

Falling Crime and Rising Border Enforcement: Is There a Connection?

The U.S.–Mexico border has typically been regarded by outside observers as crime ridden. From familiar scenes in cowboy movies where the bad guys make a run for the border to more contemporary images of the border as a staging area for illegal immigrants and drug smugglers, the Southwest border is often characterized as lawless and out of control.

Falling Crime

These stereotypes may be based on what has been true in the past, but they have not kept up well with recent developments. Official crime statistics show a dramatic drop in border crime rates in the 1990s. While the border crime rate was 30 percent higher than the national crime rate in 1990, the difference was only 12 percent in 2000. The bulk of the improvement came in property-related crimes (such as auto theft, larceny and burglary), which dropped 40 percent between 1990 and 2000. Violent crimes (including assault, robbery, rape and homicide), while representing only 12 percent of total crime, also dropped sharply, falling 29 percent over the decade.

Improvements in the crime rate during the 1990s were not restricted to the Southwest border (*Chart 1*). National crime rates declined right along with border rates. This phenomenon has received much attention among researchers trying to understand the reasons underlying these changes. The consensus attributes the downward trend to several factors at the national level: the end of the crack epidemic, a growing prison population, changing demographics and rapid economic growth. Higher imprisonment rates and demographic change reduced the size of the population most at risk for committing crime. Tougher laws

kept more criminals in jail for longer sentences, while demographic change resulted in fewer people in the highest-risk group (males ages 14–24).

These factors, especially the pace of economic growth, have likely had a substantial impact on the border as well. Most border areas grew quickly in the 1990s. Job creation outpaced population growth in many border cities, and most areas experienced large drops in the unemployment rate. Research has shown that when faced with more labor market opportunities, individuals are less likely to resort to crime.

Rising Border Enforcement

Another factor—one unique to the border region—has also played a role in lowering crime rates. In the 1990s, the U.S.–Mexico border experienced a resurgence in illegal immigration and, as

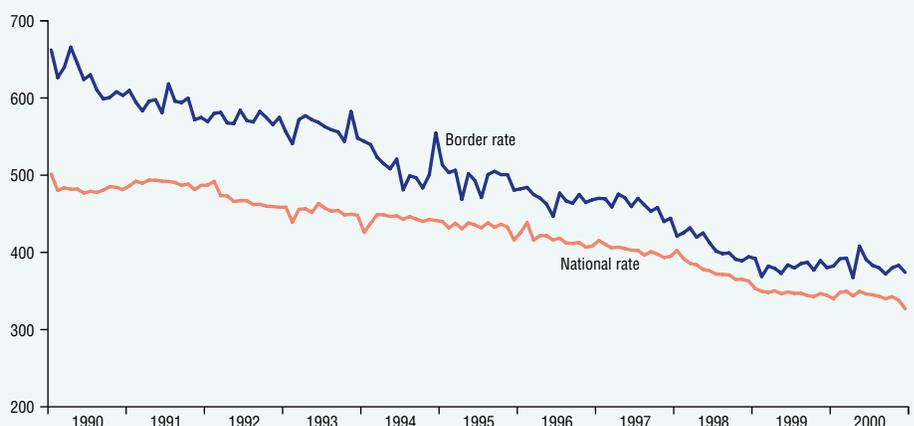
a result, an unprecedented buildup of border enforcement. While some might expect illegal immigration to be correlated with higher crime rates, mostly indirectly through the role of smugglers, border enforcement should be working in the opposite direction. In this case the end result, falling aggregate crime rates, suggests that border enforcement and the other factors discussed above won out.

Border enforcement along the U.S.–Mexico border consists predominantly of the Border Patrol. Over 9,000 Border Patrol agents currently man the border with Mexico. At the same time, enforcement has increasingly come to rely on technological advances and other hardware in locating and apprehending undocumented immigrants. Today's Border Patrol uses everything from remote video surveillance, motion detectors, mobile

Chart 1

Border Crime Rates Fell Faster Than National Rates

Offenses per 100,000 people



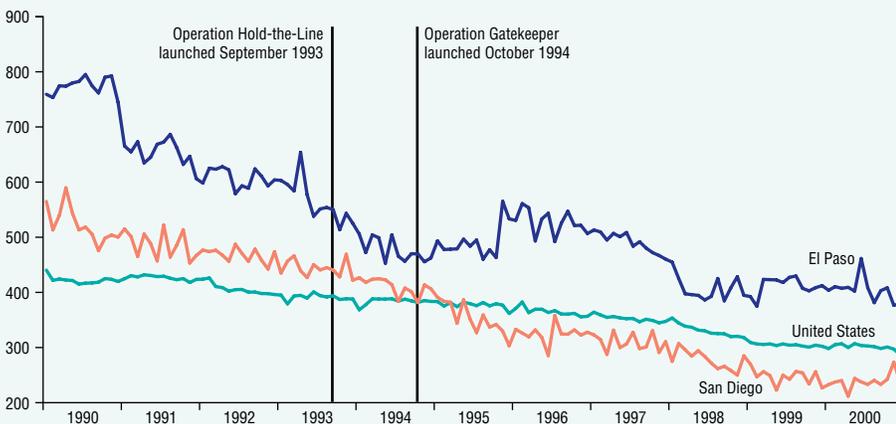
NOTE: Data are seasonally adjusted.

