

Drug Trafficking Along the South Texas Border: Evaluating the Impact of Operation Lone Star in Combating Drug Smuggling Since 2021

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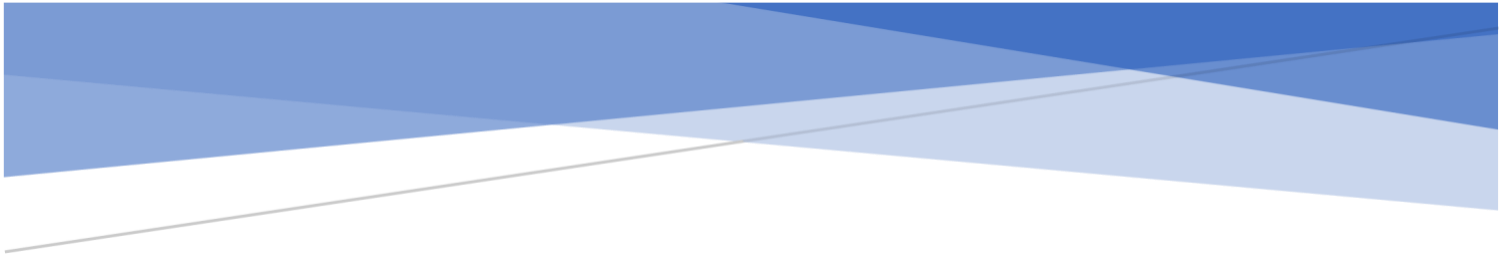
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DRUG TRAFFICKING ALONG THE SOUTH TEXAS BORDER: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF OPERATION LONE STAR IN COMBATING DRUG SMUGGLING SINCE 2021

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates the impact of Operation Lone Star (OLS), a Texas state initiative implemented by Texas Governor Greg Abbott in 2021. OLS was established to reduce illegal drug smuggling along the South Texas border with Mexico and has been promoted as a response to increasing cartel activity and federal inaction, although its ongoing results and broader impacts have been highly scrutinised and remain contested.

Through a combination of quantitative trend analysis, qualitative content review, and comparative policy analysis, this study assesses OLS's impact relative to similar operations such as California's Operation Apollo and Australia's Operation Tyrrendor as well as its broader impacts and effectiveness regarding factors such as overall costs and operational achievements. The report investigates OLS not only in terms of its tangible drug trafficking reduction outcomes but also through the lens of a constructivist theory of policy framing, exploring how political narratives have shaped public and institutional perceptions of its purpose and success.

Key findings from the data presented suggest that OLS has resulted in increases in drug seizures, particularly of methamphetamine and cocaine along the South Texas border, but evidence suggests these gains are modest and not clearly attributable to the operation itself. Independent investigations and comparative data show that OLS functions more as a political symbol of border security than as an effective, intelligence-driven strategy for disrupting cartel drug trafficking networks.

The analysis finds that OLS lacks clear causal evidence linking its activities to reductions in drug smuggling, especially given the absence of explicit data metrics and reliance on broader arrest data. The analysis argues that the operation's highly politicized framing and legal ambiguities undermine its long-term policy viability and suggests that OLS's comparative cost-effectiveness is insufficient.

Further investigation demonstrates that OLS faces significant policy challenges due to its inconsistent implementation, unclear correlation between enforcement efforts and drug seizure outcomes, and growing fiscal strain from the redirection of state funds. The report argues that if improved data collection, clearer performance indicators, and a move towards collaborative federalism is not achieved, OLS risks remaining a costly, politically charged program with limited measurable impact.

To improve policy, the report recommends reframing OLS to prioritise multi agency and intergovernmental intelligence sharing, education regarding public health, and more standardised data reporting. In addition, the report proposes the establishment of a federally

monitored Border Security Oversight Commission to enhance fiscal accountability, intergovernmental cooperation, and policy transparency.

Ultimately, the report concludes that although OLS has achieved some limited operational outcomes, it has been unable to convincingly demonstrate long-term effectiveness in dismantling cartel drug smuggling networks in South Texas. Instead, the operation appears to reflect a broader political strategy that frames the U.S.-Mexico border as a trafficking crisis zone requiring militarized state intervention. Future policy efforts should prioritize coordinated, intelligence-driven responses, an increase in federal and state collaboration, and adopt a more holistic approach that integrates public health, education, and economic development into border drug policy targeting.

Introduction

The United States-Mexico border was formally established on February 2, 1848, following the signing of the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treaty, to end the Mexican American war (DCHS, 2019). Following periods of increased migration into the US in the early 1900s, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917, which required non-US citizens to pass a literacy test and pay USD\$8 to enter the country (Immigration Act, 1917, H.R.10384). Three years later, the introduction of prohibition in the US resulted in a significant increase in the smuggling of liquor between the US-Mexico border due to the financial gain and willingness of US citizens to allow the smuggling (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2025). The increase in smuggling of illicit substances between the border resulted in the US Congress passing the Labor Appropriations Act of 1924, to officially establish the U.S. Border Patrol for the *'purpose of securing the borders between inspection stations'* (Immigration History, 2019).

Since these early immigration and border enforcement acts were passed, the US-Mexico border has become far more volatile. A 2021 report from the University of Texas at Austin found that since 1998, the smuggling of Methamphetamine through South Texas specifically had increased by approximately 20% (Maxwell, 2021, p. 3). Moreover, an article from the New York Post in 2019 defined McAllen, South Texas as *'ground zero'* for the drug trafficking crisis between Mexico and the US (Vincent, 2019).

Due to the increase in illegal US-Mexico border crossings as well as the increase in drug trafficking and human trafficking, in March 2021 Republican Texas Governor Greg Abbott, in collaboration with the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas Military Department established a new initiative titled Operation Lone Star (OLS) (Aguilar, 2021). Governor Abbott

explains how Operation Lone Star is *'intended to counter a rise in illegal immigration, the illegal drug trade, and human smuggling'* due to the *'crisis at the border'* by deploying the Texas National Guard and Texas Department of Public Safety to the southern border (Abbott, 2025).

