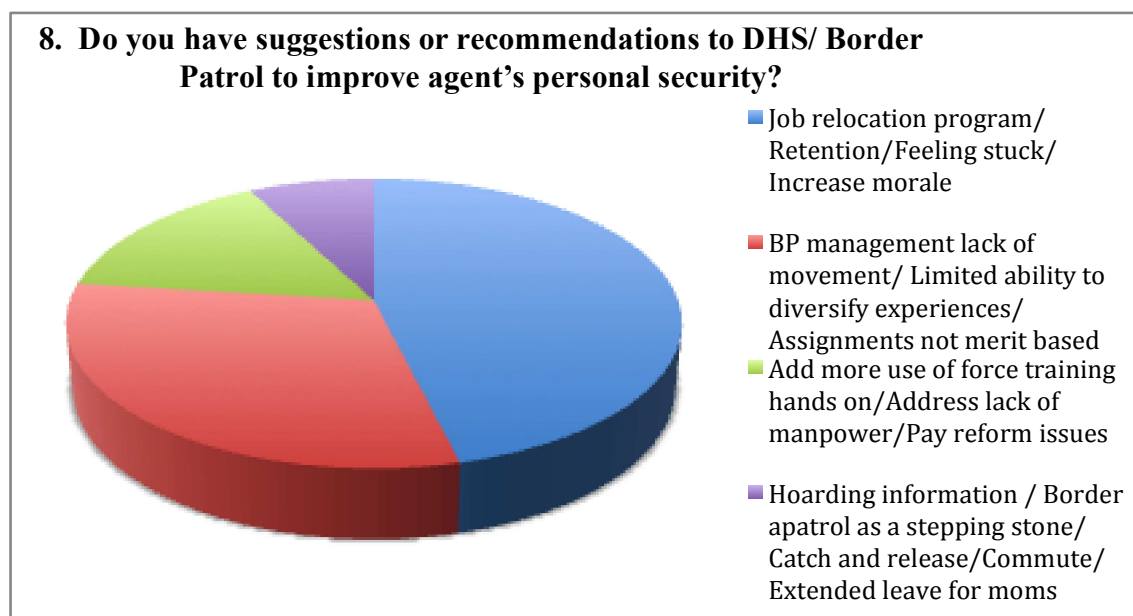


Figure 8. Responses to Question 8.

Participants shared their recommendations and some also explained why they left the Border Patrol. The participant with former law enforcement experience shared two

separate recommendations for the Border Patrol. “The agency has clearly demonstrated a need, yet they won't let people who could truly help them execute their mission.” He suggested that if employees were able to work at a location that suited them and their family such as a “voluntary relocation program” this would increase morale and they could retain employees who would not want to leave the agency. Lastly, he suggested, “If DHS did a much better job of inter-agency coordination and cooperation the department as a whole would be much better.” He mentioned that “hoarding information” does not help employees carry out the mission. This participant shared a perspective that was not commonly found amongst responses but does have specific applicability to increase agents effectiveness, inter-agency coordination, and not allowing the hoarding of information. His response could have come from his prior law enforcement experience in that it worked for his previous agency. No other participant mentioned this recommendation and again it is important to highlight that no other participant had former law enforcement experience prior to the Border Patrol.

The inability to retain agents is a stumbling block for the Border Patrol as evidenced by participant's responses. One of the former female agents shared that if the Border Patrol offered the “opportunity for people to transfer to different locations easier, the flexibility to move around a little bit more, I think it would keep more people in the agency.” She stated that a lot of colleagues, including her, left their position because they felt stuck. Having worked in a desolate area, the inability to move around made it feel like there was “no way to get out.” In addition to the location issues, the Border Patrol pay reform act caused her pay to decrease, thus increasing her financial stress. She

concluded by saying “I think that the Border Patrol is a great stepping stone to get into law enforcement - it’s a whole different form of law enforcement; the line (border) is one of the more dangerous areas.” This participant and one other share a similar sentiment in that the Border Patrol is unlike most other common law enforcement departments, comparing it to a military entity.

One participant with former military experience prior to the Border Patrol stated that agents needed more training. He clarified by saying, “hands on training” not computer based VLC training. In order to increase “officer presence and confidence” he recommended bolstering training efforts in “use of force training.” He stated that it is important that this training initiative focus on how to “deescalate” in use of force situations. The second participant with military experience prior to the Border Patrol shared a different recommendation than his colleague. He stated the stationary camera towers in his area of operation (station) need to be repaired. He mentioned that this technology was a huge asset but was not 100 percent operational. “Just updating that technology so you have an eye in the sky at all times,” he said, would increase agents’ safety. He also recommended that the station increase manpower to allow for partners in the field. This participant stated that the reason he left the Border Patrol was “to come home.” This example provides insight into low retention rates and why agents leave their position.