SOURCES: County crime data: Special Request Unit, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, California Department of Justice; Uniform Crime Reporting Program, Access Integrity Unit, Arizona Department of Public Safety; Uniform Crime Reporting, Crime Information Bureau, Texas Department of Public Safety. National monthly crime data: FBI UCR reports. Population estimates: U.S. Census.

Chart 2

Property Crime Rates Fell When Border Enforcement Rose

Offenses per 100,000 people



NOTE: Data are seasonally adjusted.

SOURCES: County crime data: Special Request Unit, Criminal Justice Statistics Center, California Department of Justice; Uniform Crime Reporting, Crime Information Bureau, Texas Department of Public Safety. National monthly crime data: FBI UCR reports. Population estimates: U.S. Census.

infrared nightscopes and helicopters to old-fashioned barriers such as walls, floodlights and road checkpoints. Although the Border Patrol does not typically apprehend criminals who commit nonimmigration offenses, like the ones we are considering here, the Border Patrol's visibility and the omnipresent monitoring devices and checkpoints throughout the border region deter all forms of crime.

This point is best illustrated by looking at the impact on crime of two major border enforcement offensives in the early to mid-1990s: Operation Hold-the-Line in El Paso in 1993 and Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego in 1994. As Chart 2 shows, in the year following the introduction of Hold-the-Line in El Paso, property crime rates fell 17.6 percent (the national rate declined only 1 percent). In the year after Gatekeeper was introduced, property crime rates in San Diego fell 16 percent (the national rate declined only 2.3 percent).

Given this preliminary evidence of a possible causal relationship between enforcement and crime, we tested this in an econometric model where we controlled for economic conditions, the volume of immigration and other variables. We found that a 10 percent increase in monthly linewatch hours (equivalent to adding about 515 full-time agents) leads to a 0.3 percent fall in the monthly prop-

erty crime rate (equivalent to about 862 fewer property crimes per year).

Redistributing Crime

Despite this good news about border crime rates and the role of the Border Patrol, a set of second-order effects deserves attention. The overall border crime rate has fallen substantially from its 1990 peak, but the bulk of the improvement has been concentrated, not surprisingly, in the communities targeted for early border enforcement initiatives, namely San Diego and El Paso. Most border counties, albeit much smaller than San Diego and El Paso, did not experience declines as steep as the national drop and thus have become relatively more crime ridden in 2000 compared with the nation.

The lesson in this analysis is that until border enforcement initiatives impact the entire Southwest border, crack-downs in one area may result in fewer crimes in that vicinity but also in a redistribution of crimes to other areas. For example, in the years that Hold-the-Line and Gatekeeper were introduced, the neighboring counties of Hudspeth, Texas, and Imperial, Calif., both experienced relatively large increases in their crime rates. These second-order effects have already been apparent in the changing geographic pattern of illegal immigration. The traditional migrant gateways of

Tijuana–San Diego and Juárez–El Paso have been replaced by migrant flows through smaller, less patrolled towns in Arizona and South Texas.

Getting tough on the border has had positive spillovers on border crime rates. The border has realized marked declines in the incidence of crime. However, the crime that is occurring has become more equally distributed across border counties. Less populated counties are contending with a greater share of border crimes, a development that likely stems in part from the launching of the border offensives Gatekeeper and Hold-the-Line. This may not be a significant problem as long as crime rates continue to fall, but that trend may already have been reversed. Since mid-1999, the downward trend in border crime has flattened considerably.

— Pia M. Orrenius
Roberto Coronado

Orrenius is a senior economist in the Research Department of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas. Coronado is an economic analyst in the Research Department of the Bank's El Paso Branch.

Maquiladora Downturn

Structural Change or Cyclical Factors?

Is the maquiladora industry ready to face rising global competition, or is it the beginning of a long-term decline? This conference will offer answers to these questions and more.

November 21, 2003

Sheraton Hotel

South Padre Island, Texas

Conference hosted by the
El Paso and San Antonio Branches
Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas

Watch for details on our web site
www.dallasfed.org