Operation Lone Star, which began on March 6, 2021, has now been in effect for over four years. The operation has been subject to a wide range of support and criticism from the media, politicians, academics and the general public. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] In July of 2023 Congressman Vicente Gonzalez Jr. and *'the full Texas Democratic Congressional Delegation, sent a letter to President Biden urging his administration to intervene in Governor Abbott's Operation Lone Star'* (Gonzalez, 2023). In 2023, Congressman Gonzalez stated that *'reports on Operation Lone Star have revealed that state troopers have been directed to push nursing babies and children back into the Rio Grande River'* and that *'the Governor has directed the addition of floating barriers, netting, and sharp razor wire along the river'* (Gonzalez, 2023). Adding to Congressman Gonzalez concerns, El País Newspaper reported in March of 2025 that *'the state has spent more than \$11 billion in public funds to finance Operation Lone Star'* arguing that the program is unsustainable and has failed to adequately achieve the broader goals outlined by Governor Abbott in 2021 (Leal, 2025).

Nevertheless, many have praised Governor Abbott's initiatives and objectives of the program. President Trump stated in January of 2025 that Abbott was *'an unbeatable governor because of his border policies'* (Choi, 2025). Furthermore, 2023 opinion polling from the Texas Politics Project found that 59% of Texans supported the *'state's deployment of additional state police and military resources to the border'*, with 40% believing that the state spends *'too little'* on issues relating to the border (Henson & Blank, 2023).

Research Question

Given the ongoing uncertainties, controversies and debates regarding OLS's perceived failures and successes, it is clear that identifying OLS's impact on illegal drug smuggling in South Texas since it was introduced, and more succinctly recognising policy lessons that can be applied moving forward, is an effective and appropriate approach to analysing the impact the program has had. An appropriate research question is therefore:

“What Impact has Operation Lone Star Had on Illegal Drug Smuggling Along the South Texas Border with Mexico Since its Inception in 2021, and What Policy Lessons can Be Applied in the Future?”

This research question specifically targets OLS’s effectiveness at combatting illegal drug smuggling in South Texas, and not the broader goal of OLS such as human trafficking and illegal border crossings. To measure effectiveness and recognise the impact OLS has had on drug smuggling, this report will consider multiple factors such as financial costs in comparison with drugs seized and ongoing cartel operations. Moreover, critically assessing whether OLS effectively funds and supports welfare systems in place designed to combat drug usage such as educational and healthcare programs will help to determine OLS’s overall impact and effectiveness. Although the research will consider how the broader goals of OLS, such as countering illegal immigration and human trafficking, have impacted drug cartel operations and drug smuggling in South Texas, it is critical to highlight that the primary focus of this report, is OLS’s impact, whether successful, neutral or unsuccessful, at targeting illegal drug smuggling.

Success, in the context of this report, is defined as an increase in drug seizures as a direct result of OLS funding, or proven decrease in cartel drug trafficking operations, therefore resulting in decreased drug supply. A meaningful and apparent drop in cartel drug smuggling and trafficking operations, relative to the amount of money spent on Operation Lone Star, is also a significant factor in assessing success. If, for example, a major sum of money was spent on OLS, and drug trafficking decreased, but only on a minimal scale, it is likely this report would conclude that OLS had failed to successfully execute its goal of countering a rise in illegal drug trade, as the sum of money spent relative to the desired outcome would indicate OLS funds did not target drug smuggling effectively.

Thesis Statement

“Despite Minor Decreases in Drug Trafficking in South Texas Since 2021, Operation Lone Star Has Failed to Adequately Address the Ongoing Drug Smuggling Issues Along the Texas Border with Mexico”.

As of March 14th, 2025, Operation Lone Star’s website claims to have seized approximately ‘735 million lethal doses of fentanyl’ (Office of the Texas Governor, 2025) A further press release from June 6th, 2025, highlighted a ‘week-long operation to disrupt terrorist cartel activity’ with the OLS website stating that over ‘45,600 felony charges’ have been laid since the beginning of the operation in 2021 (Office of the Texas Governor, 2025).

The statistics and data currently available on the Operation Lone Star and the Office of the Texas Governor's websites, however, have been widely disputed and criticised by multiple media outlets, independent researchers and politicians (Trevizo, 2022).

A 2022 investigation by ProPublica found that Governor Abbott, the Department of Public Safety and the Texas Military department had *'fought two dozen public records requests from news organizations that would have provided a clearer picture of the operation's accomplishments'* (Kriel & Trevizo, 2022)

The conflicting and uncertain findings of media outlets, as explored later in this report, indicates that a reasonable but critical analysis and thesis statement for this research paper is necessary to adequately assess OLS's success. The thesis statement proposed is appropriate as it both acknowledges the drug trafficking decreases reported by Governor Abbott but also considers the broader concerns raised by independent investigations, therefore creating a more balanced foundation for evaluating the operation's true effectiveness in addressing drug smuggling along the Texas-Mexico border.

'Failed to adequately address', in the context of this report, refers similarly as a comparison to measures of success, as discussed in the research question section of this report. The thesis statement in this report defines OLS failure, as a failure to achieve a meaningful increase in drug seizures as a direct result of OLS funding, or proven decrease in cartel drug trafficking operations.

Background

In 2008, the National Drug Intelligence Centre (NDIC) published a report, highlighting that the *'South Texas border area is a principal drug smuggling corridor between the United States and Mexico'* (NDIC, 2008). The report outlines how a considerable portion of the border area between the United States and Mexico in South Texas is *'extremely rural'* and therefore *'is often used by drug traffickers to smuggle illicit drug shipments into the United States'* (NDIC, 2008). The report includes drug seizure data taken by the El Paso Intelligence Centre, between 2005 to 2007, with figures relating to multiple South Texas counties situated along the border.

