

Confronting Myths: How Violence in Ciudad Juárez Affects El Paso, Texas

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This is a field-study looking at the effects of Ciudad Juarez drug cartel violence and its effects on the city of El Paso, Texas. This study examines criminal, economical, and societal effects of the drug wars that have encapsulated this region.

“Our two nations are bound by more than just a common border, and we want to make sure that the fate of Mexico turns out to be a good one because that will have a residual good impact on the United States.”

– Attorney General Eric Holder

A Rugged Landscape

What the Spanish once dubbed “El Paso Del Norte,” has now become one of the most contentious regions in the United States, packing the holy trinity of the southwest: drugs, immigration, and national security. Each day the border crossings connecting Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, the second busiest land port of entry in the United States, sees thousands of people and goods cross in cars, trucks, busses, or on foot. This daily exchange of goods and people (mostly legal) is the vital resource for the sister cities’ economies. As for drugs, the FBI believes 40%-60% of all illegal drugs smuggled into the United States enter from Juárez.¹ According to Border Agent Joe Romero drug trafficking is part of the local economy where Juárez provides the supply and the United States provides a huge demand.² The 18-foot, rust colored fence is an ever-present reminder of the contentious nature of this region and the drive for national border security from Washington, D.C. However, calls from Washington and the American public for tighter border security do not take into account that “some 2 million people are linked at this spot, by ties of blood and commerce” as claimed by New York Times contributor Andrew Rice.³ This corridor, polarized by a rusty fence, the full force of two nations’ militaries, federal agencies, immigration, and drugs is a testament to the precarious nature of the borderlands.

In a 2011 symposium sponsored by the University of Colorado Colorado Springs, Michael Noll, the former Director of Intelligence for North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Northern Command and Director of Joint Intelligence Operations Center (JIIOC) North, stated, “Ciudad Juárez is the most dangerous city in the world. More dangerous than Kabul or Kandahar.”⁴ The distinction given to Juárez by Mr. Noll is not without validity. Ongoing war between the rival Juárez and Sinaloa Drug cartels over precious smuggling routes creates

somewhere between \$6 to \$36 billion a year.⁵ As of June 24, 2011, Juárez eclipsed one thousand murders (not to mention the five thousand amassed between 2008-2010), and according to Patrick Manning, a writer for Fox News Latino, that “is a welcomed statistic that is actually a dip compared to the 1,200 homicides at the same point last year.”⁶ Juárez is still on pace to eclipse more than two thousand homicides for 2011. So, accepting the axiom that Ciudad Juárez is a mecca for western hemisphere violence and Death Star like narco-terror: what affect is this having on its sister city, El Paso, Texas?

El Paso is located on the northern bank of the meandering Rio Grande, home of the Miners from the University of Texas El Paso (UTEP), muse for Marty Robbins’ country classic “El Paso,” site for Fort Bliss, and the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC), the mother-hub for monitoring inter-American drug trafficking. El Paso has become an epicenter for national border security policy, immigration, drugs, debates and worries of cartel violence. El Paso is linked to the future of Ciudad Juárez.

For eight days, from the end of May 2011, to the first week of June, I conducted interviews and other data collection for this research in El Paso. Interviews for El Paso Social Services, Economic Development Team, and Dr. Murphy, the head of the Inter-American Border Studies Program at the University of Texas El Paso, were scheduled through email correspondence from Colorado Springs. Other primary data were gathered through landscape assessment around the city, discussions with staff from the Hotel Gardner (where, according to the Gardner’s website, John Dillinger once stayed before his capture in Tucson), and from anyone else willing to discuss the curious dichotomy of the El Paso – Juárez corridor. The research consisted of three questions:

1. Has commerce been affected by the violence in Juárez? Has capital left the city, or has cross-border trade been complicated?
2. How has the violence from Juárez spread to other dimensions of society in El Paso? For example, are there impacts on school enrollment, public health, crime, housing, etc.
3. As a citizen of El Paso, how do you interpret the violence in Juárez? What outcomes do you see for the future?

El Paso, How High Can the Wall Go?

