

## **Safety and Danger at the US-Mexico Border: How can we really know what's going on?**

By Judith Rosenberg, December 2010

I've lived in Austin almost 13 years and still have many friends in my hometown of New York who know I regularly visit Mexico at the border. Lately when the subject comes up, they ask nervously: "Isn't it dangerous?" They seem to be wondering if I have become reckless or foolish. For my part, I realize how daily media coverage of 'death stalking the Rio Grande' has scared news consumers everywhere and promoted assumptions that the violence is viral, targeting everyone equally and even leaping out of Mexico. From my perspective, the public has a real dilemma to get solid information and accurate assessment of a great range of situations that exist in Mexico. What can I say to my friends? Lately I answer, "it's complicated" and "I could give you a better answer if you have the time."

Though fear has escalated in the last few years, the "Mexico murder rate" is actually *down*. A well-documented report issued by the Mexico Solidarity Network on August 8, 2010, publishes the facts, for those who care to know them.

"[L]ong before the current narco-battles for turf captured national and international headlines... the national murder rate in Mexico hovered around 20 per 100,000 residents." "In 2009, the most recent year for which statistics are available, the rate was 14."

By contrast murder rates in many US cities are higher than in Mexico, for example Washington (31.4), Baltimore (36) and Kansas City (25.5). It is true however that the generally low average in Mexico is pushed up by three border states, led by Chihuahua, where Ciudad Juarez is located, (74), followed by Durango (60) and Sinaloa (47). I have not visited any of those border states recently. Neither has Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera, the organization that I travel with. I do go to Mexico City. It is one of the biggest cities in the world and, surprisingly, also one of the safest, 8 on the scale of murders per 100,000. Another source reveals that El Paso is one of the safest cities in the United States despite its proximity to Ciudad Juarez, thus helping to skewer the media idea of "spill over violence."

More important than citing statistics, the MSN report challenges readers to

dig deeper and question the media focus on violence. MSN editors warn, “Uninformed, racist images... are permeating the consciousness of US cities, largely because of the dramatic decontextualized media coverage of Mexico. We are concerned that these images are impacting the current debates around immigration reform, making overt racism acceptable in places like Arizona.” When it comes to legislation, could Texas be far behind?

Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera has an urgent concern too. Lurid news stories lead the public to automatically and immediately associate violence with the border, ignoring what is, in the long term, a more important threat to social order—the injustice which unfortunately is historic, but which we have watched accumulate fast at the border since the start of NAFTA. After 12 years of visiting maquiladora workers and their communities, we witness how “free” trade impoverishes workers and migrants from the south and how foreign-owned factories, known as maquiladoras, prosper frequently depending on their ability to break laws and violate workers’ rights mandated by the Mexican Federal Labor Law. On a material, cultural and spiritual level, the maquiladora system is wasting border communities, great terrain for the cartels. However, we also witness a grassroots social justice movement that carries on, nimbly changes strategies with new economic upheavals and scores important short- and long-term victories. All of this is invisible to the press and public mesmerized by “war.”

To continue the discussion with my New York friends, my next answer to their anxious question would be another question: who do the drug cartels, the lawlessness, and the spiral of violence endanger? A recent Salvadoran immigrant now living in Austin had a lot to say on the subject. Arturo’s path led him through Piedras Negras, one of the cities that Austin Tan Cerca visits frequently (in the state of Coahuila and not on the danger list). He spoke graphically about how drug cartels work closely with human traffickers getting immigrants across the border. Together they target migrants, kidnap, torture, blackmail and extort them. It’s a business, there’s money in it and not much risk, because they target the vulnerable with precision. According to Arturo, they see everything in the street and even in church-sponsored migrant shelters. They do not target visitors from the US since, in their professional calculation, we are not among the powerless. Meanwhile, in Austin, staff at immigrant shelter Casa Marienella hears the stories and corroborates the systematic violence against migrants, especially women. “No woman crosses the border without being ‘abused.’”

We all know that innocent bystanders can get caught in the crossfire. When I taught adult education in Brooklyn in the 1980s, one morning the whole class heard gunfire in the street and later learned that Mr. Daly, a devoted elementary school principle, had been shot and killed as bullets flew between youth gangs. That was during a period of high unemployment and high drug activity in the Red Hook section, a dangerous area of public housing that urban development policy created. I think I see some analogies with the US-Mexico border today.

Perhaps we've been lucky but in 12 years of quarterly travel to the border, Austin Tan Cerca has never experienced a violent incident or even a threat. We have an advantage; we can monitor and assess conditions carefully through the local and knowledgeable community members, the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras/os, our Mexican partners in solidarity. They advise us how to exercise caution. We know that they would tell us not to come if we faced risks. We also know that we have privileges that protect us—of color, citizenship, relative wealth and political connections. We do not want to ignore the reality and the tragedy that is befalling Mexico, especially the poor.

Julia Quiñonez, the Comité's national coordinator, wrote in April, 2009: "For many years, Piedras Negras has characterized itself as a safe and peaceful city, in addition to being one of the cleanest in Mexico. Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña have made considerable efforts to keep their good reputations as a result of the demands of organized citizens. **These communities are able to organize themselves to bring changes to improve working conditions, and they are also able to demand accountability from their local governments.**"

More recently Quiñones writes: We are confident that when you visit you will be safe... [Y]ou will always be accompanied by people that we trust and **you will visit places where poverty is the main concern rather than drugs or weapons.** I hope that these are considerations that may assure your families.

In solidarity, Julia Quiñonez

See the full Mexico Solidarity Network article:

<http://www.mexicosolidarity.org/post/2010/august/mexiconewsandanalysisaugust282010>.

Also see “A Different Kind of War: How do journalists convey just how seriously upside down things have become?” *Texas Observer* reporter Melissa del Bosque grapples with the difficulties of border news reporting: <http://www.texasobserver.org/laline/a-different-kind-of-war>

Judith Rosenberg, PhD, is Board President of Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera (Austin So Close to the Border), an educational non-profit, formerly a project of the American Friends Service Committee, that since 1999 has taken solidarity delegations to Mexico at the border four times a year so that people from the US can see for themselves the conditions of life and work in the maquiladoras and the impact of “free” trade and other global forces. Delegations are hosted in Mexico by the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras/os (the Border Committee of Working Women and Men), a Mexican civil association dedicated to human and labor rights at the border, with an additional focus on women’s rights and a commitment to democratic process. [jrosenberg@atcf.org](mailto:jrosenberg@atcf.org), <http://www.atcf.org/>