

# Unique Needs and Challenges of Border Law Enforcement *and Promising Practices for Establishing a Criminal Interdiction Unit*

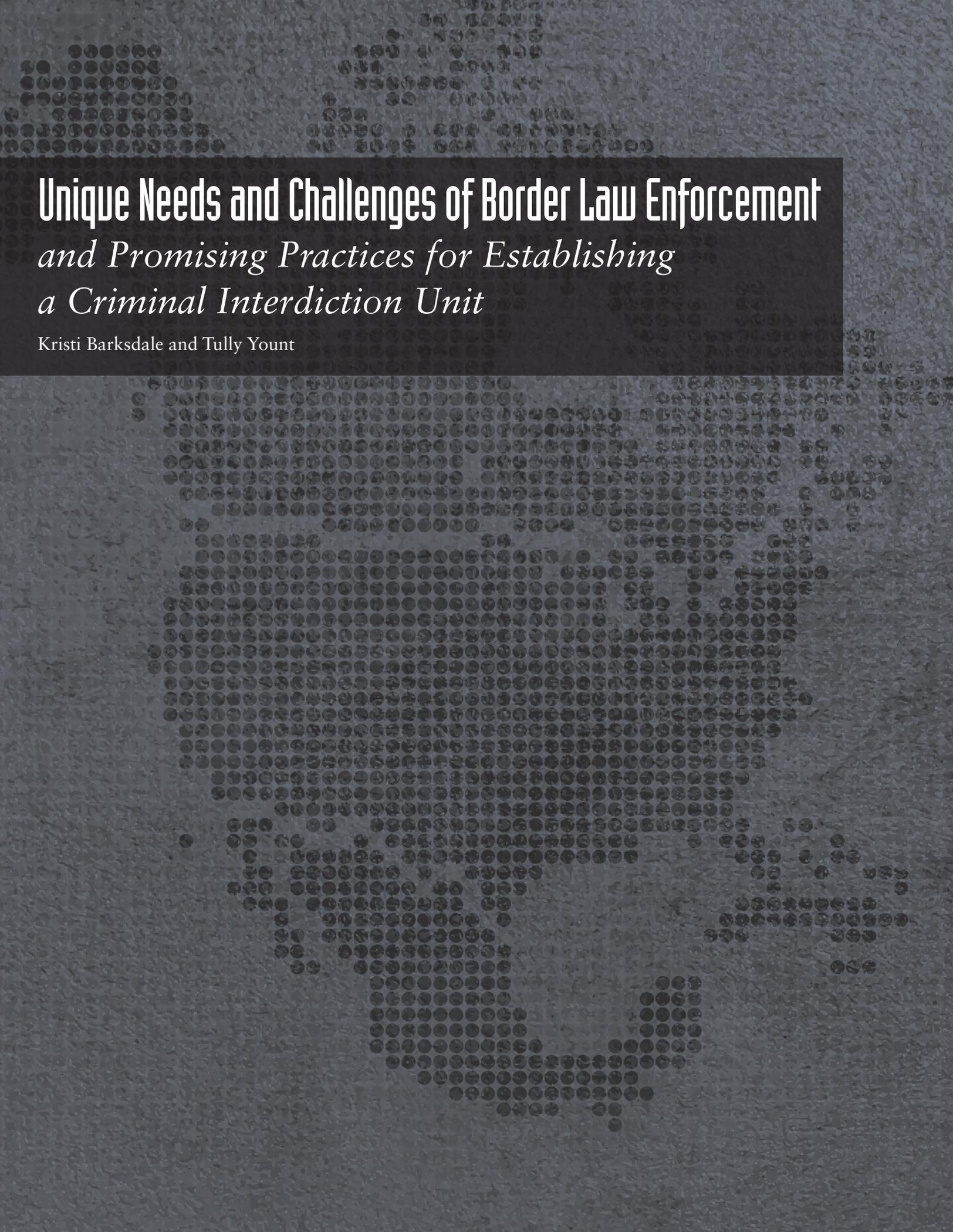
Kristi Barksdale and Tully Yount



**COPS**  
Community Oriented Policing Services  
U.S. Department of Justice







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Kristi Barksdale and Tully Yount

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# Letter from the Director

Colleagues:

In December 2018, the National Sheriffs' Association (NSA) and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) began hosting a series of roundtable and focus group discussions with members of border county sheriffs' offices. These meetings were the culmination of a long collaboration with the NSA to discover and address issues critical to sheriffs. They were also an outgrowth of a trip I and other COPS Office staff took to visit border sheriffs' offices alongside representatives from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The conversations we had on that trip left us with a renewed appreciation for the significant and unique responsibilities of sheriffs in our nation's border counties—responsibilities that are often overlooked and undervalued.