**Illicit Drugs Seized in South Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) Counties
Bordering Mexico, in US Tons, 2005-2007.**

County	Cocaine 2005-2007	Heroin 2005-2007	Marijuana 2005-2007	Methamphetamine 2005-2007
Cameron	3.43	0.05	42.03	0.22
Dimmit	>0.01 Tons	No Data	5.01	>0.01 Tons
Hidalgo	17.77	0.06	236.89	0.68
Jim Hogg	0.23	0.01	49.72	>0.01 Tons
Kinney	No Data	No Data	6.94	>0.01 Tons
La Salle	0.15	No Data	2.06	No Data
Maverick	1.56	0.02	46.17	0.08
Starr	1.71	0.03	186.99	0.03
Val Verde	0.23	>0.01 Tons	39.67	0.06
Webb	12.15	0.21	206.32	0.48
Willacy	0.09	No Data	4.36	0.02
Zapata	0.03	>0.01 Tons	16.09	No Data
Zavala	0.01	>0.01 Tons	1.19	No Data
Total	37.37 Tons	0.38 Tons	843.18 Tons	1.58 Tons

Table 1.1 (El Paso Intelligence Centre, 2008)

**Total figures may differ slightly due to rounding calculations*

The figures produced by the El Paso Intelligence Centre provide a useful indication for the approximate amounts of cocaine, heroin, marijuana and methamphetamine that were being seized within counties close to, or right on the border with Mexico in the early 2000s. This report will later compare these findings to more recent drug trafficking trends to analyse how trafficking along the border has changed since the 2000s. It is worth noting that the figures presented in this graph aim to reflect drug seizures directly associated with cartel drug trafficking and smuggling operations, and not misdemeanour, or indeed felony possession seizures from members of the public (NDIC, 2008).

Since 2008, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has published comprehensive annual National Drug Threat Assessment (NTDA) reports online that analyse national, and sub-national data such as cartel operations and drug seizure figures (DEA, 2021). The 2020 NTDA report states that in the South Texas border cities of Laredo, Eagle Pass and El Paso the Sinaloa Cartel, the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and the Beltran-Leyva Organisation are the three most prominent and active cartels in the region (DEA, 2021 pp. 65).

The NTDA report states that the Sinaloa Cartel has been active since approximately 1987 and controls drug activity near Mexico's northern borders with *'the most expansive international footprint compared to other Mexican cartels'* and almost entirely controls the town of Eagle Pass (DEA, 2021 pp. 66). The Jalisco New Generation Cartel meanwhile maintains *'strategic locations on the border between the United States and Mexico'* with *'large amounts of*

fentanyl, heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine’ primarily being distributed in El Paso and Laredo (DEA, 2021 pp. 67). According to the 2020 NDTA, the Beltran-Leyva Organisation ‘*relies on its loose alliances with larger cartels for access to drug smuggling corridors*’ in towns along the Southwestern border such as El Paso and Laredo with trafficked drugs primarily including heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine and marijuana (DEA, 2021 pp. 67).

The DEA’s NDTA report provides a strong insight into how drug trafficking effects towns along the South Texas border and suggests a possible justification for Governor Abbott’s implementation of OLS. In Texas’s 34th Congressional district alone, for example, there are currently border patrol stations set up in the towns of Brownsville, Harlingen, McAllen, Weslaco and Rio Grande City (Roberts, 2020). The 2020 NDTA found that a fourth cartel, the Gulf Cartel, is one of the most prolific Mexican Cartels, operating since approximately the 1980’s (DEA, 2020 pp. 68). It is headquartered in Matamoros, a town in Mexico directly across the border from Brownsville, with significant trafficking therefore taking place in Brownsville and McAllen (DEA, 2020 pp. 68).

Constructivist Theory of Policy Framing

The DEA’s reporting of cartel operations and drug trafficking in South Texas suggest that Governor Abbott’s state-led response to the ‘*crisis created by the Biden Administration’s reckless open border policies*’, could be framed as a more proactive, confrontational response (Abbott, 2025). Analysing Governor Abbott’s response to drug trafficking in South Texas from a more theoretical perspective, it is apparent that he is likely framing the issue from a constructivist theory of policy framing perspective (Van Gorp, 2007 pp. 60). OLS is framed as being a necessary state-led response to perceived federal inaction on border security, constructing a narrative of crisis and sovereignty. From a constructivist perspective, this policy initiative therefore shapes and influences public understanding by actively constructing threats and identities depicting cartels and drug trafficking as security risks and the state of Texas as a protector of order.

Problem Statement

Is Operation Lone Star an effective policy for curbing drug smuggling or a symbolic political tool?

A problem statement that arises from Governor Abbott’s constructivist policy framing is whether OLS is an effective policy for curbing drug smuggling or a symbolic political tool. Although Governor Abbott’s OLS has been framed as a necessary and proactive response to federal inaction on border security, particularly in combatting drug trafficking in South Texas,

it remains unclear whether the initiative functions as an effective policy instrument for reducing drug smuggling or primarily serves as a symbolic tool to construct a political narrative of crisis, sovereignty, and state authority. This highlights how evaluating OLS not only in terms of policy outcomes but also from a constructivist policy framing perspective, is critical to determining the factors and influences that shaped OLS's implementation and justification.

Literature Reviews

The comparative operations were selected due to their shared goals of combatting drug smuggling as well as their operational scale and detailed outcome data. The operations analysed in the literature review will be critical to determining whether OLS's methods are potentially only uniquely effective, overly symbolic, or politically framed.

California: Operation Apollo

Operation Apollo was launched in October 2023 by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency (CBP) and primarily targets the south of California in an effort to reduce fentanyl and methamphetamine drug trafficking from Mexico (CBP, 2023). Operation Apollo differs from OLS as it consolidates both federal and state agencies in cities throughout California such as San Diego, Orange and Los Angeles and promotes '*collaboration and information-sharing to combat illicit synthetic drug networks*', therefore directly targeting the reduction of drug supply chains the California-Mexico border (CBP, 2023).

In its first two years, Operation Apollo seized '*more than 50,000 pounds of fentanyl*' due to the intensified campaign and increased funding against drug trafficking and coordinated targeting from federal and state law enforcement agencies (Undercover California, 2024). Additionally, In May 2024, Operation Apollo seized 16 thousand pounds of methamphetamine, the third largest seizure ever recorded by the CBP, further highlighting the benefit of a '*holistic*' multi-agency effort to counter drug trafficking (Ireland, 2024). As discussed, although drug seizure numbers are not necessarily an exemplary indication of effective operational success, the data-driven results achieved by Operation Apollo demonstrate the operation's tangible impact in disrupting illicit networks.

Operation Apollo is communicated and delivered as a technical, collaborative enforcement effort from the CBP aimed at gathering intelligence on drug trafficking operations and

prosecuting high level cartel figures by working with the Department of Homeland Security and the Drug Enforcement Administration (CBP, 2024). In comparison, Governor Abbott's OLS demonstrates a more politically targeted and framed approach that emphasises a crisis at the border, promotes street level enforcement and confrontation and uses the operation as a tool to attack *'the Biden Administration's reckless open border policies'* (Abbott, 2025).

