The Merida Initiative and US Border Security: An Assessment

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President Nixon declared a “War on Drugs” nearly 40 years ago and established the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) to combat illicit drug use on the streets of the United States (Thirty years of America’s drug war: A chronology). In 2008 the Bush administration continued this war on drugs with the Merida Initiative, a policy focusing on drug production and US-Mexico border security. The Obama administration has expanded this initiative (US State Department). The Merida Initiative is the US government’s effort to combat “drug trafficking, organized crime, corruption, illicit arms trafficking, money laundering and the demand for drugs in both the U.S. and Mexico” (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2013, p. 65). This study addresses the question of whether the Merida Initiative has resulted in lower rates of violent crime along the US-Mexico border.

There are a variety of viewpoints on this topic in the existing literature. According to US government sources, the US and Mexico have made great strides in reducing border violence. The US Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE) doubled the number of its agents along the US-Mexico border in 2009 (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2013, pp. 2-6). In addition, ICE has increased the number of border liaison officers that work with Mexican law enforcement officials on drug trafficking issues. The US government claims to have reduced the flow of money that supports Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs), hindered the trade in illegal weapons across the border, and improved safety in border communities including the reduction of violent crime (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2013, pp. 2-6).

However, according to local news sources, the violence is still a concern for many citizens who live along the border. County officials in Douglas, Arizona say that violence is ongoing in their region and spreading eastward (Bell, 2013). They note the disappearance of the Mexican police chief in Nuevo Laredo in 2011. In a town hall meeting with the citizens of Douglas, consul officials from both the US and Mexico admitted there was some violence along the border but that anyone not associated with the drug trade should be safe. When the consul officials tried to talk about economic prospects, the audience kept returning to the topic of border violence (Bell, 2013). According to another local reporter, a Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) official attributes the rise of border violence in the El Paso region to the friction between the Sinaloa cartel and its rivals (Valdez, 2013). These news reports suggest that people who live along the border continue to be very concerned about drug-related violence, as do some US government officials who work there.

However, researchers and law enforcement personnel need to be careful in attributing a causal relationship between the Merida Initiative, the drug trade, and border violence. There are correlations to be made between the ongoing drug violence in Mexico and the violence along the border. This does not solely mean that the violence has crossed into the US. In a 2013 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report, researcher Kristin Finklea suggests it is not very easy to figure out levels of border violence, nor is it easy to prove that violence is linked to drug trafficking (Finklea, 2013 p.16). She questions the US government’s claim that it has reduced “spillover” violence along the US-Mexican border as some people suggest, (Finklea, 2013, pp.1-21).

The RAND Corporation, an independent public policy think tank, is equally critical of the Merida Initiative but for different reasons. Rand analysts criticize the lack of coordination between the US and Mexican agencies and worry that the lack could worsen relations between the two countries (Schaefer, , Bahney & Riley, 2009, pp. 45-54). This book also addresses some of the United States’ shortcomings when looking at how they support the Mexican government and fighting to reduce violence along the border. One shortcoming seen by the RAND Corporation is the way in which the Merida Initiative does not fill holes between local and federal police agencies and that local level police receive no further assistance than before the Merida Initiative (Schaefer et al., 2009, pp. 45-54).

According to political scientist Peter Andreas (2009) the federal government’s “out of control” narrative has exaggerated the violence along the border, which has
convinced Congress to turn over more and more resources to increase border security. The US has built larger and larger barriers that have been more symbolic than useful in securing the border. This narrative is that of a state (US) losing the ability to manage movement and violence along an international border. This perceived loss of control gives state officials a pretext to rely more on coercive policies to curb violence and regain control of the border.

Andreas points out the reactions that the state is taking (e.g., increased policing, larger barriers) which glosses over the actual reasons why there needs to be increased policing. What they are glossing over in terms of stricter laws, expansion of agencies and rising agency budgets is that the US-Mexican border has never been secure. Therefore, the whole idea of cooperation between the US and Mexico is what Andreas calls “image crafting instead of management crafting the border.” This notion of image crafting does not depend upon levels of enforcement but the way in which the enforcement is perceived (Andreas, 2009, pp. 4-10).

