

The Border Violence Myth

by **GABRIEL ARANA**

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If media reports are to be believed, an Armageddon-like rash of drug-related violence--**unlike any seen since "Miami Vice years of the 1980s"**--has crossed from Mexico into the United States, "just as government officials had feared." Even if you've never used or sold drugs, you're not safe: kidnapers are breaking into the wrong houses and holding innocent civilians for ransom, putting guns in babies' mouths. Severed heads might end up being rolled into dance clubs, beheadings might end up on YouTube. Television segments narrated like war documentaries broadcast dramatic footage of Border Patrol Humvees kicking up dust in the Southwest, Minutemen with binoculars overlooking the border and piles of confiscated drugs. In the national media, it's become a foregone conclusion that Mexican drug violence has penetrated the United States.

But the numbers tell a different story. According to crime statistics for American cities along the US-Mexico border and major US metro areas along drug routes, violent crimes, including robberies, have either decreased in the first part of 2009 or remained relatively stable. This is not to say that the increased violence in Mexico has had no impact in the United States or that no violence in the United States can be traced to the conflict in Mexico. Rather the drive not to get "scooped" by competitors has led media outlets to conclude prematurely--based on hearsay and isolated incidents--that a wave of drug-related violence is upon us.

The increase in drug-related violence in Mexico over the past few years is well established, the result of a crackdown on drug cartels by President Felipe Calderón's administration. By most accounts it began in December 2006 when **6,500 federal troops and police were dispatched to the Mexican state of Michoacán**. In a series of gradual steps, this war on drugs broadened: over the past two years, 45,000 troops and 20,000 federal police have been dispatched to different regions of the country, primarily in northern Mexican cities like Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez. Almost 8,000 cartel-related deaths have been reported in Mexico, with a spike in the summer of 2008. The situation, however, had been viewed from a distance in the United States until the media began raising the nightmarish scenario of a spillover across the border.

In January 2009, outlets like the Associated Press, Fox News, the *New York Times* and **MSNBC reported on contingency plans** drafted by the Department of Homeland Security to address such a spillover, but the consensus seemed to be then that these measures were a precaution rather than a response to any real threat. A **policy paper** from the libertarian Cato Institute on the threat posed to the United States by Mexican drug cartels sounded a similar precautionary note.

The AP reported that El Paso Sheriff Richard Wiles said that he didn't "anticipate the city or county being overwhelmed by border violence." North Carolina **Representative David Price said**, "It appears so far that such violence is not yet systematically 'spilling over' as some have alleged."

In February, however, something tipped, and the question mark in news headlines--"Border Violence

Spilling into the US?"--disappeared. Among the earliest reports that potential violence had become actual violence was **an AP story** that credited unnamed "authorities" with the news. Tellingly, the story did not contain a single direct quote stating either that violence had increased or that it was linked to the drug trade. Rather, it juxtaposed its broad claims against gruesome descriptions of drug violence in Mexico or wildly speculative quotes about what *could* happen here.

One of its most fearmongering statements came from Rusty Payne, identified as a "Drug Enforcement Administration spokesman in Washington," who said, "'When you are willing to chop heads off, put them in an ice chest and drop them off at a police precinct, or roll a head into a disco, put beheadings on YouTube as a warning,' very little is off limits."

The only relevant statistics included in the piece were the number of "**home invasions**" in Phoenix for each of the past two years--about 350, "the majority...committed at the behest of the Mexican drug gangs"--and the number of drug-related killings in Mexico over the past year, 5,000. Besides the fact that the steady number of home invasions in Phoenix over the past two years suggests that there had not been a recent increase in violence, the piece also readily concedes that in El Paso, Texas--across the border from Ciudad Juárez, dubbed the epicenter of Mexico's escalating drug war--has remained "one of America's safest cities."

Nevertheless, within weeks the *New York Times* jumped on the story: "**Wave of Drug Violence Is Creeping Into Arizona From Mexico, Officials Say**," the paper reported on February 23 in an article by Randal Archibold, concentrating on an increase in the number of residential robberies and kidnappings in Maricopa County, where Phoenix is located. This article and a mere handful of other reports shot through the media pipeline and were widely re-reported at places like **CNN**, **Fox**, **USA Today** and the *Huffington Post*, as well as in regional papers, a testament to the increasing paucity of firsthand news reporting.

The news reports on the increase in drug-related violence in the United States rely heavily on anecdotes, impressionistic quotes from police or politicians, and bare statistics presented without context. Most of the reporting examined violence in the border states of Arizona and Texas.

Tucson, Arizona, an hour's drive north of the international border, served as the centerpiece for another *New York Times* report on March 22 ("**Mexican Drug Cartel Violence Spills Over, Alarming U.S.**," also by Archibold). The story claimed that Tucson "is coping with a wave of drug crime the police suspect is tied to the bloody battles between Mexico's drug cartels and the efforts to stamp them out."