From a constructivist theory of policy framing, it is clear that the messaging behind OLS is generally framed more as a crisis and attack on sovereignty, where drug trafficking must be targeted due to the perceived failures of the federal government. This therefore justifies a state-led, military focused response that increases front-line visibility rather than targeting the broader underlying issues. In comparison, Operation Apollo is framed as a collaborative effort between the federal and state government where the response to and targeting of drug trafficking is based on evidence, expertise and coordination, therefore potentially positioning the problem as a systemic, but still solvable issue.

Australia: Operation Tyrrendor

Operation Tyrrendor was a transnational law enforcement initiative primarily conducted and led by the Australian Federal Police (AFP), Australian Border Force (ABF) and the Queensland Police (AFP, 2024). The 2024 operation specifically targeted one criminal syndicate operation, with links to the Comanchero motorcycle crime gang, and resulted in 2.34 Australian tonnes of cocaine being seized off the coast of Queensland, the largest ever in Australian history (AFP, 2024).

Operation Tyrrendor significantly differs from OLS as it targeted a small criminal conspiracy that was attempting to illegally smuggle cocaine into Australia by land, rather than an ongoing, multiyear operation aimed at combating drug smuggling into Australia on a broader scale (Loftus, 2024). Nevertheless, Operation Tyrrendor is a relevant and useful comparison to OLS as it demonstrates how a coordinated, intelligence-led interdiction, that utilizes domestic collaboration between law enforcement departments, can achieve meaningful and effective results.

Assessing the operation from a constructivist theory of policy framing, it is clear that Operation Tyrrendor, in comparison to OLS, emphasises strong multi-agency coordination, precision and procedural legitimacy, this is further exemplified by the lack of politicisation or publicization of the operation. Although the operation was highly targeted and resulted in just one large seizure of cocaine, the operation prioritised more systemic, high impact disruption. This therefore resulted in an outcome that maximized cartel network disruption and effectively achieved its goals through strategic partnership and covert operations, rather than emphasising and implementing a more crisis-oriented rhetoric such as OLS.

Methodology

This research report employs a policy analysis framework to assess the impact of OLS on drug trafficking activity along the South Texas border since its inception in 2021. The methodology is built around a comparative and mixed source approach in which both quantitative data analysis and qualitative content analysis are used to measure the outcomes, effectiveness, theoretical framing and potential policy implications of OLS. The findings and analysis of the report are grounded in constructivist policy theory, and therefore examines how and why Governor Abbott has framed ongoing problems and altered public perspectives to gain legitimacy for OLS.

Data Sources and Collection

Quantitative Data:

- Comparative drug seizure statistics from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) using longitudinal trend analysis (2005-2007, 2018-2021, 2022-2024)
- Operational costs from Operation Lone Star official reports, Media Investigations and Policy Papers
- Border-related drug and crime rates from South Texas counties and cities

Qualitative Data:

- Congressional testimonies and committee hearings involving OLS, drug-specific policy and broader border security interests
- Media coverage such as the Texas Tribune, ProPublica and Fox News
- Press releases, public statements, and interviews from Governor Greg Abbott and other Texas officials
- Academic articles, policy papers and think tank reports on drug policy, border security, and state-federal jurisdiction

Comparative Framework

As discussed in the literature review section, to evaluate OLS's effectiveness, a comparative set of operations with similar border focuses will be included:

- Operation Apollo (California) - a federal led operation targeting fentanyl and meth smuggling at border points of entry, with collaboration between multiple agencies
- Operation Tyrrendor (Australia) - a coordinated drug seizure operation, used to compare contrast operations from an international perspective

Potential Limitations

This study acknowledges a number of potential limitations such as:

- Restricted access to certain OLS records (arrest data, drug seizure data)
- Potential political bias in official data (media reports, policy papers)
- Fiscal years 2020-2022 drug trafficking seizures may have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noted by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency, however, that they do not believe COVID-19 significantly impacted drug trafficking operations or seizures numbers (CBP, 2022).
- Difficulties in isolating causality between drug trafficking trends and OLS (especially between individual years)
- Limited research available (policy papers, reports) that directly assess OLS's outcomes and data comparisons
- In regard to a constructivist theory of policy framing, there are minimal studies that have examined how OLS is framed politically and symbolically to justify its continuation

Findings

Understanding and exploring the deeper issues associated with OLS and recognising the findings conducted from this report is essential to determining a sound policy solution. This section will therefore examine drug seizure data reported by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) in South Texas before and after the implementation of Operation Lone Star as well as analyse several reports, policy papers and investigative articles relating to OLS

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency includes relevant data regarding drug seizure rates in South Texas from before Operation Lone Star was announced by Governor Abbott, and since its implementation (CBP, 2020). In fiscal years 2018, 2020 and 2021, for example, the CBP released figures regarding drug seizures at South Texas ports of entry:

Illicit Drugs Seized at South Texas Ports of Entry, in US Tons, FY 2018, 2020, 2021.

Financial Year (FY)	Cocaine	Heroin	Marijuana	Methamphetamine
2018	3.54	0.36	42.03	3.78
2020	2.16	0.47	41.26	18.73
2021	4.29	0.60	20.85	16.88
Total	9.99 Tons	1.43 Tons	104.14 Tons	39.39 Tons

Table 1.2 (CBP, 2019, 2020 & 2022)

**Operation Lone Star was implemented in March 2021, 6 months before the end of fiscal year 2021.*

**CBP did not publicly release FY 2019 drug trafficking seizure figures.*

**South Texas ports of entry refers to border checkpoints in South Texas cities of Brownsville, Hidalgo, Pharr, Anzalduas, Progreso, Donna, Eagle Pass and Del Rio.*

The data provided by the CBP for multiple fiscal years before the implementation of OLS in March 2021 provides a strong indication and comparison for fiscal years following OLS's commencement. Comparing the data from FY 2018, 2020 and 2021 to the data from FY 2022, 2023 and 2024, we see that:

Illicit Drugs Seized in South Texas Sectors, in US Tons, FY 2022-2024.