In all, we met with more than 130 border law enforcement personnel. We also circulated a needs assessment to allow sheriffs and deputies who could not attend the discussion series to voice their needs and concerns.

We learned from these discussions that border sheriffs share specific needs for meeting the unique challenges of their jurisdictions: for personnel, both deputies and civilian staff; for funding and resources to update technology and infrastructure; and for support in sharing information and setting common goals across all levels of government.

We also heard about a number of promising practices being promoted in border sheriffs' offices. One of these, specialized interdiction units, has already proven so effective that the COPS Office has held a series of interdiction trainings for rural sheriffs. We summarize those trainings, and some of the lessons learned by a new North Texas interdiction initiative, in this report.

We hope sheriffs along our nation's borders will find this report useful in setting priorities and making plans to access the resources they need to patrol their jurisdictions. The COPS Office would like to thank the NSA for their collaboration on this project. We would also like to thank all the law enforcement professionals who contributed to our discussions and research, without whose help this project would not exist.

Sincerely,



Phil Keith, Director  
COPS Office



# Background

Since December 2018, the National Sheriffs' Association (NSA) and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) have been hosting and actively participating in meetings with border sheriffs to discuss their unique needs and challenges. The purpose of these meetings was to provide the NSA, the COPS Office, and other DOJ stakeholders with a better understanding of border security needs and to identify gaps for personnel and equipment, as well as training and technical assistance.

More than 130 people participated in three roundtable and focus group discussions. The first meeting, held in December 2018 in Rockwall, Texas, featured a roundtable of Texas sheriffs discussing their need for support and equipment needs, funding opportunities, personnel shortages, and operational control. Promising practices discussed included an introduction to the North Texas Criminal Interdiction Unit (NTXCIU).

Continuing the conversations, the NSA and the COPS Office called on the Southwestern Border Sheriffs' Coalition (SWBSC) to participate in two focus group sessions facilitated by NSA, the COPS Office, and CNA on next steps. The first focus group session took place during the Western State Sheriffs' Association meeting in Reno, Nevada, and the second, in which the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) also took part, at the SWBSC annual conference in Del Rio, Texas. They continued the discussion of the DOJ and DHS's commitment to supporting sheriffs. Federal representatives presented on initiatives and projects being deployed to meet the needs of sheriffs.

Throughout these meetings, border sheriffs made it clear that they were facing a number of challenges. Participating sheriffs agreed that they could always use more training and would continue to accept any training opportunities that were made available. They responded well to the NTXCIU presentations where they gained knowledge on basic criminal interdiction and how to build a criminal interdiction unit. Participants also discussed their need for more technology, such as automatic license plate readers and x-ray machines.

To allow sheriffs who had not participated in the roundtables an opportunity to voice their needs, the NSA, in coordination with the COPS Office, sent a needs assessment to northern and southwestern border sheriffs to gather a comprehensive list.



# Findings of the Needs Assessment

In June 2019, the NSA sent needs assessments to sheriffs who operate in counties on the United States' borders with Canada and Mexico. The assessment asked these sheriffs to identify their unique challenges and needs and to make recommendations for addressing the issues. Fourteen southwestern and 16 northern border sheriffs responded to the survey. This section summarizes the key results of each assessment.

## Key challenges of border sheriffs

Sheriffs described many challenges they face. One sheriff put it simply: “Border sheriffs have to deal with a variety of issues at the border, ranging from narcotic smuggling, human trafficking for the sex trade or for labor, [and] the rise in transportation of dangerous pharmaceuticals.” Sheriffs also report a general increase in people coming across the southern border.

