

AN OVERVIEW OF CRIME STATISTICS AND IMPACT OF LAW ENFORCEMENT ACTIVITIES IN U.S. BORDER CITIES: LAREDO/WEBB COUNTY¹

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Abstract

Crime occurring in US border cities is a topic that has been widely discussed and drawn much-needed attention today. A statistical analysis is needed to address the effects that crime statistics have on law enforcement activities. Statistics profiles for the last seven-year period from 2000-2006 have been collected and analyzed as an integral part of this study. Merely increasing the number of law enforcement personnel does not reduce crime as some authorities have argued. Since other factors in the border cities can attribute to the crime statistics or may influence these statistics, they need to be considered. The primary objective of this task is to find whether there is a correlation between these variables. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of these data. More data need to be collected to conduct a full analysis of law enforcement and crime in the region.

JEL classification: J61, K42

Keywords: Crimes, law enforcement authorities, analysis, border cities

Introduction

The citizens living on either side of border cities are becoming fearful of crimes occurring in their neighborhoods. These fears have an influence on their day-to-day lives. Fear to travel freely and a want to protect their families and properties need additional attention and vigilance. This has already resulted in the lowering of property values in some areas and likewise some business has also plunged. Local authorities have responded by attempting to increase the visibility of police personnel in an effort to curb these crimes. It has had an impact to some extent. However, better control of crime in border cities must consider a wide array of strategies, not just simply the increase of law enforcement personnel.

For many years now, United States' politicians have led the public to believe that an increase in law enforcement officers will have a deterrent effect on crime. In other words, the more law enforcement officers we have, the less crime there will be. However, often those departments with the most officers also have the highest crime rates. Scholars have reported that crime rates are not influenced to a great degree by the numbers of law enforcement officials working the streets. The reason most scholars believe this is because police do not spend most of their time fighting crime. Wroblewski and Hess

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(2000) report that there are five roles United States police officers perform. These include: enforcing laws, preserving the peace, preventing crime, providing services, and upholding rights. Of these, the least amount of time is spent fighting crime (Fyfe, Greene, Walsh, Wilson and McLaren, 1997). Wroblewski and Hess (2000) say that officers spend around 90 percent of their time providing services. Cox and Wade (1998) report that police spend about 5 to 10 percent of their time dealing with matters related to crime. A lot of time is also spent doing administrative duties. Most police chiefs will tell you that they are reactive in nature and thus, although they have some effect on crime, they are not very effectual at reducing crime. Researchers and criminologists also know that there are many factors related to crime etiology like the economy and unemployment rates, or even characteristics such as the gender and age demography of the population have effects on crime that are beyond police control. As such, police have little to do with the cause and effect equation of crime. The addition of law enforcement officers therefore does not have the expected effects that are purported by the media and our political leaders.

As an example, take President Clinton's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. This act proposed 100,000 new police officers for the United States. The purpose of the act and the new officers was to prevent crime, punish criminals and restore a sense of safety to communities around the country. But if we break this bill down, we can see how maybe it would not have the impact that it was touted to. Because police work shift work and some of these new officers would be in administrative positions, this bill would only really put 20,000 new officers on the street at any given time. Consider also that there are 50 states in the union; this means that there would only be 400 new officers per state. In a state as big as Texas, how many of these new officers would be added to your community? As you can see, even adding 100,000 new police officers, is not going to result in much crime prevention.

This is also related to something called the law of diminishing returns. The law of diminishing returns is the idea that up to a certain point, additional police officers will have an effect on crime, however, after this point, the addition of each officer does not add much by way of effects on crime. In other words, adding two officers to a department with only ten officers may result in increased effectiveness, however, adding two officers to a department of 200 or 300, will result in little, if any, increased effect on crime fighting capabilities. Police, however, do play a major role in society and provide a great service to the victims of crime. Robinson (2005) states some of the services that the police provide for crime victims. These include: responding to calls for help, investigation of crimes, collection of evidence, capturing suspects and clearing crimes, and testifying against suspects in criminal court.