Financial Year (FY)	Cocaine	Heroin	Marijuana	Methamphetamine
2022	6.43	0.16	26.69	21.73
2023	5.78	0.13	21.06	13.58
2024	4.35	0.14	20.94	20.54
Total	16.56 Tons	0.43 Tons	68.69 Tons	55.85 Tons

Tables 1.3 (CBP, 2025)

**South Texas sectors refers to border checkpoints in South Texas cities and regions of Del Rio, El Paso, Laredo and Rio Grande Valley.*

The 2022-2024 data suggests an increase in methamphetamine and cocaine seizures as well as a marked decrease in heroin and marijuana seizures. This data could potentially indicate targeted enforcement success under OLS, although currently the implications remain uncertain. Given the ambiguity of the quantitative data, it is important to more adequately explore other qualitative information and broader sources to consider OLS's impact.

Professor Penichet-Paul, for example, argues that although drug seizure in South Texas are decreasing, *'fentanyl, a drug 100 times more potent than morphine, are up significantly'* (Penichet-Paul, 2023). Recent nation-wide estimates suggest fentanyl was *'480 percent higher at the southern border in fiscal year 2023 compared to FY 2020'* and that 0.55 US tons were smuggled through South Texas sectors between FY 2022-2024 (CBP, 2025) (Penichet-Paul, 2023). Penichet-Paul argues that addressing both the supply and demand of drugs such as fentanyl is essential to reducing overall trafficking and harm to Americans and that *'to provide solutions to this challenge, it is important to acknowledge and have an accurate perspective of how drug smuggling interacts with U.S. borders'* (Penichet-Paul, 2023).

Penichet-Paul's findings are notable as they succinctly highlight the complexity of drug trafficking dynamics at the U.S.-Mexico border. Penichet-Paul's conclusions indicate that investing in technologies that enhance border surveillance, strengthen multi-state intelligence cooperation, and in particular, increased efforts to reduce domestic demand

through public health improvements, are all essential to implementing a strategy that treats drug trafficking as not only a security issue but also a public health crisis.

An investigative article published by ProPublica, in collaboration with The Texas Tribune and The Marshall Project in 2022, argues in regards to Operations Lone star that *'the agency failed to identify arrests and drug seizures that could have occurred without the additional personnel made available through the operation'* (Kriel & Trevizo, 2022) The article states that *'the absence of clear metrics for measuring its accomplishments points to a larger problem with the border operation'* (Kriel & Trevizo, 2022). Furthermore, in 2023, The Texas Tribune *'revealed that the data cited by the governor was for statewide drug seizures, not those solely tied to Operation Lone Star'* and that *'the program has swelled the profits of drug cartels and smugglers, who can now charge a premium to help migrants cross the increasingly dangerous terrain'* (Trevizo, 2022).

Adding to ProPublica's findings, a study published by Dr Callan, analysing OLS through a human rights framework, mirrored the findings of ProPublica's article (Callan, 2024 pp. 268). The report argued that *'claims of success were found to be based on shifting metrics that included crimes with no connection to the border, work conducted by troopers stationed in targeted counties prior to the operation, and arrest and drug seizure efforts that do not clearly distinguish DPS's role from that of other agencies'* (Callan, 2024 pp. 268).

Human Rights Watch (HRW), an international non-government organization that conducts research and advocacy on human rights, reported that *'property damage from vehicle pursuits has also increased in Operation Lone Star counties'* (HRW, 2023). The report found that *'average losses from chases were at around \$73,000 per month before March 1, 2021, with losses rising to over \$177,000 since that date, an increase of 142 percent'* (HRW, 2023). Human Rights Watch argues that the costs associated with OLS is disproportionate to the effectiveness of the program (HRW, 2023). HRW states that *'Operation Lone Star has cost Texas taxpayers close to \$10 billion in spent or allocated funds'* but despite this they are not aware of *'any evidence that Operation Lone Star is making measurable progress towards its stated goals to deter migration and thwart cartels involved in drug trafficking and people smuggling'* (HRW, 2023). Indeed, HRW made several recommendation is 2023 to the then Biden administration, the US Congress and the Texas Governor Greg Abbott, respectively, stating that they should *'end all collaboration with Operation Lone Star in Texas'*, not provide funds to US Customs and Border Patrol that directly collaborate with Operation Lone Star and end Operation Lone Star immediately (HRW, 2023).

In contrast to the findings discussed, the Texas National Guard reported in February 2025 that *'Operation Lone Star has disrupted and turned back more than 138,000 potential smuggling events'* and that *'National Guard members continue to play a key role in sealing and securing the southern U.S. border'* (Soucy, 2025). The Office of the Texas Governor also reports that

since the implementation of OLS, *‘Texas has seized over half a billion lethal doses of fentanyl’, ‘enough to kill every man, woman, and child in the United States and Mexico combined’* (Abbott, 2024).

Republican Senator John Cornyn reported in June 2025 on Fox News that President Joe Biden *‘woefully neglected’* to keep the citizens of Texas safe, therefore allowing the border to be *‘overrun by criminal aliens and cartels smuggling deadly synthetic opioids’* (Cornyn, 2025) Senator Cornyn argues that the \$11 billion cost of OLS is the result of the Biden administration failing to protect its people, stating that \$11 billion is a *‘pretty penny for Texans to pay for the basic safety and security that the federal government owes its people’* (Cornyn, 2025).

In 2024, the Texas Senate border security committee examined the effectiveness of OLS in an interim report, finding that *‘the Biden Administration wilfully failed to uphold the law and secure our southern border resulting in an unprecedented border crisis’* (Senate Committee on Border Security, 2024) The report argues that *‘the success of Operation Lone Star is evidenced by the seizure of over 504 million lethal doses of fentanyl’* and that *‘the State of Texas must continue to fund Operation Lone Star’* (Senate Committee on Border Security, 2024)

Nevertheless, despite these claims, data from the California U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency suggests it may be unlikely that OLS has currently resulted in consequential changes to drug smuggling and trafficking in South Texas:

Illicit Drugs Seized in California Sectors, in US Tons, FY 2022-2024.

Financial Year (FY)	Cocaine	Heroin	Marijuana	Methamphetamine
2022	4.91	0.46	0.63	48.48
2023	7.31	0.41	2.18	38.61
2024	8.71	0.23	0.94	49.01
Total	20.93 Tons	1.10 Tons	3.75 Tons	136.10 Tons

Table 1.4 (CBP, 2025)

**California sectors refers to border checkpoints in California city of San Diego (Field Office and Sector)*

The data from California, in comparison with data shown in tables 1.2 and 1.3, suggests that the partial decreases in drug seizures of heroin and methamphetamine in FY 2023 were experienced in both the South Texas region and California border area, while the changes in cocaine and marijuana remained relatively unchanged. Although this data does conclusively determine the effectiveness of OLS, it suggests that changes in drug seizures in South Texas could be influenced by outside factors unrelated to OLS.