One participant had a suggestion that he prefaced by saying that “even though the union would not go along with it, put the best agents in the best places based on ability rather than seniority or friendships with supervisors.” He described this as his biggest

issue with the Border Patrol and how it contributed to the reason he left the job to go back home. One other participant shared that he would recommend, “enforcing the laws that are on the books” as opposed to the “catch and release program” that he experienced as an agent. He also discussed increasing manpower stating, “So you can spend zillions of dollars on all this wonderful technology, but at the end of the day you need able-bodied agents on the ground that can go and effect an arrest.” He described the need for 700 agents at his station yet they had 400. “Just think of how more effective you can be with full staff” he added. “You just feel stuck and there's no point in trying because this is all we got.” This participant was describing the lack of manpower and backup. He shared feelings of being trapped and how there was no ability to promote and feeling stuck along the Southwest Border because internal movement was seniority based.

The inability for agents to relocate was one of the primary reasons that so many agents left their position. One agent recommended that the Border Patrol “take the money that you're spending on recruitment and create a system that gives agents a way to get to a location they want to be at.” He described how that would work logistically saying “if it means spending several years at the location but then you have your top three (locations); whatever you need to do to get people a better quality of life is going to improve retention and therefore improve your quality of life.” He stated some agents have family members who live in different states because their duty station area is not conducive to families and lacks amenities. He also shared that training efforts could be bolstered. The current training he mentioned is insufficient to appropriately equip agents, adding that “you can't do an academy and then do a quarterly training four times a year and expect

these guys to know what they're doing or be prepared for situations (in the field).” While training is essential and was a common theme throughout some of the interview questions, having limited training does not benefit agents. In order to make training effective, it needs to be repetitive and frequent to build confidence in agents and their ability to know how and when to use specific training they’ve received.

One participant shared that pay-cut issues have impacted agent morale. He made a few recommendations, questioning why the Border Patrol would create new stations in somewhat desolate areas along the border in which agents have to commute. He said, “I would relocate certain stations towards major metropolitan areas wherever the guys can actually live.” He further elaborated on this point and shared that “the days of hiring cowboys for the Border Patrol are somewhat over. They need to realize that they have a more diversified workforce coming on that isn't exactly comfortable just living in the middle of nowhere.” He further responded with “build the wall - that's going to be extremely effective” as another recommendation based on his experience. This participant mentioned that he left the job because “when you top out at a GS-12 (a specific level of pay) and there isn’t any other opportunity for mobility, the only logical next step is to leave.” He described it as a “dead end.” This is an example of how the lack of mobility for this participant lead to having low morale.

One participant recommended a change in leadership, using Eric Holder as an example of manipulation. This participant stated that he left the Border Patrol because there were no opportunities to promote and “a lack of leadership that deserve to be in the spot.” He mentioned that he has a Master’s degree in intelligence studies and speaks four

languages, yet this still did not get him promoted even though management had none of these skills (no advanced degrees or foreign language skills). Another participant shared that his commute was challenging, long. Secondly, his concern for the Border Patrol and overall national security is that “something's going to happen really bad one day,” thus highlighting the unknown nature of the border and potential risks regarding national security. Not all participants shared recommendations but rather indicated areas that in their opinions needed addressing.

Interviewee responses to the last question revealed a few insightful ideas. One participant shared that a relocation program would be ideal for the Border Patrol in order to retain employees. She elaborated on the importance of families having access to good schools and such accommodations, which is currently lacking in certain station locations along the Southwest Border. This participant shared that if there was a long-term leave program for woman who wanted to raise their infants and then return to work this may allow for female positions to be retained. “I'm not talking about paid leave, I'm talking about a leave of absence or a time away to have children, stay at home with babies for a period of time and then to be able to go back to work - currently that's not feasible.” While there is maternity leave this idea is a different aspect of extended leave. This participant mentioned that pay reform, increased manpower, and lack of mobility are also areas of needed attention.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I summarized how my research findings answered the research question. Research question: How do Border Patrol agents who work along the United

States Southwest Border perceive threats and dangers to their personal safety and to homeland security? There are examples throughout the interviews where participant's responses and or recommendations correlate with other participants concerns in separate interview question. Looking at Question 1, the participant with former law enforcement experience shared that "increased database access" could augment Border Patrol operations and increase agents' safety. While in Question 2, a female participant explained why she believed terrorism to be one of the greatest threats to homeland security stating that there was not a way to fully vet the people who were coming into the country to claim asylum as an example. These overarching themes and potential solutions to real problems could provide insight for policy makers illustrating where there is a disconnect between headquarters policy and actual field implementation for agents along the border.

