Ciudad Juárez, in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, is known as a city of death.¹ Perhaps the most violent place on the planet, it is home to the world's highest homicide rate—officially there were 3,111 total murders in 2010, but since many deaths go unreported, the real number is likely significantly higher. Like many other Mexican border cities, Juárez has had relatively high levels of crime, vice, and corruption for decades.² But it was not always as brutally violent as it is today. Not long ago the city was renowned by its own inhabitants (Juarenses); visitors from its “sister city” across the border, El Paso, Texas; and millions of migrants for its fine weather, vibrant nightlife, and relatively high standard of living.

In the mid-1980s two powerful drug traffickers, Rafael Aguilar Guajardo, a federal police commander, and Rafael Muñoz Talavera, a businessman, ran the Juárez Cartel, but the city’s yearly homicides remained below 100 until 1993. That year, Amado Carrillo Fuentes muscled out his competitors and took control of the Juárez trafficking market and assumed the mantle of the Juárez Cartel.³ From 1993 onward, Amado Carrillo Fuentes, an innovator in jet-transporting cocaine from South America to northern Mexico, substantially increased

By Howard Campbell

Howard Campbell is a professor of anthropology at the University of Texas–El Paso. He is the author of Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches From the Streets of El Paso and Juárez (University of Texas Press, 2009).
the volume of cross-border drug trafficking. Homicides, including a substantial number of killings of women that were labeled “femicides,” increased correspondingly. In 1993 Juárez homicide totals surpassed 100 for the first time in recent history, and from 1994 on, total homicides surpassed the 200 mark and remained there for the rest of the decade (with the single exception of 1999, when they declined in the aftermath of Carrillo Fuentes’s death and the violent shake-up within the cartel that occurred immediately after it).

By 2000, Vicente Carrillo Fuentes, Amado’s brother, regained control of the trafficking market, and the homicide rates leveled off at about 200 to 300 a year as business returned to “normal.” Drug trafficking continued to produce needed revenue for thousands of Juarenses and El Paseos, locally known as Paseños. Many border people considered the violence inevitably produced by the drug trade to be undesirable but not “out of control,” although activists, relatives, and friends protested the disappearances and murders of their loved ones. Indeed, despite the increase in killings and disappearances that began in the 1990s, Juárez remained a bustling, 24/7 city that was much livelier than El Paso.

The ultra-violence that Juárez now endures began in January 2008 with the drug-trafficking arrest in El Paso of a high-ranking Juárez police official, Saulo Reyes Gamboa, who reputedly cooperated with U.S. law enforcement. Then a series of high-profile killings occurred in January 2008 with the drug-trafficking arrest in El Paso of a high-ranking Juárez police official, Saulo Reyes Gamboa, who reputedly cooperated with U.S. law enforcement. Then a series of high-profile killings occurred in rapid succession in Juárez. Knowledgeable local observers attributed these deaths to attempts by the Juárez Cartel to kill disloyal members as well as to internal power struggles within the organization after the downfall of a once powerful leader. This internal battle was exploited by the cartel’s bitter rival, the Sinaloa Cartel—led by Chapo Guzmán, in an attempt to take over the Juárez drug-trafficking market. As the violence continued, experts compared the Juárez drug war to the 2004–2006 inter-cartel squabble between the Gulf Cartel/Zetas and the Sinaloa Cartel for control of Nuevo Laredo and surrounding areas.

By March 2008, the spike in Juárez violence attracted the attention of Mexican president Felipe Calderón, who sent thousands of soldiers and federal police into the city’s streets to stop the bloodshed. Military and police checkpoints, heavily loaded troop transport trucks filled with green-uniformed soldiers, and blue police trucks filled with federal cops in heavy body armor and ski masks, with their fingers on the trigger of automatic weapons, became ubiquitous sights in the border town. Juárez was in a state of siege, essentially controlled by the military.

