

Crime Data and Spillover Violence along the Southwest Border

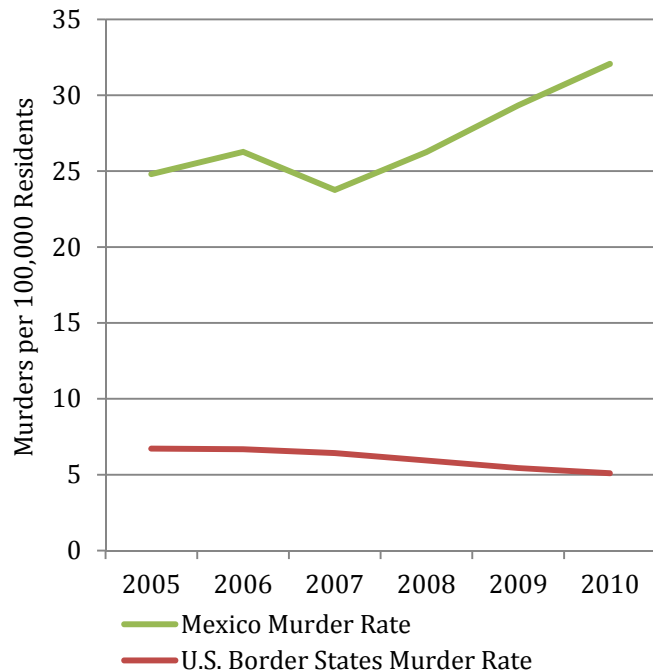
Christopher E. Wilson

As organized crime-related violence has increased in northern Mexico, so has the heated rhetoric regarding the U.S. side of the border. The title of National Geographic's program, *Border Wars*, exemplifies the sentiment, echoed by several politicians, that the border region is lawless and dangerous. For residents of the U.S. border region, thankfully, the reality is anything but that.

In fact, as violent crime surged in parts of Mexico, the U.S. border region became safer. While in Mexico the murder rate climbed 29% between 2005 and 2010, it declined 24% in the U.S. border states. This suggests that despite a smattering of violent incidents perpetrated by members of Mexican criminal groups in the United States, widespread "spillover violence" has not occurred.

Other studies demonstrate similar findings. Using data reported to the FBI by local law enforcement agencies, *USA Today* found that most cities in the border region (within 100 miles of the border) had violent crime rates lower than state and national averages.¹ Indeed, some of the largest border cities, like El Paso and San Diego, have murder rates that are less than half the national average and among the lowest

Mexico's Murder Rate Climbs As U.S. Border States Become Safer



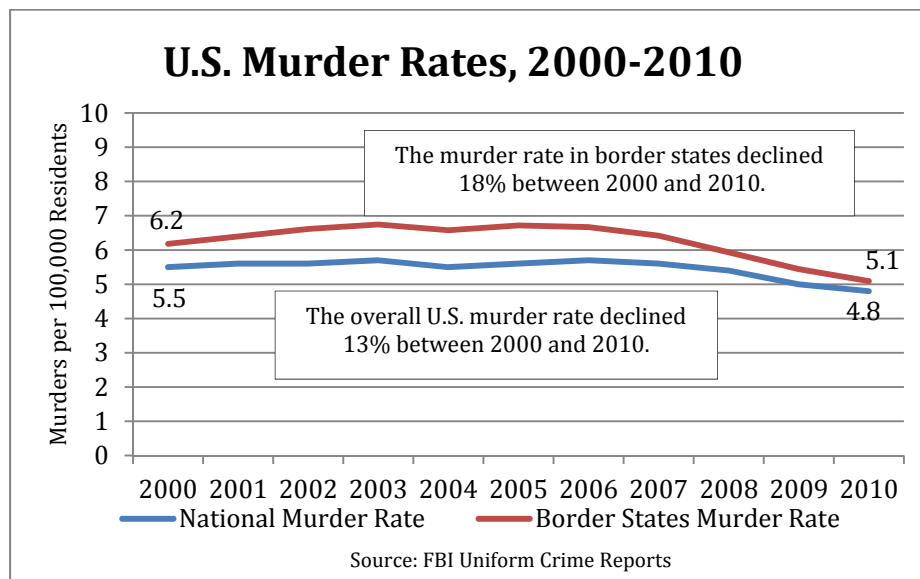
Sources: FBI Uniform Crime Reports and Secretariado Ejecutivo del Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, via ICESI,
http://www.icesi.org.mx/estadisticas/estadisticas_oficiales