Assistant City Manager Pat Aduato never expected she would be in the national spotlight, however, on June 30, 2010, that all changed. As a gunfight between Mexican Federal Agents and cartel members raged in the streets of northern Juárez, a bullet shattered Aduato’s office window at City Hall. In all, seven bullets hit the City Hall building. Texas’ Attorney General Greg Abbott wasted no time venting his frustrations about his perceived lack of border security. In a letter to President Obama, Abbott stated: “Yesterday, gunfire from cartels struck City Hall in El Paso. Fortunately no one was injured or killed. But that good fortune was not the result of effective border control – it was mere luck that the bullets struck buildings rather than bodies.”⁷ The In another interview, Abbott further elaborated that “It is more dangerous to walk the streets of Juárez, a few blocks from El Paso, than it is to walk the streets of Baghdad. There is a very serious problem that is beginning to bulge at our borders and put American lives at risk.”⁸ The

Obama administration responded by relocating 1,200 National Guard troops to the borderlands, a figure that Abbott feels does not meet the gravity of the threat. He believes action was needed immediately⁹ and states, “we see this crime on a daily basis. The federal government must respond more effectively, step up their enforcement and protection of the border before more American blood is shed.”¹⁰ While the Texas Attorney General was lambasting the Obama administration for their lack of response Texas Governor, Rick Perry was vilifying the administration for something that never happened.

In an interview with Fox News, Gov. Perry claimed “You’ve got bullets hitting city hall in El Paso. You’ve got bombs exploding in El Paso. The border with Mexico is a war zone.”¹¹ While it is true that bullets did in fact hit the City Hall building, the car bomb the Texas Governor was referring to in fact detonated in Juárez – a completely different city, in a completely different sovereign nation. Governor Perry’s statement was not only calamitous, it led Antonio, aka Clark Kent, and an employee at the Hotel Gardner, to label him “an idiot—He knows better, and he just wanted votes.”¹² Perhaps the governor misspoke, and in fact his office released a statement to KFOX-TV in El Paso:

In response to your question, he (Perry) was referring to the incident in which a car bomb was detonated by cartel members in Juárez, just across from El Paso. Thankfully no one was injured in that incident, but it certainly underscores the seriousness of the violent drug war taking place miles from our border communities and the need for adequate federal resources to secure the border.¹³

However, two days later in Laredo Texas, in an interview with KGNS-TV, a Laredo TV station, Governor Perry stated: “When a car bomb goes off in El Paso...we know there is a (security) problem.”¹⁴ The Obama administration responded by sending in Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano. The former Governor of Arizona and lifelong resident of the borderland embarked on a mission to promote facts, and ridicule border politicians for their use of fear rhetoric about border communities.

During her whirlwind tour of the southwest, Secretary Napolitano delivered a speech at the University of Texas at El Paso. Napolitano chastised Border States politicians for trying to “score political points” by using fear rhetoric about border issues, such as drugs, immigration, and violence.¹⁵ In another speech for the national think tank NDN, she further claimed, “Damaging information about border communities has been repeated enough.”¹⁶ Napolitano praised that the policies enacted by the Obama administration by saying the Border Patrol has received “the biggest surge of manpower and technology to the southwest ever.”¹⁷ According to Napolitano, in the last two years Border Patrol has grown to include an estimated 21,000 agents which helped reduced illegal crossings by a third.¹⁸ And as for belief that an imminent threat of violence is spewing from Juárez, the Mayor of El Paso, John Cook, could not disagree more. And he is backed by empirical data.

Despite Juárez’s astronomical murder toll, El Paso, Texas is ranked number 1 for the city with lowest crime rate that has a population 500,000 or more.¹⁹ According to FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Statistics data, the total violent crime report has dropped by nearly 36% from 2000-

2010.²⁰ These are figures that Mayor Cook is extremely proud of and in an interview with the BBS he says “The reality is we really don’t need the help on this side of the border. We probably have every kind of federal law enforcement agency that you can think of. We’re an extremely safe community.”²¹ Cook had a similar response to Attorney General Abbott’s request for National Guard soldiers: “What are they going to do? Jump up in the air and catch the bullets? I’m very concerned about the militarization of the border.”²² And it seems like Mayor Cook has to constantly go on the offensive to ensure people, especially those living outside the community, that violence does not run El Paso.²³ Cook elaborates, “Logically it seems that if you have violence on one side of the border then you’re going to have spillover on the other side... But the reality is that we don’t.”²⁴ Mayor Cook also responded to the false statements made by Governor Perry by saying “It doesn’t help when the governor comes out and adds to the perception that the violence has spilled over.”²⁵