These unique challenges are exacerbated by the necessity of covering vast areas of land—a problem mentioned by a majority of responding border sheriffs (71 percent of southwestern respondents and 63 percent of northern). In the southwest, these encompass geographic features ranging from urban environments to deserts to remote mountainous areas, while the northern border includes all those environments as well as large bodies of water and, in many areas, large amounts of snow in winter that make law enforcement access to some areas along the border difficult or impossible.

The southern border is approximately 1,933 miles long and spans four states, while the northern border of the United States is the longest international border in the world between two countries. The terrestrial boundary (including portions of water boundaries on the Great Lakes and the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic oceans) is approximately 5,525 miles long.

Sheriffs' funding levels vary from county to county, but the consensus of respondents was clear that current funding levels are woefully inadequate. This lack of resources leads to two main problems: (1) a shortage of personnel, which prevents sheriffs' offices from handling much beyond day-to-day operations, and (2) aging equipment, which is insufficient to address an array of threats and responsibilities.

Because it is often not physically possible for the northern sheriffs to cover all areas of their counties themselves, relationships and contacts with both federal partners and officials in Canada are essential. Sheriffs in some areas, however, reported that maintaining these relationships is complicated by technological limitations on ways to communicate. Differences in policy priorities for American and Canadian authorities have proven to be a challenge as well.

## Key needs of border sheriffs

The needs of border sheriffs are unique from county to county, but the needs assessment revealed some commonalities: increased funding and other resources, more officers, more equipment, and improved communication and relations between all levels of government.

Sheriffs need funding to secure full-time personnel, both commissioned and support staff. Many grants such as the DHS's Operation Stonegarden only provide resources for equipment or overtime funds—which are important, but without the personnel to use those resources, the net benefit of that funding becomes moot. Increased personnel must include not only permanent deputies but also the support staff to alleviate their workload by helping in activities such as operation coordination and maintaining grant funding. In addition, northern border sheriffs need increased personnel to patrol the larger counties.

Border sheriffs also require more resources in the form of improved equipment, technology, and vehicles to better patrol remote border areas, assist in opening lines of communication in dead zones, improve surveillance along the border, and equip officers with the things they need to more effectively do their jobs. Along the northern border, equipment is needed to patrol inaccessible areas such as waterways or snow embankments: boats, snowmobiles, ATVs, improved cameras, and updated radio systems that switch to 800 MHz.