The Organization of American States (OAS) issued a comprehensive report on the state of anti-narcotic efforts in the western hemisphere. Though this international organization supported the US’s “war on drugs in the past, it now calls for different policies. Around 7,000 homicides were reported in Mexico that were drug related in 2010” (Organization of American States Secretary General, 2013, p.7). The OAS has collaborated with academics and world leaders to try and get control of drug trafficking. In doing this the OAS tried to come up with policy solutions but found that a lot of Latin American states do not have the money to put into polices that will help combat drug trafficking in their countries (Organization of American States Secretary General, 2013, pp.5-9, 77). This latest report does not give any clear cut evidence that violence is directly on the border, but it implies that the initiative is not doing as well as Mexican officials had hoped in reducing the root causes of the drug trade which are organized crime, corruption, illicit arms trafficking, money laundering and the demand for drugs in both the U.S. and Mexico (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2013, p. 65). My research seeks to focus on the US side of the border rather than the Mexican side, but the number of homicides from the OAS could indicate the previous scenario that “spillover” is a possibility along the border. The problem of identifying and measuring border violence due to drug trafficking and its relationship to the Merida Initiative are very complex as seen through this previous literature. My question is has the 2008 Merida Initiative, a joint US-Mexican policy on trafficking in illicit drugs, increased US border security? More specifically, has the Initiative reduced drug trafficking violence on the US side of the border? I hypothesize that the violent crime has decreased but not to the extent that the US government claims, nor can we determine with certainty that the decrease is the result of the Merida Initiative.

To test my hypothesis, I examined the rate of violent crime in the four border states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, from 1990 to 2013, available from the US Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation (2009; US Department of Justice, FBI) crime statistics. I also reviewed assessments of the Merida Initiative by Congress, the Office of National Drug Control Policy, and non-governmental organizations (e.g., the Center for International Policy). If there is a dramatic drop in violent crime since 2008 along the border than my hypothesis is wrong. If not, then my hypothesis has support as long as this drop in violent crime is not attributable to the Merida Initiative. I would spin the hypothesis in a positive way: The first part of the hypothesis is correct if there has been no dramatic drop in violent crime rates along the border. The second part is correct if there is no consensus among a variety of experts regarding the relationship between the Merida Initiative and violent crime rate patterns.

The year 1990 is the baseline for comparison. In that year, President George H. W. Bush proposed a dramatic increase in spending on the “war on drugs,” and the following year, the DEA’s budget increased by 33% and continued to climb thereafter. Starting in 1990 also gives us two decades of data—ample enough to provide possible patterns as I will look at global figures for the four border states, as well as sixteen border counties, with a focus on two dissimilar ones. One is El Paso County in Texas, which features the interlinked cities of El Paso and Ciudad Juarez, and has a long history of drug trafficking, and Cochise County in Arizona, with the small US town of Douglas across from the much larger Mexican city of Agua Prieta, and where the rise of drug trafficking is more recent (Arizona Criminal Justice Commission [ACJC], 2011, p.11). I chose these two counties since they occupy two disparate parts of the US-Mexico border and have two different political economies and histories. This focus shows whether or not I can make a generalized statement about the border and drug related violent crime levels. I then compared these data and government assessments with those of non-governmental observers such as the Organization of American States, Center for International Policy and Witness for Peace.

I gathered qualitative data from a variety of governmental and non-governmental sources, the latter which run a gamut of political orientations. When conducting this research we have to keep in mind the possible bias from both governmental and non-governmental sources. The data which I will examine may be highly politicized and therefore the results might be prone to being exaggerated to show improvement. Whereas critics of the “war on drugs” or the Initiative may unfairly deflate the results as insignificant when there might actually be an overall improvement to the problem. Secondly, we also have to consider the structural factors that contribute to violent crime and the “drug trade.” One is political, that is, corruption and weak state institutions (i.e., police, judicial and legislative, etc). Another is social, referring to communities wracked by drug cartels or rampant emigration, or both. A third is economic, namely, the lack of economic opportunity. In sum these factors might be alleviated greatly if the state institutions were stronger and the economy was robust, the communities would probably not be rampant with emigration or wrecked by the drug cartels due to better economic and enforcement policies in place (Shannon, 2008). These are factors which cannot be examined at an in depth level due to the lack of time and resources.