Border historian David Romo shares Mayor Cook’s sentiments. The recent fear rhetoric about violence and security about the border in El Paso is not a new issue. Romo shares that requests for the first border fence came in 1908 to prevent Chinese immigrants from entering El Paso. During World War I, there were threats of Germans entering the city illegally. The current fear is illegal immigrants coming from Mexico and once again politicians have voiced their concerns about security and illegal entries.²⁶ Romo states:

It happens that every time an election year comes up, they know that creating fear and hysteria about the border will drive a wedge. [...] In some ways it’s cheap vote-getting. There is this cycle of kind of nativist hysteria that is very profitable for politicians. Nothing gets votes like the politics of fear.²⁷

So, if the rhetoric from politicians about border violence is based purely on fear, not facts (which the empirical data show), how is El Paso being affected by the violence in Juárez? The answer lies in the other aspects of society in El Paso.

The Realities of Juárez Violence

Walking around downtown El Paso, two things become prevalent. One, the heat, and two, there are a lot of empty buildings. Is the violence in Juárez to blame for the latter? How is the violence in Juárez affecting business in El Paso, if at all? According to Julian Aguilar of the New York Times “In 2009, more than \$42 billion in trade value moved through the ports that Ciudad Juárez shares with El Paso, representing 15 percent of the total trade between the United States and Mexico.”²⁸ And as of 2010, that trade was estimated to be about \$71 billion.²⁹ According to David Sarmiento, a member of El Paso’s City Hall Economic Team, trade “is likely to rise by about 20 percent in 2011.”³⁰ These empirical data show decisively that, in fact, international commerce has improved, despite the violence in Juárez. El Paso businesses like Tecma, an outsourcing company, has profited from the sister cities relationship and “signed five new clients and netted an estimated \$45 million in profits in 2009.”³¹ However, Bob Cook, the president of the El Paso Regional Economic Development Corporation (EPREDC), has found it difficult to recruit new businesses to the region because of the economic downturn and political rhetoric dramatizing drug violence as rampant in southwest border cities.³² Janet Napolitano has

responded fastidiously to Cook's and other border businesses quandaries and agrees by stating "Inaccurate accounts of insecurity are hurting business in border cities like San Diego, El Paso, and Tucson, where violent crime has dropped notably in recent years."³³ The owner of the Hotel Gardner, Gary (a pseudonym to protect his identity) echoed the secretary's claims and finds "We used to send 20-30 people over to Mexico a week. Now, we don't send anyone."³⁴ Customers come to El Paso convinced that Mexico is full of demons, and it is partly because of statements from Governor Perry and other state level government officials.

Nevertheless, Mr. Cook and the EPREDC have begun to think outside the box when it comes to promoting new business opportunities in the region. Mr. Cook and his team at the EPREDC have developed a 49-piece slide show to illustrate the business opportunities of the maquiladoras in Juárez. These maquila jobs have a direct effect on the economy of El Paso. As Mr. Cook illustrates, these new companies "will help restore the region to pre-recession levels, when more than 50,000 jobs in El Paso, in retail or manufacturing, were the result of Juárez manufacturing industry."³⁵ These retailing and manufacturing jobs were the victim of the economic recession of 2008, and not the turbulence in Juárez.³⁶

This same question – how has Juárez violence affected El Paso? – was posed to David Sarmiento, a member of the El Paso City Hall Economic Team. In a meeting at City Hall with Mr. Sarmiento, he stated his case that Juárez was not to blame for any economic downturn in the El Paso economy: "First, urban sprawl, and its spreading of the population has everything to do with the lack of business in our downtown area."³⁷ In fact, the violence in Juárez has led to a curious new economy at the border, blocks away from the bridge that connects El Paso Avenue and Avenida Juárez, what Sarmiento calls "The Golden Ring." He continues, "Inexpensive goods used to be a staple across the border in Juárez, but with the recent violence, and extortive practices by the cartels, business owners have moved across the border to El Paso."³⁸ Previously viewed by city officials as a source of urban blight, Sarmiento and the economic team now see a vital and positive source of tax revenue for the El Paso economy. And this relocation has had another direct effect on El Paso, its housing market.