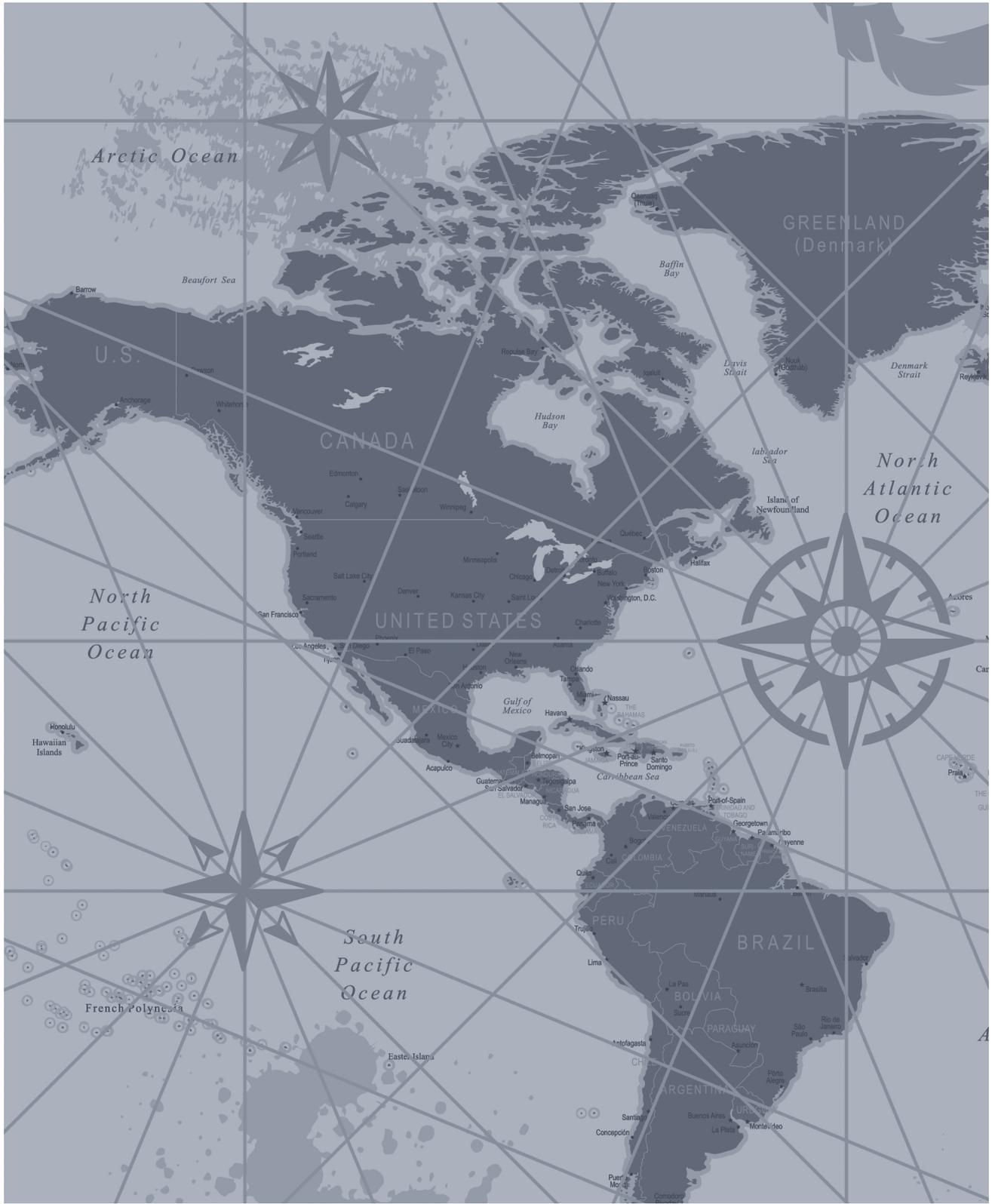
Border sheriffs also relayed the need for better systems of communication and intelligence sharing along the border; better systems for coordinating with federal partners; and an effective, balanced voice for border law enforcement at the table of policy discussion. Sheriffs also expressed their frustration with the lack of coordination between state immigration laws and federal enforcement guidelines, which in many cases are in direct conflict. Furthermore, policymakers setting those laws and guidelines have focused heavily on the southern border, neglecting issues facing northern border law enforcement.

## Key recommendations from border sheriffs

Responding border sheriffs made some key recommendations to address these issues. The first is to see an increase in potential grant funding, as well as grants with fewer restrictions and less required fiscal matching. The majority of sheriffs commended the DHS's Operation Stonegarden, some calling it a lifeline for their communities, but agreed that it should be updated to fund permanent full-time staff as well as equipment and overtime positions. Furthermore, more grants should be made available that offer communities multiyear obligations to ensure the hiring and maintenance of permanent, full-time staff. One recommendation was to design a grant that is a hybrid between the COPS Hiring Program (CHP) and Stonegarden, which would allow for border agencies to hire for these positions.

Grants should be more widely available and standards should be simplified, with law enforcement being allowed to do more with the funding that they receive. Accessing this funding will require many agencies to take on additional personnel, such as a grant liaison, in addition to the extra deputies many northern counties need to patrol the border. Agencies also require greater access to resources and updated technology such as vehicles, camera systems, and communication systems like radios to be able to more effectively do their jobs.

At the government level, sheriffs recommended better coordination from state and federal lawmakers and additional infrastructure planning and funding. Finally, partnerships between sheriffs' offices and federal agencies should be maintained to ensure border sheriffs have access to information to share with the community and all the other resources they need to do their jobs.



Arctic Ocean

GREENLAND (Denmark)

U.S.