This assessment looked into whether the Merida Initiative reduced violent crime along the US side of the border. The data that was gathered from the FBI shows some very interesting trends in violent crime along the border. The sixteen counties that were examined showed that more violent crime activity occurred in Cochise County (Arizona) versus El Paso (Texas) over the 20 year plus time span (See Appendix for county level charts). However, the Cochise County violent crime rate has been fluctuating quite a bit over the years. That county’s rate has had drastic ups and
downs in terms of the percentage of violent crime. In 2008 the violent crime rate did drop, but it went back up in 2009 and then slid downward over 2010-2012. Looking at the border region as a whole it seems that violent crime is going down as well. There are certain individual counties that have spikes in increased violent crime rate like Cochise County and Laredo, Texas; in addition, the counties in California, Imperial and San Diego, had the lowest violent crime rate amongst all counties examined. Interestingly, all four states have border and non-border counties that state level data combines. Due to these factors at the state levels and variances in violent crime rates there cannot be a definitive generalization about violent crime along the border. We could surmise that 1) the Merida Initiative could not be expected to be overwhelmingly effective; however, it may have been effective in reducing violent crime in some but not all border counties, and 2) if not for the Merida Initiative, the violent crime would have been worse. It is difficult to prove that violent crime rates and the Merida Initiative are linked through data due to the fact that state level data collapses county data with state data. Obviously not all of a state’s counties are on the border, and so the data is skewed a bit by the other counties crime data.

The reasons for this reduction in violent crime and if it is attributable to the Merida Initiative are varied just as we saw before. Every report that has been examined in this assessment has not connected the Merida Initiative to a reduction in violent crime along the border. The reason as to why there is no connection depends upon who is asked. As pointed out by Tom Barry (2011) of the Center for International Policy (CIP) a left leaning think tank, the decrease seen in violent crime along the border may be due to the new Southwest Counter Narcotics policy of 2009 which compliments the Merida Initiative efforts to crackdown on the drug cartels. Both of these initiatives bolster border security that could reduce the rate of violent crime along the border.

This report by CIP also cites the very visible display of border security and enforcement by the Obama administration. The administration's buildup of security might contribute towards the violence seen in Mexico, as drug cartels try to control their own turf. In other words, the Merida Initiative might actually be making the problem of drug cartel violence worse in Mexico which, in turn, could make it worse for the US at some point. Currently for the US side of the border this show of strong border security has given renewed life to many border towns and cities (Barry, 2011). As for the Merida Initiative being the root cause for this renewed life in border towns and cities and strong security complex it is uncertain, according to Barry. The violence experienced by the Mexican side does not seem to be spilling over to the US side at this point in time. It should be noted that the Obama administration has put in place policies and vigorously enforced laws that crackdown on drug cartels and trafficking (Barry, 2011, pp.9-11).

A professor of Military Studies at the US Army War College Paul Kan (2012) says that the Obama administration was one of the first to actually include controlling violence along the border and the unstable environment in Mexico as a national security threat to the US. The Obama administration was the first to consider border violence and instability in Mexico as national security threats. Kan cites lack of being able to control the violence on the Mexican side of the border as a threat to the people of the US and its borders combined with the demand from the US for drugs as a major problem for the “war on drugs.” Basically the US and Mexico can implement policies as they have been and are doing, but if there is not enough coordination the problem of violence along the US side of the border and the spillover effect will continue. One of the previous complaints from the RAND Corporation's analysis of the Merida Initiative was its lack of coordination between local police forces and the government which ultimately makes the problem worse. Kan says that if both Mexico and the US want to win the “war on drugs” it most likely will not be with a military operation. No military can beat the supply and demand factor of this situation. The reasons for the increase in violence in Mexico, Kan states, are a combination of institutional erosion, NAFTA, party politics, culture and machismo, and access to weapons among other factors. He argues that taking care of just one or two of these problems is not going to cure the problem in Mexico or the threat to US national security. Each issue has to be dealt with individually and that one of the larger aspects of taking care of the problem is dealing with the subject of human rights which the Merida Initiative does to a point. Although Kan does not directly address the Merida Initiative, his study of the US-Mexican partnership on the “war on drugs” is relevant. This study shows that the Merida Initiative may well not be sufficiently comprehensive to win the “war on drugs” and reduce border violence (Kan, 2012, pp.72-132).