Public information officers who track crime statistics for the city say this is simply not true.

According to Chuck Rydzak, a public information officer with the Tucson Police Department, the number of violent crimes in the city from January to March of 2008--excluding robberies--was 651. For the same period this year, it's 632. The number of robberies is also down, from 333 to 307. The home invasions have also decreased: from thirty-four in the first four months of 2008 to thirty-three for the same period this year. It is also difficult to assert that this is a Mexican problem affecting the United States: only 10 percent of those involved in home invasions thus far this year have been undocumented immigrants. Kidnappings, too, are holding steady: there were twenty-seven in 2008 and seven so far this year.

"The statistics speak for themselves and they are not indicative of a spike in violent crime," said Sgt. Mark Robinson, another public information officer with the Tucson Police Department. "The violence is in Mexico."

Representatives of the police department say they have spent the past few months trying to correct misperceptions stemming from sensational media reports. "[The reports] just cost us a bunch of trouble because of a misinterpretation of what somebody said," Robinson added.

In theory, a precipitous drop in non-drug-related crime could mask an increase in drug-related crime, but officers at the Tucson Police Department and other municipalities say this is not the case. Even Janet Napolitano, the former governor of Arizona and current secretary of homeland security, **tried to allay public fear in February** by saying that drug-related violence from Mexico had not spilled over to the United States.

An **April 26 piece in the Arizona Daily Star** also called reports of escalating violence in Tucson "more hype than reality." In it, Tucson Assistant Police Chief Roberto Villaseñor, who was also quoted in the *New York Times* story, said "not one" of the arrests related to home invasions had involved "an active cartel member from Mexico."

The February 23 report from the *New York Times* on the drug-related violence in Phoenix was notably devoid of statistics. According to the police department, the number of violent crimes in the Phoenix area is also down: there were 11,194 violent crimes in 2006, 11,168 in 2007 and 10,466 in 2008. The number of robberies in 2006 was 4,363, spiked to 4,924 in 2007, then decreased again to 4,835 in 2008.

The *Times* story, however, focused primarily on the supposed increase in the number of kidnappings and home invasions. It cites the Maricopa County Attorney's Office as saying that "border-related kidnapping or hostage-taking in a home" increased from 48 in 2004 to 241 last year. Representatives for the County Attorney's office said the spike only represents incidents reported to the prosecutor's office--not the number reported to the police. Given the strong-arm anti-immigrant tactics of **Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio** and his political allies in the prosecutor's office, there is reason to question whether these numbers are indicative of a spike in crime or merely an increase in prosecution and enforcement, for which police departments across the state have received boosts in funding in the past few years. Both Tucson and Phoenix have set up special task forces to deal with home invasions in the last year or so.

None of the stories that report these statistics--and few do--bother to ask how much the statistical increase is due to improved reporting methods. Representatives from police departments across Arizona have lamented the difficulty of keeping accurate tabs on the number of kidnappings given that many go unreported.

Numbers for the Phoenix Police Department show that there has indeed been an increase in drug-related kidnappings, but it's not as dramatic as the numbers from the prosecutor's office might indicate. Since 2006, when the conflict in Mexico began to heat up, the number of drug-related kidnappings increased from 232 to 343 in 2007, to 359 in 2008. So far this year, there have been 140.

Even if it can be established that Phoenix is in the midst of a kidnapping crisis (and there are reasons to tread carefully here), linking this activity to drug cartels in Mexico is another matter. Sergeant Tommy Thompson, a public information officer with the Phoenix Police Department, told the student newspaper for Arizona State University that **it has not been able to tie a single kidnapping to drug cartel activity in Mexico**. Kidnappings and home invasions aside, crime in Phoenix has remained steady.

The violence isn't farther south, either. On the Arizona-Mexico border is my small hometown of Nogales, Arizona, which shares a name with its sister city across the border. Residents and police seemed mystified when asked about an uptick in border violence. While the drug-related crime wave is a well-known fact in

Nogales, Sonora, the American side has not seen a single murder this year; there were also none last year. Recently, there have been several more armed robberies in the area than in the past (three in 2007, ten in 2008, eight so far this year), but these have occurred primarily outside of town, among illegal immigrants in the forests and canyons used to cross into the country.

Life there, by all accounts, is as placid as it ever was.

The logic underpinning the *New York Times's* and other reports shows the degree to which the media have strained to wrest a conclusion from data that do not support it. One statistic that is often thrown around involves the number of US cities where drug cartels "maintain drug distribution networks," which increased from 100 cities in 2006 to 230 by the end of 2008. However, the Justice Department says this increase is the product of better data-collection methods and the broadening of antidrug efforts and does not necessarily reflect an increase in violence in the United States.