CANADA

UNITED STATES

MEXICO

BRAZIL

North Pacific Ocean

North Atlantic Ocean

South Pacific Ocean

French Polynesia

Beaufort Sea

Baffin Bay

Hudson Bay

Labrador Sea

Hawaiian Islands

Gulf of Mexico

Caribbean Sea

East Island

Venezuela

Bolivia

Paraguay

Argentina

Uruguay

Chile

Peru

Colombia

Costa Rica

Guatemala

El Salvador

Nicaragua

Honduras

Panama

Cuba

Jamaica

Dominican Republic

Haiti

Trinidad and Tobago

Suriname

Guayana Francesa

Paraguay

Uruguay

Argentina

Chile

Peru

Colombia

Costa Rica

Guatemala

El Salvador

Nicaragua

Honduras

Panama

Cuba

Jamaica

Dominican Republic

Haiti

Trinidad and Tobago

Suriname

Guayana Francesa

Paraguay

Uruguay

Argentina

Chile

Peru

Colombia

Costa Rica

Guatemala

El Salvador

Nicaragua

Honduras

Panama

Cuba

Jamaica

Dominican Republic

Haiti

Trinidad and Tobago

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# A Promising Practice in Information Sharing and Intelligence Gathering

Repeatedly at listening sessions, the COPS Office and NSA heard about the need for increased information sharing and intelligence gathering among border agencies. Although law enforcement agencies have some tools available for this purpose, including the EPIC portal, Plate Link Query, and Vigilant, there is still an unmet need for greater collaboration and communication. This is particularly true in the area of criminal interdiction—intercepting criminals who use the interstate or other highways to travel. Interdiction provides another tool to officers and deputies where every field contact and vehicle stop can turn into a short-term investigation.

In December 2017, Collin, Grayson, Hunt, Parker, Rockwall, Smith, Tarrant, and Wise counties, all in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, formed the North Texas Criminal Interdiction Unit (NTXCIU). The sheriffs of these eight counties work closely and efficiently together to take down transnational gangs.

Rather than working towards independent recognition or credit, participants in the NTXCIU all wear the same uniforms without agency name. They are able to work in all eight counties, and supervision of the team rotates among the participating agencies for consistency. There are no forfeiture disagreements, as the sheriffs' offices involved split the profits eight ways, regardless of who takes the lead on a case. Table 1 (page 8) illustrates drugs seized by the NTXCIU from December 2017–June 2020. When adding all illicit activities, the NTXCIU arrested 304 people transporting illicit currency, drugs, weapons, etc. for a total monetary value of \$68,266,142. The eight counties anticipate even better results following the integration of license plate reader technology in 2020.

**Table 1. Drugs seized by the NTXCIU, December 2017–June 2020**

Type	KGS seized	Arrests made	Value
Cocaine	71	16	\$1,790,947
Ecstasy	2	1	\$—
Fentanyl	0	3	\$87,088
Heroin	128	7	\$24,992,580
Marijuana	2,204	47	\$14,680,016
Methamphetamine	816	66	\$23,041,659
Prescription narcotic	0	0	\$—
Promethazine	4	1	\$9,787
THC extract	277	8	\$573,654
Other not listed	5	19	\$30,000
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>3,509</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>\$65,205,732</b>

Agencies of all sizes can apply interdiction techniques directly in their own jurisdictions. The COPS Office has seen the value of interdiction techniques in stopping crime and illegal behavior and has supported meetings, workshops, and training in this area. In conjunction with the NSA and the NTXCIU, the COPS Office hosted two regional Basic Criminal Interdiction trainings, covering roadside interviews, passenger vehicle criminal interdiction, and commercial motor vehicle criminal interdiction. With the help of Collin County Sheriff James Skinner and Lieutenant Tully Yount, participants from the Belle Fourche (South Dakota) Police Department, Pima County (Arizona) Sheriff's Department, and their respective surrounding agencies received an introduction to conducting roadside criminal interdiction techniques.

The Belle Fourche training had 23 participants from 12 agencies, while the Pima County training had 20 participants from two agencies. All participants completed the evaluations.

## Pre-training evaluation results

Before the COPS Office/NSA training began, participants were asked to rate their knowledge of three things: (1) basic criminal interdiction, (2) basic legal aspects of interdiction in their jurisdiction, and (3) how to conduct a roadside interview. Tables 2–4 (page 9) provide a breakdown of the evaluation results by training location.

The majority of the participants rated their knowledge of criminal interdiction (see table 2), basic legal aspects of interdiction (see table 3), and knowledge of roadside interviews as either *fair* or *good* (see table 4).