In relation to OLS's fentanyl seizures, data from the American Immigration Council (AIC) highlights that *'the majority of fentanyl is smuggled by people who can enter the United States legally'*, stating that *'these individuals can evade detection by posing as normal travellers entering or re-entering the United States'* (AIC, 2025). The AIC states that *'most people crossing the land border will not receive intensive screening'* and that as of spring 2024, *'just 20 percent of commercial traffic and five percent of passenger vehicle traffic were screened through non-intrusive inspection technology'* (AIC, 2025). The AIC concludes that *'criminal organizations can easily smuggle narcotics: concealed with a traveller who is themselves concealed among all the other travellers, safe in the knowledge that only a small portion of people, vehicles, or cargo containers can be searched at any given time'* (AIC, 2025). AIC's findings therefore suggest that smuggling fentanyl and other drugs at ports of entry is likely to be highly effective, regardless of OLS, with AIC concluding that *'there is little evidence to suggest migrants are bringing fentanyl across the border on foot, or that migration is linked to fentanyl at all'* (AIC, 2025).

These findings, as well as the comments and analysis by scholars and media investigations, suggest that Governor Abbott's OLS does not appear to have currently produced long-term impacts on cartel drug trafficking operations or systemic drug flow. Moreover, conclusively determining OLS's ongoing effectiveness is likely to be complex due to the reported findings from ProPublica stating that metrics unrelated to OLS had been used in official arrest and drug seizure statistics. Therefore, further analysing the broader impacts OLS has had on illegal drug smuggling in South Texas is essential for determining sound policy recommendations moving forward.

Analysis

Research Question and Thesis Statement

The research question for this paper asked, *'What Impact has Operation Lone Star Had on Illegal Drug Smuggling Along the South Texas Border with Mexico Since its Inception in 2021, and What Policy Lessons can Be Applied in the Future?'*. From the data and findings presented suggests that while Governor Abbott's OLS has achieved some measurable increases in drug seizures, its long-term impact on targeting and dismantling cartel drug trafficking operations appears to be limited and disproportionate to its economic and social costs.

The thesis statement posited that *‘Despite Minor Decreases in Drug Trafficking in South Texas Since 2021, Operation Lone Star Has Failed to Adequately Address the Ongoing Drug Smuggling Issues Along the Texas Border with Mexico’*. The CBP data presented in tables 1.2 and 1.3 indicates rises in cocaine and methamphetamine seizures from FY 2022–2024 compared to pre-OLS years. In 2022, for example, cocaine was up to 6.43 tons compared to 3.54 tons in 2018 and methamphetamine was up to 21.73 tons compared to 3.78 in 2018. These changes are consistent with thesis statements framing of *‘minor decreases’*, however the core issue still remains. OLS has been unable to meaningfully or adequately disrupt drug smuggling or trafficking given the high expenditure and questionable attribution of data and results.

Therefore, in analysing measurable data associated with OLS, this report concludes that the thesis statement is upheld, OLS has failed to adequately address the ongoing drug smuggling issues along the South Texas border with Mexico.

Constructivist Theory of Policy Framing and Problem Statement

As outlined in the introduction, background and findings, Governor Abbott consistently frames OLS as a necessary intervention against federal failure, using rhetoric about *‘open border policies’* and slogans about state sovereignty (Abbott, 2025). From a constructivist policy framing lens, this politically charged narrative strongly shapes public perception. Texas citizens are likely to see visible troops, razor-wire fencing, and press releases claiming *‘over 500 million lethal doses of fentanyl seized’* even though transparent data that can back these claims remains unavailable, unclear or disputed (Abbott, 2025) (Kriel & Trevizo, 2022). This style of framing shifts emphasis away from evidence-based outcomes and more toward symbols of enforcement and deterrence.

The constructivist framing Governor Abbott implemented helps to likely explain why he chose to pursue OLS as a state-based operation, rather than collaborating more closely with federal agencies. The phrasing used to target the Biden administration helped to justify expanding state authority even if federal and state collaboration could have resulted in more targeted and sustainable outcomes.

The problem statement presented was, *‘Is Operation Lone Star an effective policy for curbing drug smuggling or a symbolic political tool?’*. The evidence available suggests that OLS is more of a symbolic tool, with more of a politically constructed narrative of crisis and state sovereignty, rather than a focused, intelligence-driven operation with federal and state collaboration, therefore somewhat reinforcing the conclusions stated regarding a constructivist theory of policy framing.

Comparative Contract and Cost Effectiveness

Supporters of OLS cite the Texas National Guard's statistics regarding '*138,000 potential smuggling events disrupted*', with repeated statements by Republican officials and Senate committee reports praising OLS as a success (Soucy, 2025). Importantly, public polling shows high approval for OLS among Texas citizens with '*64% supporting deploying state police and military resources on the border*' (Choi, 2023). From this perspective, OLS's symbolic value and its role in supporting border visibility and asserting state security could be argued as being sufficient justification for continuation of the operation, regardless of continued drug smuggling.

California's Operation Apollo and Australia's Operation Tyrrendor suggest, however that collaboration between the state and federal government, as well as multi-agency cooperation and data driven outcomes is more likely to deliver strong results without significant public expenditure.

Currently OLS has cost taxpayers more than \$11 billion since 2021. [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] These organisations and media companies emphasize that many metrics used may include activity that would have occurred regardless of OLS. Moreover, despite the \$11 billion spent, there is currently no clear publicly verifiable evidence that OLS has affected cartel supply lines or reduced demand.

Outcomes and Summary

Previous research from 2005–2007 offers foundational insights into drug smuggling in South Texas and contributes to understanding the broader trajectory of change leading into the implementation of OLS. Analysing the title of this report on '*Evaluating the Impact of Operation Lone Star in combating drug smuggling since 2021*', it is evident that OLS has resulted in modest increases in drug seizures since 2021, however has not reduced cartel drug trafficking networks or supply.

