



Fact Sheet: Setting the Record Straight on Border Crime

Border States Are Safe Today and Only Getting Safer

Ann Garcia June 2010

Officeholders and candidates in Arizona who support the state's draconian new immigration law have justified it with hyperbole, exaggeration, and falsehoods about Arizona's crime rate. Gov. Jan Brewer has colored recent speeches with images of "murder, terror, and mayhem" and "drop houses, kidnappings, and violence." According to State Sen. Russell Pearce, who sponsored the law—it mandates that police interrogate people they have "reasonable suspicion" are illegal immigrants and demand production of documentation—cities like Phoenix will become places with "less crime" and "safer neighborhoods." Pearce claims Phoenix is "second in the world in kidnappings and third in the United States for violence."

With all the hype around a purported crime epidemic caused by undocumented immigrants, it's ironic that newly released statistics from Arizona's Department of Public Safety and the FBI show that violent crime rates in the state and along the southwest border region have been declining. In fact, it's fair to say the border region has become safer over the last few years, and that Arizona's new law actually undermines community safety.

Let's take a closer look.

The facts on crime in Arizona

- **Violent crimes in Arizona are down by 15 percent since 2006:** The FBI's preliminary Uniform Crime Report, or UCR, for 2009 shows that violent crime—murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault—is down in Arizona

for the third year in a row. The absolute number of violent crimes in 2006 was 30,916 in Arizona. By 2009 it had dropped by 15 percent to 26,094.

- **Per-capita violent crime rate dropped by 22 percent:** Factoring in the change in Arizona's population, the rate of violent crime per 100,000 persons in 2009 was 390.5, which is a 22 percent decrease from 501.4 per 100,000 in 2006. For comparison's sake, the violent crime rate in nonborder states such as Georgia and Florida was 410.6 and 604.9 respectively in 2009.
- **Arizona's violent and property crime rate drop was twice the national average:** Nationally, violent and property crimes were down between 2008 and 2009, but Arizona saw rates of decline more than double that. The nation as a whole saw a -5.5 percent change in violent crime and -4.9 percent change in property crime from 2008 to 2009, but Arizona experienced a percent change of -11.1 in the former and -12 in the latter in this same time period.
- **Kidnappings are tied to Mexico's organized crime syndicate, not innocent Americans:** It's clear that Arizona has an organized crime problem, with 267 kidnappings in 2009 in Phoenix alone. But the kidnappings most often occur when human smugglers—who are usually part of Mexican drug cartels—demand more money for their services. As Phoenix police Sgt. Tommy Thompson said, “We’re talking about the kidnapping of smugglers and associates. I have no fear that my kids or grandkids will be victims.” This means that our efforts must be directed toward two fronts: fixing our broken immigration system so that people can immigrate legally with visas and not illegally with smugglers, and helping to resolve the deadly war on drugs in Mexico.

A safer southwest border

- **Border cities are among the nation's safest:** Phoenix and other large border (and near-border) cities have some of the nation's lowest crime rates, including San Diego, El Paso, and Austin.
- **Border counties have low violent crime rates:** Counties along the southwest border have some of the lowest rates of violent crime per capita in the nation. Their rates have dropped by more than 30 percent since the 1990s.

- **There's no evidence of "spillover" of violence from Mexico:** El Paso, Texas has three bridges leading directly into Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, a city which has suffered a significant percentage of the national death toll brought on by the Mexican war on drug cartels, which approaches 23,000 today. El Paso experienced only 12 murders in 2009, which was actually down from 17 in 2008. San Diego, California saw 41 murders in 2009, down from 55 in 2008, and Tucson, Arizona experienced 35 in 2009, a significant decrease from the 65 murders committed in 2008. Claims of spillover violence are clearly overblown.
- **High-immigrant cities are safer:** Christopher Dickey, Paris bureau chief and Middle East regional editor for *Newsweek*, points out that, "San Antonio saw violent crime drop from 9,699 incidents to 7,844; murders from 116 to 99. Compare that with a city like Detroit, which is a little bigger than El Paso and much smaller than San Antonio—and not exactly a magnet for job-seeking immigrants. Its murder rate went up from 323 in 2008 to 361 in 2009." This recent pattern falls right in line with the calculations of Tim Wadsworth, sociologist from the University of Colorado at Boulder. In Wadsworth's recent study he concludes that "cities with the largest increases in immigration between 1990 and 2000 experienced the largest decreases in homicide and robbery during the same time period."

Arizona law undermines community safety

- **Civilian cooperation will decrease:** A delegation of police chiefs from major cities in Arizona and across the country met on May 26 with Attorney General Eric Holder to make clear they opposed the Arizona law because it would hurt local law enforcement efforts. As Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck said following the meeting, "This is not a law that increases public safety. This is a bill that makes it much harder for us to do our jobs...crime will go up if this becomes law in Arizona or in any other state." That's because police need full cooperation from residents—legal and otherwise—in order to solve and prevent crime.
- **Immigrant communities will be marginalized:** Arizona's new law will "drive a wedge between some communities and law enforcement" instead of reducing crime, argues Rob Davis, police chief of San Jose, California. It will erode the mutual trust and cooperation that police have worked to develop and maintain with immigrant communities throughout the years and instead alienate these communities.

- **Resources will be diverted from fighting serious crime:** Police resources in Arizona will be taken away from serious crime investigations and redirected to questioning the legal status of otherwise lawful individuals. That’s why the Arizona Association of Chiefs of Police opposes S.B. 1070. “We are stretched very thin right now. We don’t have enough resources to continue to do this and to take on another responsibility,” said Josh Harris, head of the association.

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