**Table 2. Pre-training response summary: Knowledge of basic criminal interdiction**

<b>Question 1: How would you describe your knowledge of basic criminal interdiction?</b>	<b>Belle Fourche, SD (%)</b>	<b>Pima County, AZ (%)</b>
Very poor	4	10
Poor	17	15
Fair	57	45
Good	22	30
Very good	0	0

**Table 3. Pre-training response summary: Knowledge of legal aspects of criminal interdiction**

<b>Question 2: How would you describe your knowledge of the legal aspects of criminal interdiction in your jurisdiction?</b>	<b>Belle Fourche, SD (%)</b>	<b>Pima County, AZ (%)</b>
Very poor	4	0
Poor	17	5
Fair	39	65
Good	43	25
Very good	0	5

These data suggest that most of the participants in this training session had either prior formal training in interdiction or, at the very least, experience in criminal interdiction whether in a classroom or on the job.

**Table 4. Pre-training response summary: Knowledge of how to conduct a roadside interview**

<b>Question 3: How would you describe your knowledge of how to conduct a roadside interview?</b>	<b>Belle Fourche, SD (%)</b>	<b>Pima County, AZ (%)</b>
Very poor	4	0
Poor	13	0
Fair	48	50
Good	30	45
Very good	5	5

## Post-training evaluation results

Overall the training appeared to be beneficial: All participants rated their knowledge as improved in some form in the areas of basic criminal interdiction, basic legal concepts of interdiction in their jurisdiction, and conducting roadside interviews. Specifically, all participants rated their knowledge of interdiction as *improved greatly* (64 percent Belle Fourche; 70 percent Pima County) or *improved somewhat* (36 percent Belle Fourche; 30 percent Pima County) after receiving this training. At both sites, 55 percent of participants rated their knowledge of interdiction legal concepts as *improved greatly* and 45 percent as *improved somewhat*. Knowledge of conducting a roadside interview was rated *improved greatly* by 64 percent in Belle Fourche and 60 percent Pima County, and as *improved somewhat* by the remaining participants.

Overall, the training was incredibly well received by the participants: all attendees rated it *very good* (82 percent Belle Fourche; 80 percent Pima County) or *good* (18 percent Belle Fourche; 20 percent Pima County). No participants rated the training as either *fair* or *poor*. Comments included “Great training. The class has so much good information that you stay attentive so you don’t miss anything” and “The roadside interviews were excellent to see.”

## Beneficial aspects of training and suggestions for improvement

The participants noted several portions of the training as especially beneficial, specifically the segments on commercial motor vehicle interdiction skills and knowledge, roadside interviews, and ways to spot criminal behavior. Specific compliments were given to the instructor for his responsiveness and knowledge of the skills and material taught in this training.

The one suggestion for improvement that was made in almost every evaluation is that the participants felt that the training should have been longer; many suggested adding an extra day or two to cover more topics or go into greater depth on what was taught. This criticism can be seen as a positive, however, as the law enforcement officers and deputies who took this training saw the class to be so valuable that they were willing to spend more time in the training. Overall, participants commented on how informative, professional, and detailed the training was.

## Threats facing the border and how to address them

As with the needs assessment, participants in the interdiction training were asked about common threats facing the northern and southwestern borders. The threats they listed can be grouped into three categories: (1) lack of personnel, (2) a lack of information and focus on the northern border, and (3) drug trafficking. Consistent with the responses to the needs assessments, training participants felt that the following recommendations would resolve these issues: increased funding for upgraded technology and personnel, a greater focus on the northern border by the media and government, and improved relations between all levels of government and law enforcement to enhance intelligence sharing and information flow on issues facing both borders.



# Establishing a Criminal Interdiction Unit

To establish a full-time criminal interdiction unit, there are multiple things an agency must be willing to put into place. First, the agency administrators must be willing to defend their new program to county, city, or state officials. They must be willing to explain why they are starting a criminal interdiction unit and why it is a vital component of law enforcement. Administrators must also be willing to defend the new program to their community. Being able to educate the community is key and will help to dispel common myths and rumors about what interdiction is and is not.