Throughout the eight interview question responses, I was able to appropriately answer the research question through former agents responses pertaining to their lived experiences. In Chapter 5, I will reiterate the purpose and nature of this study provide further interpretations of the study, describe any limitations, and expound upon implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Border Patrol agents put their lives at risk for the job they do. This begs the question of why these federal employees are such an understudied, misunderstood, and perhaps disregarded part of law enforcement. There are a plethora of federal agencies in which peer-reviewed research is available. Why is the Border Patrol, the primary national security agency along the United States' borders, marginalized?

I started this qualitative phenomenological study thinking that agents had issues with morale, concerns about potential terrorism infiltration along the border, and mobility challenges. My assumptions were confirmed through research. The point was not to prove what I had thought, but to explore the understudied area of agents' lived experience. Could it be that these individuals, who risk their lives for their profession, continue to face the same adversity day after day due to poor field implementation of inadequate, reactionary mandates from headquarters? While this study may be of vital importance to policy makers and senior officials, it should also be important to taxpayers who consistently pay for the training of new agents due to high turnover rates.

If I took the interview results and created a description of a day in the life of a Border Patrol agent, it might look something like this:

An agent arrives at work a few minutes early to check email because a recent announcement indicated that a transfer to the Northern Border was available. The agent soon learns, however, that several hundred colleagues applied for the same transfer, with only two spots available. During muster, the agent is told that due to lack of manpower, agents will be working without partners for the evening.

Tensions are high because the agents are receiving less pay due to pay reform issues. Moreover, it is the holiday season and agents are far from family, and the current “catch-and-release” protocol requires them to release most of the people they apprehend after bringing them to the station.

Agents receive their assigned work locations and vehicle keys for the evening. The agent attempts to check out a long-arm rifle and night-vision goggles from equipment issue, all of which have already been handed out. Once in the parking lot, the agent conducts a safety inspection of the truck, finding that the prior agent did not refuel it, it has been driven 2,000 miles over the recommended mileage for an oil change, one tire needs air, and all four tires have insufficient tread for the mountainous terrain. The agent blames low morale for other colleagues’ neglect of the truck. Only 30 minutes into the shift, while the agent is still in the station parking lot, broken communication comes over the truck radio from the camera operator, who has spotted what appears to be a group of 15–25 individuals in the agent’s first assigned area, which will require an hour-long truck ride and a 4-mile hike through unforgiving, mountainous terrain. The camera operator says that he does not know if the people in the group are drug smugglers, and due to the location, radio communications are spotty and he will not have visual for long. He also warns that just last week in that area, a group of seven individuals was arrested smuggling 350 pounds of marijuana, and a group of 40 illegal immigrants were apprehended, one of whom resisted arrest and assaulted an agent. Agents are

made aware that air support is unavailable, the horse patrol unit cannot traverse that area, and no extra canines are on shift to assist.

This means that an agent who has no partner, a truck with bald tires, no night-vision goggles, and no long-arm rifle is expected to respond to that mountainous area with spotty radio communication capabilities and apprehend an unknown group of 15-25 individuals, walk them safely back to the vehicle, and return to the station before the shift ends due to overtime restrictions.

This story exemplifies why this study is important. Before the agent in this scenario is even out of the station parking lot, the agent already faces a multitude of challenges due to the bureaucratic inertia and political sway that affect the current operational environment. Further scholarly research on this topic could transform the Border Patrol culture and enhance national security.

The themes of this study included manpower, assaults, elements/unknown nature of the job, politics/presidential administration, and lack of mobility. Eight interview questions were asked of each of the 11 participants. Based on these agents' lived experience, it is evident that proper care and attention have not been placed on those tasked with securing the Southwest Border.

This study had a dual purpose: to broadly explore the themes that emerge from agents' lived experience and to focus on agents' lived experience and perceptions of threats and dangers. This research could result in a decreased gap in literature as well as present options for positive social change in this arena. There is limited scholarly research available on this specific topic, thus threatening the literature review and

providing challenges for researchers. In this chapter, I interpret the research findings, detail any limitations of the study, address the positive social change potential of the study, and provide recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of the Findings

The participant with previous law enforcement experience did provide recommendations that other participants did not; however, his experiences were similar to those of the other participants. The participants with previous military service did not vary from the other participants. There were no outliers within the interview results. The findings of this study extend knowledge in this discipline by adding to the extant literature concerning this topic. Tangible improvements to Border Patrol agents' lives and working conditions along the Southwest Border could ultimately create positive social change within the communities that agents serve, as well as in their agency and their own lives.

The research question for this study was the following: How do Border Patrol agents who work along the U.S. Southwest Border perceive threats and dangers to their personal safety and to homeland security?

Limitations of the Study

A phenomenological research approach can have natural limitations in reliability and challenges in data interpretation when compared to other methodologies. In order to work through these limitations, I documented the processes used to maintain reliability and proper data interpretation. For example, toward the aim of proper data interpretation, I included quotes in my results to accurately portray what my participants shared.