Although drug seizures alone are not definitive proof of inaction or poor performance, when compared with independent investigations, political framing analyses, cost data comparison, and comparison with more effective models such as California's Operation Apollo, it is highly likely that OLS has not had sufficient impact on drug smuggling, especially relative to its scale and cost.

Policy Challenges

Analysing the findings presented in this report, it is clear that the policy approach and implementation of OLS, especially from a constructivist theory of policy framing, is inconsistent and requires more cohesive and effective policy solutions to successfully achieve its broader goals. As the research question highlights, investigating what policy challenges exist, and what lessons can be applied into the future, is essential to demonstrating how drug trafficking in South Texas can be more appropriately targeted. The primary policy challenges discussed will therefore relate to drug seizure data, the intergovernmental framework, the fiscal and resource sustainability and the constructivist challenge of OLS.

Drug Seizure Data

A key challenge for policy makers is OLS's uncertain and somewhat weak link between effective strategies of the program and tangible outcomes. The findings and analysis in this report demonstrate that OLS heavily relies on deterrence of drug trafficking primarily through increased enforcement, arrests and overall physical presence. As discussed, however, current data and metrics regarding drug seizure figures, especially when compared with interstate figures, indicates that there is no definitive link that proves a reduction in drug trafficking and smuggling from Mexico. This therefore highlights that a stronger, more comprehensive evaluation of baseline data available and drug smuggling figures is needed to determine if OLS is effectively achieving its illegal drug trade related goals.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Texas (ACLU), for example, recommends in their 2024 report that OLS encourages increased transparency and accountability *'by improving data collection and reporting'* (ACLU, 2024). If Governor Abbott and the broader Texas legislature chose to implement policies to improve transparency and ensure consistent data collection, policymakers could more adequately determine if and how OLS is achieving its objectives.

Intergovernmental Framework

The implementation of OLS demonstrates significant gaps in coordination and cooperation between the federal and state government. Governor Abbott repeatedly criticised the Biden administration for its alleged refusal to *'secure the border and invite illegal immigration'* and although President Trump has received more positive feedback from Governor Abbott, there is evidence to suggest that coordination and transparency remains poor (Abbott, 2025). A 2023 report, for example, argues that the division and poor communication between the federal government and Texas state government has resulted in *'indifference'* and *'half-hearted attempts at pushback'* (Hawkins, 2023). The report recommends that until stronger

transparency and more positive dialogue between the federal and state government exists *‘Congress should exercise rigorous oversight of CBP concerning its collaboration with Operation Lone Star and Texas’s usurpation of federal authority over immigration’* (Hawkins, 2025).

The divide between the federal and Texas state governments is further exemplified by the 2023 Department of Justice decision to sue Texas due to alleged *‘unlawful actions’* relating to barriers being installed without permission in multiple border cities (Beech & Singh, 2023). Despite President Trump supporting Governor Abbott’s OLS, it is likely that continued collaboration between federal and state governments will change between administrations and not necessarily result in action or meaningful change in relation to drug smuggling in South Texas (Choi, 2025) (Hawkins, 2023).

Fiscal and Resource Sustainability

OLS’s history in relation to its economic and resource-based viability and responsibilities present substantial concerns. As highlighted previously, OLS has currently cost Texas over USD \$10 billion since 2021, with funding frequently reallocated from state agencies, including the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and Texas Department of Public Safety (ACLU, 2024). Even from a federal perspective, in the 118th Congress, HR.1286 and HR.7402 were introduced to *‘reimburse the State of Texas for expenses incurred for activities conducted relating to securing the southern international border of the United States’* (2024, HR.1286 & HR.7402).

Despite the scale of investment, however, multiple analyses and investigations have suggested that OLS has not produced a definitive deterrent effect for drug trafficking (Kriel & Trevizo, 2022) Without a coordinated intergovernmental framework or cost-benefit analysis, therefore, OLS risks becoming fiscally unsustainable. To achieve sustainable reforms, OLS must implement measures to ensure transparent reporting mechanisms that therefore allow for both accountability and long-term viability.

Constructivist Challenge

Viewing OLS from a constructivist theory of policy framing perspective, it is apparent that a more significant challenge is that OLS functions less as a policy response to measurable threats and more as a symbolic performance rooted in identity politics and narrative construction. Governor Abbott and the office of the Texas Governor often frame the operation as being essential to defending the state, restore sovereignty, and protect a cultural way of life (Abbott, 2025).

This more symbolic constructivist dimension is likely to affect policy in three distinct ways:

- **Politicisation of Threats:** The framing of drug traffickers as threats to sovereignty amplifies fear-based responses rather than evidence-based risk assessments.
- **Resistance to Criticism:** Because Governor Abbott attempted to frame OLS as a marker of state identity and political allegiance, critiques of the program are often dismissed as ideological attacks rather than constructive evaluation.
- **Reduced Policy Flexibility:** The symbolic weight of the operation makes it difficult for policymakers to pivot away from militarized strategies or revise tactics without appearing 'weak' on border security.

A constructivist approach therefore highlights how the identity and ideological politics accolated with OLS more heavily constrain policy options, reduce openness to adaptation of existing policies and exemplify a cycle where percieved 'toughness' is prioritized over measurable results.

Policy Recommendations

The policy challenges and analysis sections of this report indicate that implementing a policy recommendation for OLS to more effectively target cartel drug trafficking and smuggling at the South Texas border is likely to be a significant challenge. Developing a policy recommendation that reflects positive change, but is also realistically achievable, is therefore likely to be dependant of balancing intergovernmental cooperation, fiscal responsibilities and data-backed strategies. Moreover, ensuring that policy reforms respond to both the constructivist symbolism of OLS as well as produce a measurable and effective outcome in disrupting cartel operations, is essential to developing meaningful change to the operation.

Reframe Operation Lone Star

As explored, a key policy challenge OLS faces, especially from a constructivist lens, is its overemphasis on enforcement, law and order and a lack of oversight relating to the effects of cartel operations and drug trafficking. Governor Abbott and the Texas legislature should therefore worke to reframe OLS through a broader lens by targeting public health and support, stronger data analysis of trafficking figures, and by working collaboratively across state lines. California's Operation Apollo, for example, offers a valuable model for how Texas

might recalibrate and reframe OLS to become a more effective, evidence-based and targeted program.