¹ This study considers data from 1998-2009. Source: Alan Gomez, Jack Gillum, and Kevin Johnson, "U.S. border cities prove havens from Mexico's drug violence," *USA Today*, July 18, 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2011-07-15-border-violence-main_n.htm.

in the nation for cities of their size.² Another report, by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, analyzed the rates of violent crime from 1999-2008 and found no statistically significant increase in violent crime in cities and towns where Mexican drug trafficking organizations are known to operate, either along the border or in any part of the United States.³

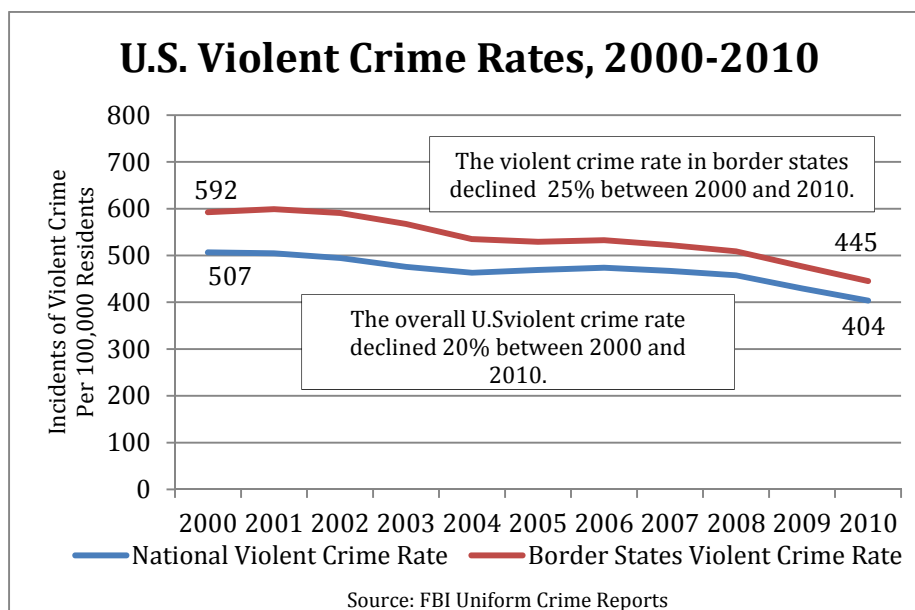
None of this is to say that there is no cause for law enforcement attention at the border. While drug use in the United States appears to be relatively stable, drug trafficking routes have shifted away from the Caribbean and into Mexico over the past decade. Most drugs trafficked through Mexico enter the United States at the Southwest Border, which means an increased share of the drugs consumed in the United States are being trafficked through the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. At the same time, large quantities of guns and cash are smuggled out of the United States and into Mexico through these same routes.

These developments require vigilance, and both U.S.-Mexico security cooperation and the U.S. law enforcement presence on the border are at unprecedented levels. Nonetheless, the U.S. and Mexican governments, including federal, state, and local authorities in both countries, need to continue improving their complementary and cooperative efforts to address the threat posed by organized crime, including efforts to enhance intelligence sharing, limit the flow of illegal money and weapons, strengthen law enforcement and judicial capabilities, and reduce narcotics consumption.



² FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 2010.

³ Jennifer E. Lake, Kristin M. Finklea, et al., *Southwest Border Violence: Issues in Identifying and Measuring Spillover Violence*, Congressional Research Service, February 16, 2010, 22.



Despite the fact that rates of violent crime along the border are at levels comparable to or lower than the national average, the public believes otherwise. A Gallup/USA Today poll found that 83% of Americans believe rates of violence are higher along the border than in the rest of the country.⁴ This disconnect between reality and public opinion is understandable in light of the often alarmist rhetoric employed in public discussions about border security, but it nonetheless complicates the implementation of common sense solutions to the major challenges being confronted by the U.S. and Mexican governments along our shared border. Rather than politically charged hyperbole, a spirit of bi-national cooperation and strong grounding in the facts should be the starting points for discussions about how to keep Americans safe while strengthening the profoundly important economic, social, and geostrategic relationships that bind the United States and Mexico together.

⁴ Alan Gomez, Jack Gillum, and Kevin Johnson, "U.S. border cities prove havens from Mexico's drug violence," *USA Today*, July 18, 2011, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2011-07-15-border-violence-main_n.htm.