In the first month of the “surge,” the homicide rate dipped, but it quickly returned to high levels that have only since increased. In 2008 there were about 1,600 homicides, more than 2,700 in 2009, more than 3,100 in 2010, and rates continue apace as of June. (While precise figures are often unobtainable or open to interpretation in many cases, the magnitude of the tragedy is beyond question.) Social critics, activists, and victims’ relatives assert that much of the violence is in fact perpetrated by these same soldiers and policemen, who also engage in fratricidal violence within their own ranks—with municipal cops killing other municipal cops, and city and federal police engaging in shoot-outs with each other. Throughout, the federal and local government claimed to be reforming the police forces. The municipal police were purged several times, police captains were replaced, and federal police were rotated back and forth. The military was reinforced, then partially withdrawn, then brought back. The federal police took over from the military, and military forces were reduced substantially. The federal police proved to be so abusive, however, that many Juarenses now call for the complete withdrawal of both it and the army.

 Violence and criminality—particularly the booming extortion and kidnapping businesses—actually grew with the arrival of the soldiers and federal police. At the same time the Aztecas and other lesser or rival criminal gangs multiplied as the city devolved into a totally lawless nightmare—a war-ravaged landscape of burned-out and abandoned buildings by day, a ghost town by night. Reportedly, more than 100,000 homes lie vacant, abandoned or destroyed. Perhaps as many as 20% of Juárez’s previous inhabitants have fled the violence for El Paso or other destinations in the United States and Mexico. Since 2008 there have been only a few days in which there were no killings in Juárez. These few relatively peaceful days were primarily the result of extremely cold winter weather, which forced residents to stay in their homes.

Many of the victims of recent violence are not big-time cartel members. They are street-level drug dealers, small-time gangsters, small business people of all sorts who refuse to pay extortion “protection” fees, bystanders, municipal police men and women, hapless smugglers who lost their drug loads, snitches or reputed snitches, and even drug addicts and homeless street people. Elderly people, small children, people in wheelchairs, and women of all ages have all fallen to the assassin’s bullet as crime organizations—in particular La Linea, the dominant wing of the Juárez Cartel—have expanded from drug trafficking into all manner of crimi-
nal activity. Young people have been the most victimized social group. The degree of extreme violence and torture—including decapitations and mutilations—defy the imagination. Some of the most extreme examples since 2008 include the following:

- Eighteen recovering drug addicts massacred by a death squad at a drug rehabilitation center in the Colonia Bellavista;
- Fifteen teenagers, mistaken for gang members, were gunned down in Colonia Villas de Salvárcar;
- Several Juárez journalists murdered, including legendary crime reporter Armando Rodríguez;
- Three people associated with the U.S. Consulate assassinated;
- Thousands of quartered, duct-taped, beheaded, burned, sexually mutilated, or otherwise desecrated cadavers dumped in the streets;
- A car bomb, killing a Juárez policeman and a respected paramedic;
- One hundred and forty-nine policemen murdered in Juárez in 2010;
- Three hundred and four women murdered in 2010;
- Dozens of mass killings in bars, homes, drug rehab centers, private parties, shopping centers, restaurants, used car lots, junk yards, car repair shops, and other businesses; and
- An estimated 20% of the homicides during the Mexican “drug war” have occurred in Juárez.

How do we explain this outrageous carnage? Beyond historical particulars and the intra- and inter-cartel wars, five main social processes coincided in recent years to produce the unprecedented violence in Juárez. These processes each have differential time lines and cycles; they are not all unified and identical, but they have collectively produced the hyper-violence and lawlessness. First, the maquiladora model failed to produce economic mobility or social “development” for the majority of the border population. From the 1960s onward, primarily U.S.-owned maquilas brought thousands of migrants to Juárez and consigned them to live in bare-bones neighborhoods (colonias). The companies did not pay more than subsistence wages and did not provide much training, nor did they construct schools, hospitals, or parks in worker neighborhoods. The captive maquila worker population lived in these often squalid, precarious conditions with little protection from the state or its employers, with the exception of the bus service that brought the factory workers, in recycled yellow U.S. school buses, to the manufacturing and assembly plants.7

Second, the global economic crisis closed many Juárez maquilas and exported low-wage jobs to China. The laid-off border workers were left with nothing to fall back on as the U.S. militarized its southern border with fences, walls, more Border Patrol agents, and a general crackdown on undocumented immigrants.8 Crossing into the United States to find work was no longer an option for most poor Juarenses. Crime became the main economic opportunity for unemployed youth.