OLS in particular emphasises border militarisation, while Operation Apollo focuses on the benefits of sharing intelligence between jurisdictions as well as emphasises the importance of overdose prevention education (CBP, 2023). Operation Apollo coordinates response efforts at the state, local, and federal level, where government agencies *‘share intelligence on drug trafficking at every level of the supply chain, from catching traffickers shipping and receiving chemicals used to make fentanyl and other opioids, to people actually moving the finished products to consumers’* (Ribakoff, 2023). This collaborative model has actively contributed to stronger, more measurable outcomes, such as increased and earlier fentanyl detection in California and successful seizures and arrests before the drugs reach local communities (CBP, 2023).

In contrast, however, OLS has resulted in uncoordinated oversight between agencies and inconclusive and unclear metrics. Governor Abbott should therefore consider restructuring and reframing OLS around key policy objectives similar to California’s Operation Apollo:

- **Collaborative Intelligence Sharing:** Develop and implement multi-agency intelligence task forces that include local and state law enforcement as well as experts from public health departments and educational institutions. This collaboration between these agencies and departments would therefore allow for stronger understandings of cartel supply chains and the broader impacts of drug trafficking on local communities.
- **Prevention and Community Education:** Adding to the previous recommendation, by allocating a portion of OLS’s funding toward drug education and usage prevention efforts at the local level, this would likely help to reduce the demand for illegal drugs, and therefore reduce hospital admissions and broader cartel operations in South Texas.
- **Standardised Reporting:** OLS should adopt consistent and clear performance metrics and data sharing protocols such as cross agency collaboration and regular, robust reporting of drug seizure figures and cartel member arrests. This would allow both state and federal stakeholders to assess the success of OLS on measurable grounds, rather than political or symbolic ones.

By reframing OLS to more directly target intelligence sharing, education and reporting techniques Governor Abbott could transform the program to more effectively and sustainably address drug trafficking in South Texas and directly target the deeper systemic issues associated with usage. Moreover, from a constructivist theory of policy framing, this reframing would directly target the policy challenges discussed such as the reduced policy

flexibility, politicisation of threats and distance to criticism without compromising the overall underlying policy framework of OLS.

Border Security Oversight Commission

Somewhat building on the first recommendation, the second recommendation addresses the ongoing fiscal and intergovernmental dysfunctions as explored in the policy challenges section of this report. Currently over USD \$11 billion has been spent on OLS since the inception of the program with continuing concerns regarding data inconsistencies and cooperation between Texas and federal government highlighting the need to establish stronger mechanisms to ensure fiscal accountability, data oversight, and larger program reforms. (Leal, 2025)

Therefore, to address these issues, this report recommends that the Texas Legislature, in partnership with the U.S. Congress, establish a Border Security Oversight Commission. A commission such as this could be federally monitored, be composed of bipartisan members, and be tasked with reviewing, auditing, and advising both the Texas Legislature and the U.S. Congress on the operations and expenditures of OLS, as well as border initiatives for other states.

This commission would likely be composed of members from:

- The U.S. Government Accountability Office
- The Texas State Auditor's Office
- Representatives from U.S. Customs and Border Protection
- Public health experts and independent policy researchers
- Community stakeholders from South Texas border regions

The primary functions of a commission such as this would be to conduct:

- **Financial Oversight:** The commissions could conduct regular audits and reports of OLS expenditure such as the funds sent between agencies and the amount of money spent on specific programs within the operation. By doing this, it would help analyse and evaluate whether OLS's allocation of resources was effective and proportionate to its outcomes as well as whether particular initiatives could be altered, streamlined or replaced alternate methods.
- **Budgeting:** The commission could recommend funding levels for OLS programs and initiatives based on performance indicators such as drug seizure effectiveness,

reductions in community hospital admissions and other drug related incidents as well as increased funding for both state federal agencies.

- **Public Transparency:** Importantly, a commission such as this could require that all OLS related drug seizures, arrests, financial transfers, and agency collaboration be published online or to a platform accessible to the public and journalists.

By establishing a Border Security and Oversight Commissions, Governor Abbott could improve the current accountability and effectiveness of OLS and encourage a more collaborative approach between federal and state authorities. Moreover, from a constructivist perspective this commission could serve as a baseline model for cooperative federalism between Texas and the federal government, therefore allowing programs such as OLS to complement, rather than compete with, national strategies.

These policy recommendations both combined and individually present a strong alternative policy option that is evidence based, more transparent, and mostly easily adaptable. They directly address the core challenges of OLS that have been discussed and emphasise Texas's current efforts within a broader national context that prioritizes strategy over symbolism.

Conclusion

This report has critically examined and evaluated Operation Lone Star's (OLS) impact in combating illegal drug smuggling along the South Texas border since its inception in 2021. The report first explored the historical contexts associated with OLS and cartel drug trafficking in South Texas. The report then highlighted the more recent background associated with OLS and compared OLS with comparative models such as Operation Apollo and Operation Tyrrendor. Following these discussions, the report presented its substantial findings and analysed the implications of the findings. Finally, the report introduced a number of policy challenges and recommendations to be considered in future to develop OLS's effectiveness in combatting drug trafficking.

As theorised in the thesis statement, the report found that although OLS has contributed to increased drug seizures and arrests, there is evidence that indicates these results are modest, inconsistently reported, and not directly attributable to the program.

The report argued that from a constructivist theory of policy framing perspective, OLS functions less as a measured policy response and more as a symbolic tool of state sovereignty

poised by Texas Governor Greg Abbott. In contrast, California's Operation Apollo illustrates how a collaborative, intelligence focused, and federally supported initiative can result in more targeted and measurable outcomes. Similarly, Australia's Operation Tyrrendor demonstrates how focused, multi-agency coordination can result in significant drug seizures and cartel disruption, without militaristic framing or political weaponisation.

Following these discussions, two key policy reforms were recommended. Firstly, the report recommended that Texas improve OLS's data collection, public health education and reporting to enable stronger understandings of its impacts. Secondly the report recommended that the Texas Legislature and the U.S. Congress adopt a border security oversight committee to allow for stronger financial oversight, budgeting and transparency.

Although OLS has produced political support and short-term success, this report finds it has failed to convincingly demonstrate long-term success in combatting drug smuggling and trafficking. It is therefore essential that Governor Abbott adapts OLS to implement stronger policy initiatives that ensure that the long-term viability and successes of the program result in meaningful change and progress towards combatting cartel drug smuggling activities in South Texas.

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