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Two Sides of a Border: One Violent, One Peaceful

By [JAMES C. MCKINLEY Jr.](#)

EL PASO — Every day, as she gets off a bus in [Mexico](#) and crosses the border to go to work in downtown El Paso, Edith Escobedo says she feels a sense of relief. For at least the next eight hours, she says to herself, she is safe from the violence ripping apart Ciudad Juárez.

“One lives with fear over there,” Ms. Escobedo said, as she waited for customers in the Casa Sylvia clothes shop. “It is pure fear, pure insecurity. One cannot even go out at night. It’s curious that here it’s so different. It’s another way of life.”

Juárez and El Paso are divided only by the narrow Rio Grande and a couple of border checkpoints that have done little over the years to stop the steady back and forth of trade and family visits.

The two cities are so close that the mayor of El Paso can look out his office window to view downtown Juárez.

But in other ways the two cities are worlds apart these days.

El Paso still enjoys its status as one of the safest cities in the United States, while Juárez, a city of 1.5 million that has always been rough, has become a battleground for drug cartels. More than 1,550 people were killed there in drug wars last year.

Worse, other violent crimes — carjacking, extortion, armed robbery — have surged as the beleaguered authorities struggle to respond to daily gun battles.

“It’s strange to be the third-safest city in the United States right next to a war zone,” said Mayor John Cook of El Paso, as he gazed at the ramshackle neighborhoods of Juárez.

Yet what is happening on the other side of the border — a vicious turf battle prompted by Mexican government efforts to crack down on the cartels — is taking its toll here in myriad ways. Americans have cut back on visiting their relatives in Mexico, and Mexicans, too, venture to the American side in smaller numbers, either because they are afraid to leave their homes at night or because they lack money.

The local public hospital in El Paso has treated 48 people wounded in gun battles in Mexico in the last year, and law enforcement officials in the United States spend much of their time trying to figure out how to prevent the violence from spilling over into their jurisdictions.

“It’s just lawless over there — it’s complete lawlessness,” said Fernando Apodaca, an El Paso insurance agent, echoing the views of many Americans here. “The criminals have the run of the city.”

Mr. Apodaca, 47, stopped crossing the border on business, as he had for his entire adult life, after his car was stolen at gunpoint on Sept. 17 in broad daylight.

Experts say many factors have kept violence at bay in El Paso, from a high concentration of law enforcement officials because of border operations to fear of the death penalty in Texas.

But some have other theories. Mayor Cook, for one, thinks the problems in Juárez began when a Mexican crackdown on drug dealers backfired. The operation smashed the drug-distribution network on the Mexican side, leading to turf wars. That has not happened on the United States side, Mr. Cook said, but if it did, he said, a similar crime wave could erupt.

Worries that the violence in Mexico could spread to the United States reach to the highest levels of the federal government. Last week, Homeland Security Secretary [Michael Chertoff](#) said the Bush administration had laid plans to send a surge of federal agents and soldiers to trouble spots if the violence spilled over.

The conflict in Juárez has led some in El Paso to propose radical solutions. In a symbolic resolution of support for Juárez, the El Paso City Council recently voted unanimously to ask Washington to consider legalizing drugs as a way to end the violence. "We think it should at least be on the table," Councilman Beto O'Rourke said. On Monday, the Council backed down after the mayor vetoed the resolution and local members of Congress warned that the Council's stance might imperil federal aid.

Still, the failed measure was a sign of the general longing here for a return to the relatively peaceful days before December 2006, when the Mexican president, [Felipe Calderón](#), began the current campaign to wipe out the drug cartels.

Across the river, the once-vibrant streets of Juárez are dark and gloomy, as residents scurry for home. The restaurants, bars and nightclubs that catered to American tourists, students and soldiers from Fort Bliss are shutting down for a lack of business.

On a recent night, three mariachis stood in the cold for five hours waiting for a single tourist to come by on Avenida Juárez. None came. A year ago, they said, American tourists, youths and soldiers filled the avenue, as vendors hawked the seamy and the sacred, steering people to pharmacies, the city market, strip clubs, restaurants and cantinas.

"It used to be full of people every day," said Luis Olivier, a 40-year-old singer. "Now no one comes, since the executions started."

The mayor of Juárez, José Reyes Ferriz, says his city suffers from a woefully undermanned and ill-equipped police department, despite programs to recruit new officers and purge scores of corrupt ones. Mr. Reyes estimated that Juárez needed at least 4,000 police officers to take back control of the streets. It has only 1,600.

He said the 3,000 soldiers and federal agents Mr. Calderón had dispatched to quell the violence had had limited success. The soldiers, for instance, know nothing about police work and patrol in long columns, which are easily spotted and avoided.

In the past six months, the killings have become more frequent, more brazen and more gruesome. One body was beheaded and hung from a bridge. Others were stuffed in giant stew pots.

Most of the victims have been young men recruited from other towns to fight for the warring drug kingpins. But at least 40 of the victims have been innocent bystanders, among them a few El Paso residents.

“This is a real war and the city, unfortunately, is the theater for this war,” Mr. Reyes said.

Not so in El Paso, a tidy desert town of 600,000. There were 16 slayings last year and violent crime dropped 4 percent, the police say. If anything, the streets of El Paso are known for being a bit dull, rather than dangerous.

El Paso is a city where people feel safe leaving their belongings in a car or strolling the street at night. The biggest problem the police have faced recently is a spate of robberies of convenience stores, Chief Gregory Allen said. Some say cultural differences underlie the paradox.

Howard Campbell, an anthropologist at the [University of Texas](#), El Paso, said the American town is made up mostly of new immigrants or their children, who tend to be cautious, law-abiding and respectful of authority. That, coupled with Fort Bliss and the heavy police presence, makes for a law-and-order atmosphere, Professor Campbell said.

For some 25,000 residents of El Paso who go to work every day in Juárez, every crossing has become fraught with peril.

Their fears are not unfounded. Marisela Granados de Molinar, 48, was an office manager at the Mexican attorney general’s office in Juárez, but lived for decades in El Paso with her husband, Jose A. Molinar Jr., a warehouse manager. For the past 11 years, she went to work at the federal office building on the other side of the border, never worrying about being attacked, her husband said.

Then, on Dec. 3, Ms. Granados agreed to give a lift across the border to her boss, Jesús Martín Huerta Hiedra, the deputy prosecutor in the office, because she had a special pass for crossing one of the international bridges and he wanted to visit Wal-Mart. Gunmen caught them at a street corner at about 4:15 p.m. and pumped 85 rounds into the car.

Mr. Molinar said he knew something was wrong when his wife did not call him during her lunch break, as she always did. It was a routine they had, a security check. He learned of the shooting on television, raced to the scene and stood dumbfounded before his wife’s lifeless body.

“She was never afraid,” he said. “She thought she wasn’t important enough for them to care about.”

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