The NGO Witness for Peace is even more strident in its call for more attention to the issue of human rights in the “war on drugs.” Witness for Peace does not feel that US policies have done enough to counter police abuses and corruption. They also cite the same problem that Kan did in that supply and especially demand of drugs has to be dealt with. This demand is compounded by the fact that there is a lot of poverty in Mexico and drug trafficking is very profitable. Secondly, Witness for Peace echoes the same sentiments that Kan did which are that a military operation for a situation such as this is destined to fail; it cites the Plan for Columbia which allocated $5.6 billion to Columbia to combat drugs without any success. Currently, the US Congress has allocated $1.5 billion from 2008-2010 for the Merida Initiative to help Mexico.

The area of human rights is of a huge concern for the group Witness for Peace as well. Included in that 1.5 billion dollar aid are conditions on human rights that have to be met before the aid is given to the Mexican Ministry of the Interior. To hopefully stop human rights abuses before they occur, Congress laid out four criteria that must be met before 15% of the Merida funds will be given. The criteria are as follows: “transparency and accountability in law enforcement, civilian trials for military officials accused of human rights violations, consultation with human rights groups, and prohibiting testimony obtained through torture” (Witness for Peace, 2011). Many citizens in Mexico do not feel that is enough to stop the abuses and corruption, and some have complained that the Merida Initiative gives the Mexican police and military more power to disregard their human rights. Results of these provisions have been slow in coming as of 2010; only $26 million was withheld due to the lack of human rights oversight by the Mexican government (Witness for Peace, 2011). Even though there have been so many critics of the Merida Initiative some still believe that it has helped but that the US government has a very mixed and murky way of dealing with the violent crime related to drug cartels along the border. Ray Walker (2010), an analyst for the conservative Heritage Foundation, thinks
the Merida Initiative was a good policy move towards controlling the violence in Mexico, and thus the violence would not spread to US communities as some have feared. Without the US backing equipment such as x-ray vans, helicopters, armored vehicles and better cooperation with intelligence gathering, the violence could spill over the US border. The intelligence gathering aspect is very crucial in deterring and detecting drug related violent crime and so are the intelligence teams the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) helps Mexico put together. These intelligence teams help coordinate law enforcement assistance to state and local agencies in Mexico.

However, Walser is also critical of the Merida Initiative. Walser’s main issue with the Initiative as discussed earlier in my findings was the very slow shipment of equipment to the Mexican authorities. The issue of getting the Mexican authorities assistance in time to make an impact has also been in the way of getting the necessary funds together as concern for where the money is going and how it is being handled also plague this initiative. It is hoped that the new National Southwestern Border CounterNarcotics Strategy will help offset any gaps that the Merida Initiative has in its implementation (Walser, 2010). This alone will not help, according to Walser who maintains that the US has to have strong domestic and international policies to counter the drug cartels and violence in Mexico (Walser, 2010). The Merida Initiative seems to have been a good start on working on a very complex problem with many facets to the problem according to this report by the Heritage Foundation.

The Congressional Research Service’s (CRS) most recent report as cited by Finklea on the Merida Initiative maintains that the violence has decreased on both sides of the border. Throughout the period of time the Merida Initiative has been in effect around a billion dollars has been spent. This notion that violence has gone down can be supported by my findings that as violent crime as a whole decreased, the amount of funding on the Merida Initiative has increased. The figure of money being spent will only grow as time goes on since last year the total was $1.2 billion. With all of this money spent and the violent crime rate dropping well before the Initiative took hold, the actual effectiveness of the Initiative is the question.