Third, ongoing political problems in Mexico after a flawed transition to democracy brought the consolidation of free trade and neoliberal policies begun in the 1980s. These policies abandoned the working class and poor, who represent the vast majority of the Mexican population, in a time of reduced employment and wages.9 The corrupt corporate state controlled for 71 years by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), despite its myriad flaws, had at least provided a modicum of jobs, social safety-net programs, and patronage. Moreover, the PRI’s heavy-handed and corrupt rule limited the growth of drug cartels to a degree.

In contrast, the neoliberal model championed by the since discredited President Carlos Salinas and continued by the new National Action Party (PAN) administrations from 2000 onward removed much of the social safety net and broke down the old patronage networks that kept drug traffickers in line. Furthermore, Mexico’s so-called democratic opening was mainly an opening for Mexican venture capitalists and international investors. Democracy neither improved the conditions of the poor nor allowed them more access to political decision-making. After the defeat in 2006 of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the left’s strongest presidential candidate since Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the progressive movement fragmented and lost much of the already scarce power it had over national affairs. The right-wing PAN and centrist PRI had control of the country, but their conflicts prevented creative political action and social programs that might have lessened the disaster already looming in Juárez.

Bitter battles between the PRI and the PAN administrations of Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón allowed little or no cooperation between the federal government and state and local governments in Juárez and Chihuahua State when violence and criminality began to spiral out of control. The thoroughly corrupt federal, state, and municipal police in Juárez viewed each other as enemies allied with rival branches of organized crime. The
chronically underfunded, criminally infested Juárez city government—especially law enforcement, which in the best of times was a hindrance to the local population—became a scourge. Poorly planned judicial reform and the federally mandated military intervention only worsened an already desperate situation. In Juárez crime paid, and criminals were almost never caught or jailed.

Fourth, Calderón’s ill-conceived “drug war,” launched in 2006 and sponsored and promoted by the U.S. government, became a disaster.10 Everywhere Calderón sent the military and federal police, the violence increased. In the states of Michoacán, Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Durango, and others, the bloody story was the same. Human rights violations and homicides (including the femicides) skyrocketed. Although rival cartels had been killing each other for years, Calderón’s improvised military mobilization threw gasoline on the fire and turned a problematic criminal situation into a virtual civil war. The U.S. government pushed Mexico to fight the drug war, and Mexicans are paying the price for it. As the U.S. executive branch now admits, U.S. drug demand and lax gun laws fuel Mexican drug trafficking and related violence.11 Moreover, the success of U.S. law enforcement in closing Colombian and Caribbean drug corridors altered the transcontinental geography of the drug trade, creating a new main channel of hemispheric drug shipments from South and Central America through Mexico and across the U.S.-Mexico border.

And finally, the rise of a “counterculture of crime” in Mexico beginning in the 1990s emerged hand in hand with economic decline, political illegitimacy, and the decadence of law enforcement and the judicial system. The marginalized masses of unemployed and semi-employed workers—especially the youth who are ignored and isolated in a rigid class hierarchy and now in a heavily consumer-oriented, neoliberal Mexican society—became the shock troops for cartels, gangs, and kidnapping and extortion rings. Organized crime, in fact, is propelled by unemployment and the hunger for consumer goods, social mobility, and the cosmopolitan lifestyles advertised in the omnipresent cyber/electronic/television imagery beamed to a Mexican populace that has less and less means of obtaining them through legitimate means.

Illegal operations flourished with little opposition and even overt cooperation from criminalized police forces. Mexico became a world leader in the kidnapping and extortion of legitimate businesses, as organized crime groups expanded into domestic drug sales, the undocumented-immigrant trade, carjacking, kidnapping, extortion (known as cobrando la cuota), prostitution, and sales of pirated music, movies, and other goods. Organized crime groups began to conquer entire regions of Mexico and large parts of cities like Juárez, becoming quasi-state entities.