Managing international borders such as the US-Mexico Border provides a further challenge to law enforcement officials, thus making it difficult to deter crime on both sides of the border (Phillips and Panteri, 2004). Problems related to border management are multi-linked so that none can be solved individually without taking others into consideration. The majority of them are related to drugs and illegal immigration. Since these are federal issues, local law enforcement are further burdened with added responsibilities. This study looked at local crime statistics for Laredo/Webb County for the last 7 year period, as well as the numbers of local law enforcement officers for those years. This in an attempt to look at whether there is any relationships existing between these two phenomena.

If we look at FBI statistics from Table 1 below for index crimes for 2004 at both the national and local level, we see that Laredo has below average crime rates for some crimes such as forcible rape, robbery, burglary and motor vehicle theft. Laredo, however has higher than national average crime rates for the following crimes: murder, aggravated assault, and theft. These statistics, however, only reflect the seven index crimes that the FBI collects information on. Under this classification, crimes can be classified into two main categories, namely, violent crime, and property crime. A violent crime is classified by the FBI as murder, forcible rape, robbery, or aggravated assault. Burglaries, larceny thefts, and motor vehicle thefts are property crime.

Table 1: 2004 Crime Statistics: Laredo, Texas vs. National

Type	Laredo per 100,000 People	National per 100,000 People
Murders	8.7	6.9
Forcible Rapes	31	34.6
Robberies	119.1	195.4
Aggravated Assaults	351.5	340.1
Burglaries	751.4	814.5
Larceny Thefts	4818.6	2734.7
Motor Vehicle Thefts	463.3	526.5

Source: <http://laredo.areconnect.com/crime1.htm> on June 8, 2007

Figure 1: 2004 Crime Statistics: Laredo, Texas vs. National (1- Murders, 2-Forcible Rapes, 3-Robberies, 4-Aggravated Assaults, 5-Burglaries, 6-Larceny Thefts, and 7-Motor Vehicle Thefts)

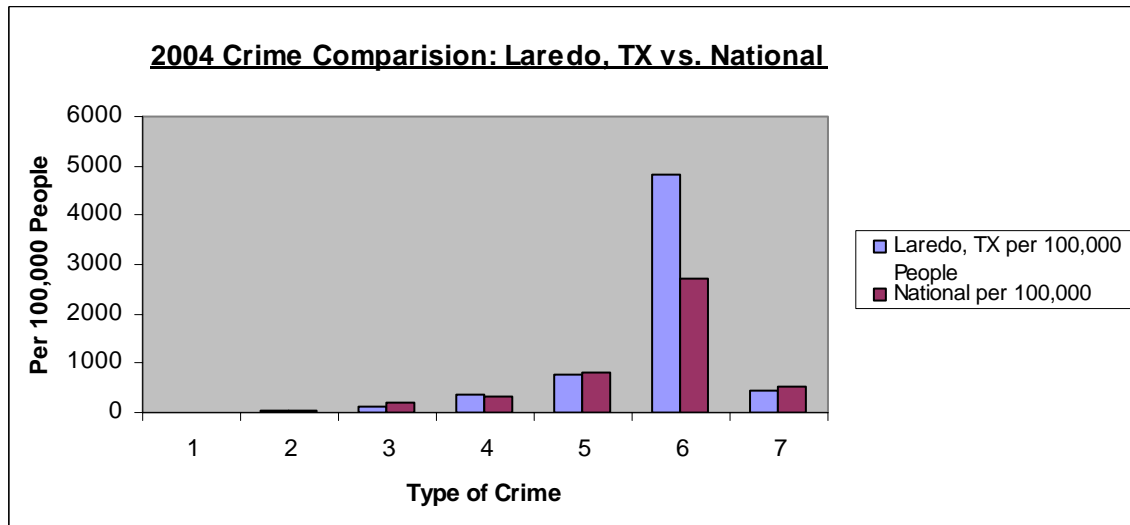


Figure 1 shows that larceny thefts are the biggest contributor for the crime statistics. This has exceeded the national average for Laredo, Texas in 2004.

