

ABOUT JUÁREZ

BEYOND THE VIOLENCE IN JUÁREZ⁵

There are numerous explanations for escalating violence in Juárez. The first explanation is poverty. In the 1980s, Mexico began implementing controversial policies that encouraged foreign trade. When NAFTA took effect, the availability of cheap labor just south of the U.S. border was irresistible to industry. Companies like General Motors, Phillips, RCA, and General Electric opened factories in the city. For these companies, NAFTA was a bonanza. Those seeking jobs flocked from surrounding communities, doubling the population of Ciudad Juárez by the year 2000. By 2007, social conditions had deteriorated. People were earning starvation wages; maquiladoras were hiring women and distorting family relations; infrastructure was lagging behind population levels and children were deserting school at an alarming rate. These conditions cultivated the birth of a network of neighborhood gangs that have been absorbed into the war between competing cartels.

The State's one-dimensional strategy for combatting the cartels may have also contributed to increased violence. Employing the "kingpin strategy," the State arrested the leader of the Mexican cartel causing the division of the Mexican narco-empire into numerous competing factions. As lines blur between the police and the criminals, these fragmented cartels "compete" by killing each other in battlegrounds like Juárez. Meanwhile, North Americans continue to demand illegal narcotics.

Gang membership has been glorified in Mexico. Drug ballads, or "narcocorridos," romanticizing the lives and deaths of drug traffickers have flooded YouTube. As Ricardo Ainslie points out, 13-16 year-old primary school dropouts have "form[ed] the bottom rung of Ciudad Juárez crime culture." At some point the prospect of driving an armored SUV and dying a hero in a blaze of gunfire became preferable to working for 70 pesos a day in the factories—particularly when Mexican law prohibits employment for children under the age of 15.

Some organizations have stepped up to combat the underlying causes of violence. "Boys and Girls First!" provides after school and weekend projects for elementary schoolchildren and young adolescents. Kids in the program are being trained in photo-journalism to document their worlds with disposable cameras. In theory, these opportunities represent an alternative to drug addiction and gang membership.

⁵ Much of the information in this document is based on Ricardo Ainslie's article: "Ciudad Juárez: Violence, and the Social Fabric" in Portal, Issue 7, 2011-2012, published by the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin.

In other efforts to reach the causes of violence, the federal government has launched “Todos Somos Juárez,” an ambitious \$245 million social intervention. TSJ seeks to address the social ills of the city by targeting six areas: economy, employment, health, education-culture-sports, and social development. Thus, life goes on in Ciudad Juárez, and efforts like “Boys and Girls First!” and “Todos Somos Juárez” are a fresh approach to a complex problem.