Opponents of this mafia-like criminal expansion, whether politicians, journalists, unbraggable policemen, or activists, were tortured and decapitated, and their bullet-riddled bodies or body parts were hung from bridges and monuments or strewn in the streets. Cartels created narco-spectacles of dumped, mutilated cadavers and large-scale massacres in broad daylight to intimidate the general population. These horrific, visceral displays were backed up by narco-propaganda messages in threatening narco-graffiti, narco-mantas (pro-cartel banners that attack rival cartel members and government officials), and YouTube videos of interrogation and torture sessions, executions, and pro-cartel manifestoes. Simultaneously, drug traffickers celebrated their actions in upbeat narco-corridos that espouse a gospel of brutality, drug abuse, misogyny, money worship, and impunity.

The counterculture of criminality became morbidly stylish and a kind of primitive ideological justification for anti-state, anti-social, and even nihilistic violence.12 Crime groups, including corrupt local, state, and federal police, engaged in a feeding frenzy of murders designed to punish the real or perceived thieves of drug loads or informers, purge the ranks of traitors or disloyal members, take revenge for previous killings, exterminate business owners who would not pay la cuota, execute kidnap victims to destroy evidence, or attack rivals or government agents that got in their way. The fragmentation and conflict among existing crime groups has produced multiple new crime organizations.

The inability of the state and civil society to provide a viable, appealing alternative to the “counterculture of crime” and violence means that it will continue if not grow indefinitely. Many border people feel that only the victory and supremacy of one drug cartel in the city will reestablish a degree of order and peace. This discouraging scenario exists in one of the most important industrial cities in the Western Hemisphere, located right on the U.S. border. It is evidence of the long-term bankruptcy of U.S. drug war policy, neoliberal free trade agreements, and Mexican political leadership. In the face of all this, valiant Juarense activists and protesters stage countless marches, demonstrations, vigils, and peace rallies. These courageous actions are met with bloody repression, politicians’ empty promises, or silence from a deaf and dumb government. As the conflictive 2012 Mexican presidential election approaches, it is hard to envision any improvement. At present there is no end in sight to the violence in Juárez.
University of Mexico, 1980), 80–81.
13. Ibid.

How Can We Help Mexico?

1. For numbers on illicit-drug users in the United States, see U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Results From the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Volume I. Summary of National Findings, Figure 2.1, “Past Month Ilicit Drug Use among Persons Aged 12 or Older: 2009,” oas.samhsa.gov/NSDUH/2k9NSDUH/2k9Results.htm#Ch2.

No End in Sight

1. For the sake of readability, the author has omitted copious references to the massive reportage about the Juárez situation. But he would like to express his gratitude to others who have studied or written about the city and border issues, including Rico Ainslie, Cecilia Balli, Eduardo Barrera, Charles Bowden, John Burnett, Julian Cardona, Alfredo Corachco, Gustavo de la Rosa, Richard Dugan, Josiah Heyman, Alejandro Lugo, Molly Molloy, Rafael Nuñez, Tony Payan, Alfredo Quijano, Sandra Rodríguez, David Shirk, Kathy Staudt, Pablo Vila, Ed Vulliamy, and Melissa Wright.
3. Howard Campbell, Drug War Zone: Frontline Dispatches From the Streets of El Paso and Juárez (University of Texas Press, 2009), 32.
5. Campbell, Drug War Zone, 1–33.

The Daughters of La Nacha

2. Affidavit of W. H. Crook, The United States of America v. Ignacia Jasso Gonzalez et al., September 16, 1942, State Department (RG 59), Central Decimal Files, 1940–1944, 212.11 Gonzalez Ignacia Jasso, Box 105, National Archives II.

Marketing Violence in Mexico’s Drug War


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3. For more of Castillo’s analysis, see her Easy Women: Sex and Gender in Modern Mexican Fiction (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 39.

The Colombia FTA