In a news report, Cathy Few, an El Paso Real Estate broker, highlighted the exodus of Juárez citizens fleeing the violence to start a new life in El Paso and finds "They are running for their lives, they're afraid that something is going to happen to their family. They're afraid for their brother and sisters and children."³⁹ Few added, "A good 10 to 20 percent increase in my business is from these people coming over."⁴⁰ In fact, many interviewed during the field research for this essay corroborated Few's statement. According to Sarmiento, "Nearly half of the new home owners in my neighborhood have Mexican plates."⁴¹ Michele Ellington, from El Paso's Department of Community and Human Development stated "many families are currently relocating their loved ones to El Paso, and there is a definite rise in the number of businesses owned by Mexican nationals."⁴² Diana Diaz, another member of El Paso's Economic Development Team, who was born in El Paso but grew up in Juárez, added "I know about forty people who have come over from Juárez, some legally, some illegally, and the first question they ask me is how can I start a business."⁴³ Andrew Rice, a contributing writer to the *New York Times*, finds "Juárez's middle and upper class has decamped to the other side of the border,

taking their money, businesses, even their private schools with them, forming an affluent community in exile.”⁴⁴

The Academic Community

Dr. Moria Murphy Aguilar, a visiting professor for the Inter-American Border Studies Program at the University of Texas at El Paso recognizes the violent situation in Juárez, however, cautions against blaming everything on the violence. It is hard to measure exactly what the effects of violence are as opposed to the effects of something like the economic downturn.⁴⁶ “We have not collected enough information to see if it is only the affluent who are leaving Juárez, and it is the violence they are fleeing from.”⁴⁷ With that as a caveat, Dr. Murphy and her colleague Zita Arocha, a senior lecturer at the UTEP, have been working on a journalism project called “Mexodus,” which is bilingual, multi-cultural online publication that investigates the effects of the Mexican Exodus.⁴⁸ Specifically, they seek to understand how Juárez violence has contributed to the loss of business and students fleeing to El Paso.

In 1985, Gustavo Gonzalez and his family founded Ingles Individual, a franchise of schools that teach English. Gonzalez opened the door to his first El Paso branch in July 2011. Gonzalez’s story is a familiar one. Juárez Chamber of Commerce has lost more than 10,000 businesses in the past three years—many of these closures are linked to the rise of violence.⁴⁹ In an interview with Mariel Torres, Gonzalez explained his reasons for taking his business and his family to El Paso. “If the situation wouldn’t be so difficult in Juárez, I would have stayed there... The first point is to open an institute here in El Paso, maybe two more.”⁵⁰ Gonzalez and his family plan to invest an estimated \$300,000 in the El Paso economy.⁵¹

Located on the west side of El Paso, Franklin High School has become a bastion for students fleeing from Juárez. According to an article published on the Mexodus site, this school’s student enrollment in ESL (English as a second language) program increased 350% from 2007-2010.⁵² The entire faculty has not welcomed the new abundance of Mexican students. One teacher expressed her frustrations by saying:

I just want them to be here legally and pay their taxes so that we can hire more teachers and support the tax base. Right now they are sucking us dry. For these kids it seems there is no need for them to learn the lessons. I don’t think they want to learn.⁵³

However, teachers are not the only expressing this sentiment. In a personal interview with the author, Sergeant Timothy Rutter of the El Paso Police Department shares, “I’m worried about Mexican women coming over and giving birth to their children that become a burden on the social and school systems of El Paso.”⁵⁴

Not everyone is worried about this transition. Another teacher provided a more positive view of the students from Juárez and shares:

Many kids coming from Juárez are educated, smart and know their history. They know that less than 200 years ago, half of their country was taken away. Now they are seeking refuge over here, and people start complaining.⁵⁵

Victor Carrasco, a sophomore at Franklin, addressed the idea that students from Juárez do not want to learn, or are not happy to be in the United States: “I think it’s just that people have their preconceived ideas, thoughts and opinions and don’t consider what these students are going through with an open mind.”⁵⁶ And what these kids are going through is sometimes hell on earth.

