

The Impact of Drug Violence on Mexican Border Communities

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First, I thank the Committee for inviting me to testify on these important issues. I speak as an American who loves both the U.S. and Mexico. A cooperative, binational approach is the only way to deal with the complex drug problem.

That said, clearly Mexico has suffered the worst consequences of the illegal drug trade. More than 1600 people died in Juarez drug violence in 2008. The violence continued at this pace until the recent Mexican military surge.

These homicides—the result of a power struggle between the Juarez and Sinaloa Cartels-- have occurred in broad daylight. They included acts of horrific torture, decapitation, and mutilation. Policemen, laborers, lawyers, college students, journalists, housewives and children are among the victims. Massacres have taken place on main streets, in bars and restaurants, and close to the international bridges between El Paso and Juarez. Dozens of El Pasoans, i.e., American citizens, have died or disappeared as a result of the drug war.

The damage to Mexican society is profound. The cultural trauma is equivalent to that experienced by residents of war zones in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Day after day, average Juarenses have been exposed to shoot-outs, piles of bodies left on street corners, and cadavers hanging from bridges.

The drug war completely disrupted law and order. Cartel criminals and other organized crime groups exploited the situation by

Kidnapping 100s of people including even working-class residents of the border
(huge ransoms were paid and some victims were tortured or killed)

Extorting large and medium-sized businesses and medical doctors

Torching bars and restaurants of those who would not pay extortion

Schools, international factories (known as maquilas), and drug rehab centers were all threatened or attacked

Virtual Call Centers of copycat crime emerged. Thousands of people received phone calls from criminals claiming to be Zetas (a ruthless hit squad linked with the Gulf Cartel) who threatened kidnappings and demanded money.

The Juarez economy suffered terribly. Maquilas laid off 1000s of workers.

100s of businesses closed. Others fired staff and shortened working hours.

Juarez streets were empty after dark. Tourism died. Shopping centers withered

And 1000s of Mexicans fled to the U.S.

The impact on the psychology of border people witnessing daily violence, threats and terror is a kind of collective Post-traumatic stress disorder.

In addition to the actual violence, the warring cartels have waged a propaganda battle involving threats to the mayor, governor, police force and

The placement of intimidating signs and banners near body dumps and along major streets

Burned, beheaded and otherwise mutilated cadavers left in public plazas and roads

The wide distribution of graphic, threatening you-tube videos, narco-blogs and musical ballads

In this aggressive media campaign, the cartels proclaimed themselves the legitimate rulers of Juarez.

This is the bloody context in which the Mexican government sent 9000 troops to Juarez.

Previously, the arrival of 3000 soldiers did little to quell the violence.

So far the current surge has dramatically lessened the homicide and general crime rate.

But the military takeover of Juarez—though the lesser of two evils—has brought its own share of problems, namely:

- (1) Human rights violations—hundreds if not 100s of Juarez residents have been picked up (apparently) by the military and interrogated (some claim to have been tortured, some have disappeared)
- (2) There are numerous reports of soldiers stealing from local residents or bullying them
- (3) There have been a few cases of the military killing individuals that they (wrongfully) suspected of being drug traffickers or other types of criminals.

The military has taken control of the Juarez police department and will eventually control the local prisons and enforcement of traffic laws.

The growing power of the military in Mexican society, though reducing drug homicides, is harmful to Mexican democracy.

Military control of border cities like Juarez is not a long-term solution to the U.S.-Mexico drug trade.

When the military leaves Juarez, what will stop the cartels from returning to business as usual?

The most effective ways the U.S. can help Mexico with the drug problem is by cutting our demand for drugs, slowing the flow of guns from the U.S. to Mexico, and fighting drug trafficking organizations within the U.S.