What is especially striking is that the February and March stories in the *Times* concede that violent crime is down in Arizona, but conclude nonetheless--even in the same sentence--that the state is "bearing the brunt of smuggling-related violence":

Although overall violent crime has dropped in several cities on or near the border...Arizona appears to be bearing the brunt of smuggling-related violence. Some 60 percent of illicit drugs found in the United States--principally cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamine--entered through the border in this state.

But the percentage of drugs that travel through Arizona has no bearing on whether the amount of drugs--or related violence--has increased.

Media reports on the supposed crime wave are riddled with these types of tenuous connections. They are held together with a string of conditional statements--"seems as though," "might indicate." Few contain police data, which is continuously available to those seeking public information. Barely any reports present the ample countervailing evidence that the United States has yet to be substantially affected by Mexican drug violence.

Arizona is not the only state where reporters have scraped for evidence of increased violence. In March, CNN host Anderson Cooper did a live broadcast from El Paso, Texas, dressed in military garb. El Paso Mayor John Cook, who spoke with several news organizations at the time, lamented the mischaracterization of crime in the city by the media.

"I'll speak with [news reporters] and tell them there hasn't been any spillover of violence into El Paso," Cook **told the *Texas Observer***, "and then they will turn around and report that there is. Mostly I feel like I've wasted my time."

In one incident, Richard Cortez, the mayor of McAllen, Texas, told a CNN anchor that the violence had not spilled over to his city. Despite having elicited the information, the anchor, Don Lemon, refused to accept the response.

"Since you're the mayor of the city, you have to put the best foot forward," he said. "I know your city is affected, but you have to put a good face on it."

Area journalists, while stressing the potential danger posed by violence in Mexico, said cartel-related crimes in Texas's Rio Grande Valley have been isolated and that residents feel safe.

"As far as innocent people being pulled into it--not yet," said Marisa Treviño, a veteran journalist and founder of news and analysis blog *Latina Lista*. "It's a serious situation, but [these incidents] are isolated."

"People don't feel threatened at all," she said.

Amid the symphony of national news media proclaiming an outbreak of violence over the past few months is **one report** from NPR's Deborah Tedford that challenged what had become conventional wisdom. On May 15, she reported that the string of cities along the border between Texas and Mexico--El Paso, Laredo, McAllen and Brownsville--had seen no increase in drug-related crime. Brownsville Police Chief Carlos Garcia told Tedford that while some residents of the city worked for drug cartels, they conduct this business in Mexico, where "extensive networks...keep them safe if they are caught."

"There, they have money, safe houses; if a member is captured, he can escape or buy his way out," Garcia said.

The report, however, wasn't picked up and disseminated by other outlets as the *New York Times* and AP stories were.

Looking at crime statistics for San Diego, Atlanta and other major drug transit cities casts similar doubt on drug violence reports. In San Diego, across the border from Tijuana, the rate of violent crime per 1,000 people has decreased slightly over the past few years, from 4.87 in 2006 to 4.5 in 2008. For the first two months of this year, the rate continued its slide, to 3.85. The same is true of robberies, the rate of which fell from 1.5 in 2008 to 1.19 through February. In Atlanta, there was one more homicide in January compared to last year and the number of robberies decreased from 288 in 2008 to 266 in the first month of 2009.

The hype has been enabled by a news apparatus that feeds sensationalism. As Treviño said, "The media take one incident and they blow it up; it makes for good copy."

Melissa del Bosque, the journalist who originally reported on media misrepresentation of US drug violence for the *Texas Observer*, attributed the appearance of sensationalistic stories to a number of factors, among them the agendas of what she has called "border-warrior politicians" who use neologisms like "narco-terrorism" in calling for the border to be militarized; the change in administrations; and budgeting concerns.

The formation of local, state and national budgets at the beginning of the year provides an opportunity for politicians to exaggerate the threat posed by Mexican drug cartels and thereby receive more funding for local police forces, del Bosque said. Indeed, Texas Homeland Security Director Steve McCraw **stressed that the spillover had already occurred** in asking state lawmakers to approve a \$135 million increase in funding requested by Texas Governor Rick Perry. In Arizona, police readily admitted to the *Arizona Daily Star* that they welcomed more money.

The motive for exaggerating the effect of drug-related violence is not just monetary, though. "There are a lot of conservative legislators who want to look tough on border security," del Bosque said.

Even a cursory online search bears out what del Bosque surmises: conservative commentators and politicians have used the news to call for tightened border security, in some cases even calling for the border to be "militarized." For example, Fox News' Sean Hannity recently warned that "the effect on our country may be just beginning" before telling viewers to shield their children's eyes from the Mexican

drug-violence footage that followed. He was not alone--as he did in the segment--in conflating US and Mexican drug-related violence.

Del Bosque and other journalists who report on and live near the border criticized the simplistic characterization of life there by the national media, one informed by "Wild West" and drug-movie caricatures. "The national media doesn't really care about the border," del Bosque said. "They hit it like a piñata and take off."

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