Susan Crews, a counselor for the El Paso Independent School District, explains “I have students whose mothers have been decapitated. I have a student in one of the middle schools, when he visited his family in Juárez, there were three heads on sticks along the path he goes... I mean it’s just been overwhelming.”⁵⁷ The school district is tragically understaffed for the realities these children are bringing to school with them every day—the students could benefit by having at least one counselor be dedicated to just the students from Juárez.⁵⁸

Founded in 1995, the Paso del Norte Health Foundation specializes in the area of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); according to the mission statement on the foundations website, this organization specializes in providing assistance to “families exposed to the violence from Ciudad Juárez.”⁵⁹ Kathy Gaytan, the Clinical Director of the El Paso Child Guidance Center stressed the importance of focusing on children ages three and up with signs of PTSD. She reports “Roughly 15 percent of the children that we have at the foundation are children who are from Juárez, or have been affected by Juárez violence.[...]Our goal is to increase the supply of mental health professionals to help victims suffering from symptoms related to PTSD.”⁶⁰

What is Next?

What is the fate of El Paso? And, maybe more importantly, what is the fate of Juárez? Diana Diaz, who has spent her entire life crossing the bridges connecting the sister cities, feels that if no one wins the turf war between the Juárez and Sinaloa cartels the crossing could become even more precarious. And at the most extreme, even closed.⁶¹ Michele Ellington hopes the status quo continues to be effective in keeping the violence quarantined on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande. Ellington hopes “the efficacy of our federal law enforcement continues to intimidate the nut bags who are responsible for the violence in Juárez, and keep them over there.”⁶² David Sarmiento feels the future may be bleak for Juárez and the perception of El Paso. He comments “The fact is Americans are not going to stop using cocaine. So maybe if someone wins the turf war, we might see some sense of normalcy.”⁶³ Dr. Murphy shared a more positive outlook to the violence in Juárez and believes Juárez will come back from the brink—“I believe in the resilience of communities.”⁶⁴ Where Dr. Murphy is optimistic, Kathy Gaytan is more pessimistic and fears that Juárez could become extinct. She explains:

Mexican nationals with the means, or without them, are fleeing Juarez for other cities in Mexico, or relocating to El Paso. It is hard to feel optimistic about Juárez.[...]As for El Paso, it is a big question mark. The El Paso – Juárez corridor

is so valuable to the cartels that they cannot afford to wage war in the streets of El Paso.⁶⁵

While the future of Juárez remains precarious at best, according to the primary data gathered during field research and the secondary news and data examined, El Paso's economy, schools, housing markets, and cross-border trade have continued to prosper. This quasi war profiteering is illustrated in the estimated increase of \$20 billion in border-trade between El Paso and Juárez in the next calendar year, despite the violence. Shops along the border are filled with Mexican nationals, and El Paso residents (who used to buy these same goods across the border in Juárez) are shopping and stimulating El Paso's economy. Mexican nationals with enough money to flee Juárez have created an exiled community, which is filling houses and contributing to the tax-base. These same nationals are opening businesses and investing in El Paso's economy. Finally, school enrollment of Mexican nationals has increased. Along with the evidence that El Paso is faring well from the current situation, the negative political rhetoric claiming El Paso to be a festering cauldron ready to explode in the mists of a cancerous drug war in Juárez is simply not true. El Paso continues to rank among the safest cities for violent crime in the United States for its population; El Paso has every possible federal agency one could imagine to ensure the safety of its citizens. And finally, perhaps most importantly, it would not be in the best interests of these cartels to wage war in the streets of El Paso, risking the full wrath of these federal institutions, and perhaps, the United States military. One thing that is for certain, the sister cities are inextricably banded together. Or, as Andrew Rice stated "The longer view of history suggests that the cities rise and fall together, if not always in perfect unison. Their fates can never be disentangled."⁶⁶

Notes

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