Another possible limitation of this study was that it focused specifically on the Southwest Border, as opposed to the Northern Border or territories of the United States. There were no limitations on gender or race within the study. There were two female and nine male participants. Participants were Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic. The benefit of conducting this research with a phenomenological approach rather than other potential methodologies was that the former afforded the opportunity to focus on agents' lived experience.

Recommendations

A phenomenological approach was ideal for learning about the specific lived experience of participants; this type of study could be duplicated to focus on any specific area of agents' lives. For positive social change, there is a need for duplication in research and policy recommendations alike. As indicated in Chapter 2, the available scholarly research on agents' lived experience was scarce. Most of the available literature posed an external perspective, and results were primarily approached quantitatively. Although a few ethnographic studies provided some insight into the job of a Border Patrol agent, phenomenological research has been limited. The results of this qualitative study may be useful for researchers who are looking for scholarly research specific to agents' lived experience from an insider's viewpoint.

I would recommend that this study be repeated to expand the number of people sampled. Studies could focus on the specific experiences of women, given some of the specific insights from female respondents in this study. A broader quantitative study could also be done to validate the qualitative work I completed. Studies could be done,

similarly, on the Northern Border or island states and territories, or studies could be done comparing the experiences of Border Patrol agents and park rangers assigned along the border, given their similar locations. I would propose studies that look in greater depth at issues of terrorism infiltration and the porous border. Further research on employee retention and morale could alleviate the continual training burden and address the lack of manpower. Lastly, research that focuses on policy, ensuring that it is applicable at the field level, would also augment available scholarly literature and could promote positive social change.

Implications

This study could influence executive leadership in such a way that it serves to promote positive social change at the station level, thus transforming the future experience and retention of Border Patrol agents. According to interview results, the overriding perception is that policies from headquarters are neither translated nor implemented well at the local, station level. This research can be used to better implement policies at the field level in a proactive versus reactionary fashion. Future Homeland Security studies programs could be impacted by my research and encourage further study in areas that have limited exposure.

Positive social change implications will come as a result of decision makers becoming aware of some of the problems identified in this research. Administrators and policy makers, after they take the findings into consideration, may be able to make changes in the system. These secondary and tertiary positive implications might include cost savings through the reduction of turnover, long-term improvements in morale and

national security through the provision of better staffing, and the reduction of injuries and risks. Other positive social change implications may include overall improvement in national security, greater awareness of the potential of terrorist infiltration through the porous border, and overall improvement of morale and safety.

Conclusion

The career of a first responder, more specifically a law enforcement officer, is rife with negative publicity, dangerous work, and usually thankless clientele. The U.S. Border Patrol is no exception; these agents may perhaps even experience these stressors to a particularly great degree, due to the human suffering and danger that they encounter on a daily basis. The agents in this organization regularly risk their lives to ensure the safety and security of not only the citizens of the United States, but also those whom they encounter in the field. Although agents may not be looking for recognition or even acknowledgement, their livelihood, safety, and familial environment could be greatly improved by minor agency changes. This study affords insight into an understudied group of individuals who are the backbone of national security along the Southwest Border of the United States and who risk it all for the protection of citizenry as well as adversaries.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Introductory and brief demographic questions will be asked initially: How long were you an agent, Were you always assigned to the Southwest border, How old were you when you became an agent, when did you leave the border patrol, why did you leave, did you ever leave and come back to your position, are you male or female, how far did you live from your station?

1. Based on your experience as a border patrol agent, what do you perceive were the greatest threats to your personal security? Probes: What about equipment? Training? Duty assignments? Partners/teamwork? Environment? Perpetrators/civilians? Others?
2. When did you feel most in danger? (What made you believe this was a danger, how were feeling at that time, describe what you were thinking at this time.)
3. Based on your experience as a border patrol agent, what do you perceive were the greatest threats to homeland security? Probes: Terrorist infiltration? Drug cartels? Smugglers? Visa overstays? Others?
4. Based on your experience as a border patrol agent, do you perceive any threats or dangers due to bureaucratic or political problems? Probes: Mixed messages from leaders? Contradictory policies or implementation? Changes in national or presidential policy/political appointees? Other management problems? Others?
5. Did you perceive any threats or dangers posed to you because of isolation from friends, family, or your home community? Probes: Emotional or physical stressors? How did you cope? Others?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share about the threats and dangers posed to you personally as a border patrol agent? Probes: On the border? In general?
7. Is there anything else you would like to share about the threats and dangers posed to national security from a border patrol agent perspective? Probes: On the border? In general?
8. Do you have suggestions or recommendations to DHS/ border patrol to improve agent's personal security?