

IS THE SOUTHWESTERN BORDER REALLY UNSAFE?

by Ernesto Castañeda and Josiah Heyman, University of Texas El Paso

Politicians and advocates often talk about the urgent need to “secure” America’s southwestern border, painting a picture of violence and chaos at the line demarcating the United States from Mexico. The specter of disorder is often invoked to argue that the United States must better control the border before further immigration reforms are considered. Yet claims about an unsafe border are not backed by hard evidence about crime rates or apprehensions by the U.S. Border Patrol. Alarmist claims contradict the everyday experiences of people in American cities along the U.S.-Mexico border. Immigrants come to the United States for work and family, not to engage in violence or crime. Reforms should focus on the needs of people and on ways to foster economic prosperity on both sides of the border.

Myths and Realities

Immigrants enter the United States looking for work, chances to reunite with family members, and opportunities to operate small businesses. Existing U.S. immigration laws provide visas for international students, for certain kinds of highly skilled workers, for investors, actors, and sportspeople, and for some agricultural workers and people employed by transnational firms. But other categories of determined migrants have little choice except to cross illegally into the United States outside of designated ports of entry. Many take dangerous journeys through the Arizona desert. Migrants from Mexico and countries to its south have long come in search of desperately needed economic opportunities – although the current U.S. economic downturn has led to a sharp decline in undocumented arrivals, especially from Mexico.

Undocumented migration can appear treacherous. Criminal “coyote” guides and “safe houses” may be involved, and people crossing the border may leave behind clothing or litter, or trespass on ranches as they search for water in the desert. But the dangers of undocumented arrival mainly hit the migrants themselves. Although some human traffickers are coercive, most smugglers provide non-violent guidance to willing customers. Once first-generation immigrants are in the United States, research shows they have low rates of criminal activity. This is especially true for migrants without proper papers – who naturally try to avoid police attention.

Actual threats of violence have to do with drugs smuggled into the United States and weapons and cash flowing back across the border. Mexico itself has suffered a terrible increase in violence due to the war on drugs waged by military forces. Drug trafficking and business connections certainly span the border, but drug violence usually does not spill over to the U.S. side and rarely affects American civilians not connected to organized crime.

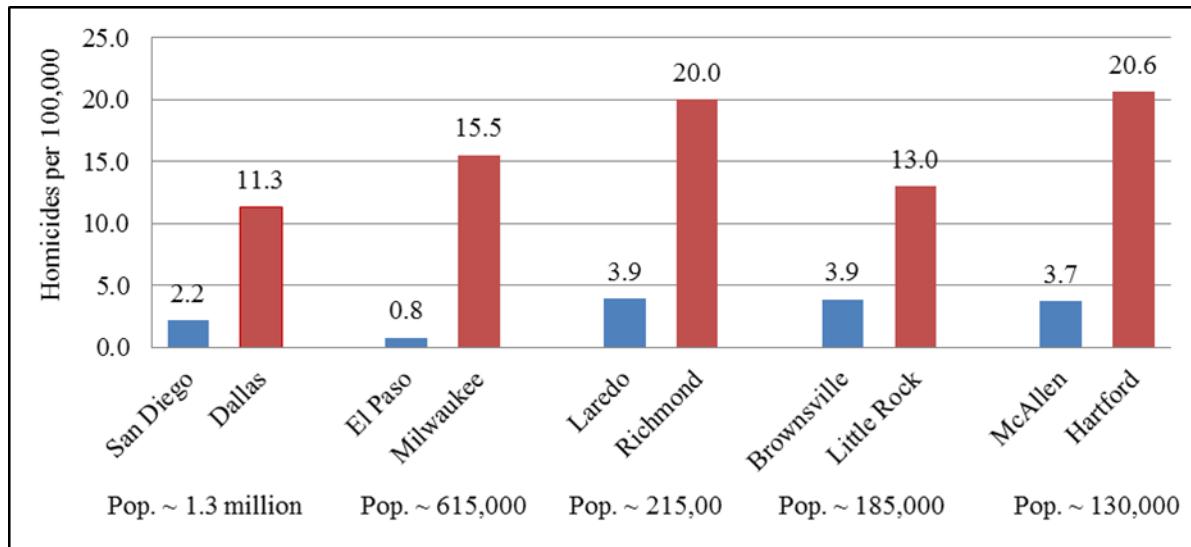
Safer than the Rest of America

Not only are the southwestern border states safer than most non-border states, U.S. cities near the border are even safer. In 2010, for example, FBI statistics show that the border city of San Diego

experienced 2.2 homicides per 100,000 residents, compared to 7.6 for Los Angeles. America's flagship cities, Washington DC (21.9) and New York (6.4), have higher homicide rates than border cities, where crime rates have actually declined in recent years. El Paso, Texas, is actually the safest U.S. city of more than half a million residents, despite its situation across the border from Ciudad Juarez, a Mexican city with a sky-high homicide rate of 282.7 per 100,000 people. As the following table shows, homicide rates for the main U.S. cities along the southwestern border are consistently lower than the homicide rates in other major U.S. cities of equivalent size.

Homicides per Hundred Thousand in Cities of Comparable Size

(with border cities on the left in blue)



Residents themselves tell the same story as official statistics. A remarkable 96% of El Paso residents have told researchers that they feel “mainly safe,” “safe” or “very safe” in their neighborhoods. A 2010 poll commissioned by the Border Network for Human Rights showed that 70% of respondents “feel their border neighborhood is as safe as most U.S. neighborhoods,” while 88% “feel safe walking and driving in their neighborhood.”

The Real Border Challenge

Clearly, the U.S. side of the southwestern border is safe. Over-hyped claims about violence should not be used to forestall consideration of immigration reforms. Many workers from abroad currently have no authorized avenues to obtain work legally in American cities. Yet as long as U.S. employers want to hire them, people will come. Ties between the United States and migrant-sending countries will become more orderly – and humane – if ways are found to offer regular routes to all migrants who can contribute to our economy.

Read more in Josiah Heyman, “Guns, Drugs, and Money: Tackling the Real Threats to Border Security,” Immigration Policy Center, Washington DC, 2011. Additional data available from authors.