The agency must be willing to dedicate personnel to full-time criminal interdiction efforts. This is the first key to success for any agency. It is a full-time job for a criminal interdiction officer to learn traffic patterns, identify what is consistent with the innocent motor public, and learn other aspects of the job. It will be difficult to create a successful program with part-time criminal interdiction officers.

An agency must have clear directives on how its personnel will conduct criminal interdiction investigations—not a blueprint for traffic stops, but rather procedures in place for how the investigations will be conducted. The agency must have a good working relationship with federal partners for the furtherance of investigations, as well as a supervisor who understands criminal interdiction and how the officers work.

An agency must also select the correct personnel for the position. Member selection is going to be the breaking point of the unit. If the wrong member is selected, the unit could fail. The members must be of high moral character, must be highly motivated, and must have demonstrated a high conviction rate. The personnel selected will have the ability to affect all criminal interdiction efforts across the nation through resulting case law—good or bad.

Interdiction unit members are also in a high-profile position and will often be the targets of numerous complaints because of their high level of stops and interactions. The agency must trust its officers to conduct criminal interdiction and support its personnel against groundless complaints while ensuring that officers who were involved in any type of misconduct are to be disciplined for their behavior. Often, agencies will disband their programs once a complaint comes in because the supervisor who handles the complaint does not understand the field of criminal interdiction.

Agencies that are starting a full-time criminal interdiction unit should consult with other established and tenured programs to gain their input when forming their units. This will help prevent them from making mistakes during the unit's infancy and throughout its lifespan.

Once a criminal interdiction unit is established, there should be a system in place to measure its success. However, success can be measured in different ways. Success of the criminal interdiction program is not necessarily measured in pounds of illicit narcotics seized but is based on the agency's goals. These goals will be affected by the agency's geographical location: An agency with a major interstate running through its jurisdiction will have more opportunity to intercept criminals in transit over long distances. A smaller rural agency, however, can still be successful in reducing crime within its jurisdiction by intercepting smaller criminals while in transit.

# Conclusion

In conclusion, sheriffs on both borders of the United States share many of the same needs affected by the unique challenges of their geographic regions. Border sheriffs have three main priorities:

(1) funding; (2) updated infrastructure and technology; and (3) better forms of communication between law enforcement at the local, state, and federal levels. One promising method to help alleviate some of these issues is the establishment of a criminal interdiction unit. Interdiction provides another tool to officers and deputies, with which every field contact and vehicle stop can turn into a short-term investigation. Agencies of all sizes can take these techniques and apply them directly in their jurisdictions. The value of interdiction units is illustrated by example from the eight-county NTXCIU program in Texas, which collected more than \$65 million in profits from seized illicit substances and weapons in a 30-month period.

Another valuable resource to address the needs and challenges of border sheriffs is the Collaborative Reform Initiative for Technical Assistance Center (CRI-TAC). In partnership with the COPS Office and eight other leading law enforcement agencies, including the NSA, the CRI-TAC provides customized training and technical assistance to state, local, tribal, territorial, and campus agencies throughout the United States. These services are delivered at no cost to agencies. Built to meet the diverse needs of law enforcement agencies today, the CRI-TAC works to develop solutions specifically tailored to agencies, allowing them to play an active role in the problem-solving process. The CRI-TAC provides a collaborative and comprehensive process in which subject matter experts from the field help agencies reach the forefront of cutting-edge innovation and evidence-based practices. To learn more about CRI-TAC, please visit [CollaborativeReform.org](https://www.CollaborativeReform.org).



# About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than \$14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.
- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov). This website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.





The U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) and the National Sheriffs' Association (NSA) hosted a series of roundtable and focus groups, supplemented by a needs assessment, to determine the needs, promising practices, and challenges of sheriffs' offices along the northern and southern borders of the United States. This report summarizes the findings of those discussions. Border sheriffs' primary needs are for personnel; updated equipment and infrastructure, particularly along the northern border; and support in information sharing and communication across all levels of government. The report also focuses on a widely shared promising practice—the establishment of dedicated interdiction units. A COPS Office / NSA training on rural interdiction is summarized, along with lessons learned from an interdiction unit in North Texas.



U.S. Department of Justice  
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