The US Congress has been gauging implementation according to two criteria: the number of training opportunities, and the rate of delivery of Merida Initiative resources and assistance. Even though the US has expedited deliveries in recent years, this does not necessarily mean that the Initiative has been effective (US Government Accountability Office). The increase in those delivering the needed supplies to the Mexican authorities does not mean it helped the Merida Initiative as my data showed an increase in violent crime along the border in 2011 when the deliverers were expedited. Before those deliveries the violent crime rate was down overall. As CRS points out, the positive effects of these deliveries and assistance in 2011 still does not show whether these deliveries made a huge difference or not. Another factor that needs to be considered is maintenance of the equipment the Mexican government receives. The training that the Initiative gives to the Mexican authorities, according to CRS, shows us a turnover rate of police officers after receiving training, and the US government is not tracking their progress as they should be. This way of measuring does not give clear or accurate results of whether the Merida Initiative is actually reducing the violence along the border. Conclusive evidence cannot be gained as to whether this Initiative has decreased violent crime along the US border further since its inception. The US government cites the amount of extraditions and killing of drug trade organization leaders as a sign of the achievements of the Merida Initiative. Again however, there are many problems with measuring the achievements of this initiative as is evident from the results of this study and the many others that have tried to measure Merida’s success (Seelke & Finklea, 2014, pp.4-35).

Conclusions that can be drawn from this study are that the violent crime along the US side of the border has gone down with the exception of a couple of counties in Arizona and Texas. It is interesting that the violent crime rate was going down well before the Merida Initiative. This shows that proponents of the Merida Initiative cannot conclusively give all the credit for reducing violence along the border to the Merida Initiative. This reduction in crime could be due to increased border security and enforcement and previous assistance given to Mexico as well. The actual results of violence spilling over into the US from Mexican drug cartels cannot be accurately proven based on the evidence available. There are various reasons for the variances in violent crime rates along the border and their relationship to the Merida Initiative. They could be due to the lapse in time of getting the supplies to the proper authorities in Mexico, a continued lack of coordination between national and local law enforcement, human rights violations, emphasis on this being a “war” or the aspect of supply and demand that can only be controlled in the short-term versus long-term situation. Thus far we have seen that the Merida Initiative has made limited efforts to address the deeper causes of the drug trade. One structural cause is political, such as weak Mexican state institutions, including rampant government corruption. There are also social factors, such as community bonds weakened by migration and the drug trade. Cultural norms idealizing the drug trade are another factor.

Greatest of all is the economic factor. Relatively few economic opportunities outside of narco-trafficking, combined with the high demand for drugs in the US, make the drug trade a tempting source of employment (McCaffrey, 2009). Peter Andreas (2009) could give us another explanation as to why the recent spike in violent crime has occurred. The border was never out of control because the US never really had control of the border in the first place. The many facets of this problem make it difficult to assess whether progress on the issue at hand has made a difference. This whole notion that the border is “out of control,” even when violent crime is going down, could point to political motivations beyond just controlling the drug violence. The Merida Initiative may be in part an effort to appease a hard-core faction in Congress that prefers straightforward police and military responses to narco-trafficking and border violence rather than far more complex comprehensive approaches.

Instead of looking at what should be looked at which is the best interest for those people living along the border, there has been a concentration on fighting and winning the war on drugs. Not enough concrete data is available to see if even this violence that we see is directly linked to the drug cartels. The Merida Initiative’s premise is that there is a close correlation between violent crime along the US-Mexico border, and the drug trade. However, there is not yet enough data to demonstrate this correlation. Unfortunately, US policy appears more attached to that perceived correlation rather than what is in the best interest of people living both sides of that border.
References


Appendix

Violent Crime Rates in 16 US border counties

Chart 1
Violent Crime Rates in the US states bordering Mexico, 1990-2012

Chart 2
Violent Crime Rates in the Four Arizona Border Counties
Footnote: Due to lack of data at the county level in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) data from the town of Luna Deming had to be used in its place.

Footnote: Due to a lack of data at the county level in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) El Paso had to be used in place of county level data.