Methodology, Procedures, and Analysis

The data for this study comes from three judicial districts in Laredo Texas: District 49, District 341, and District 406. The 49th District court was the first court established in Webb County. This court's jurisdiction includes both civil and criminal cases as well as tax lawsuits and narcotics cases, and the court has 5 deputy clerks who handle the matters of the court. District 341 was created in 1983 and handles both civil and criminal cases. This court has 3 deputy clerks handling its workload. The 406th District Court was established on January 1, 2001 and handles civil, criminal, and family law cases. In 2005, Oscar Hale took over as judge and agreed to hear some drug cases in order to balance out the workload of the other district courts. This court therefore now handles roughly one third of the felony cases in the area.

Data on cases coming before these three courts was collected from the Webb County Office of Court Administration. The cases for all three courts for the years 2000 through 2006 were compiled for the purposes of this report. Numbers of police officers by year were obtained from the Laredo Police Department. A bivariate correlation was run between the different types of crime and the numbers of officers on the force. These findings will serve as a basis to increase the awareness of the situation and as a preliminary analysis of the cases coming before these three area district courts. Dissemination of these findings may help to advise law enforcement agencies in planning effective law enforcement strategies. It will further create knowledge among those who are interested in the prevailing data.

Generally, undocumented migrants are unaware of the circumstances they face once they have landed in US cities. Marosi (2005) reported a record of 460 migrants' deaths along the US-Mexico Border. These deaths are primarily the result of heat-related illness. Some may also be subjected to violent victimization as they lose contacts with their smugglers. They can be easy prey for violent gangs and thus generally contribute in some ways to crime.

Preliminaries

Laredo/Webb County, Texas is located north of the historical Rio Grande River. The reason to focus on this city and the county is due to its peculiar geographical location. On one hand, it is the largest inland port for commercial goods and on the other it is one of the busiest border cities along the US-Mexico Border. The city has a large Hispanic population (98%). The findings from this study may also assist local authorities and could be the focus of other strategic implementation in other similar cities. Laredo, however, is also unique because it is the only city that operates international bridges between two Mexican states. The city maintains three border crossings with the Mexican state of Tamaulipas located at Nuevo Laredo, and one with the Mexican state of Nuevo León located at Colombia, and another one is in the beginning stages of after being built. A fourth bridge is currently being planned. The city of Laredo is the largest city in the county of Webb. Webb County borders the state of Nuevo Leon and the state of Coahuila, both in Mexico.

Figure 2: The Map for Laredo, Texas and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico



Univariate Statistics

There are many overlaps between the border crossing data collected by local and federal law enforcement agencies. In addition to classification of crime by the FBI, there are other crimes. Crime related to arson may also be considered violent and that related to drugs and driving under the influence (DWI) are considered public order offenses. Table 2 shows the numbers of offenses for the three Laredo district courts for the years 2000 to 2006.

Table 2: Crime Statistics: Laredo, Texas from 2000 to 2006

Year	Type of Crime												
	Capital Murder	Murder	Assault	Sexual Assault	Robbery	Burglary	Theft	Auto Theft	Arson	Drug Traffic	Drug Possession	DWI	Other Felony
2000	0	11	60	17	48	112	67	38	2	2	443	7	128
2001	0	9	56	30	28	81	52	39	0	0	485	8	110
2002	3	18	65	71	46	80	48	27	6	0	315	23	208
2003	0	7	82	87	40	70	82	26	2	0	602	16	227
2004	0	34	132	35	90	87	87	37	0	0	393	25	196
2005	0	32	76	37	41	67	63	35	2	0	287	21	180
2006	0	26	12	61	58	74	70	24	6	8	523	10	240

As can be seen in the above table, the numbers of crimes occurring in each year is idiosyncratic, in other words, there doesn't seem to be a pattern. Variations in crime from year to year could be reflective of a number of factors. These numbers can also be obtained from the authors for each specific crime type and in graphical format. These statistics are the first indication that possibly numbers of law enforcement officers are not related to variations in crime statistics. The numbers of Laredo police officers were continuing to increase throughout these years while crime was fluctuating up and down in no consistent pattern.

Bivariate Statistics

Table 3 below shows the correlation between the above crime statistics and the numbers of Laredo police officers for the years 2000 through 2006.

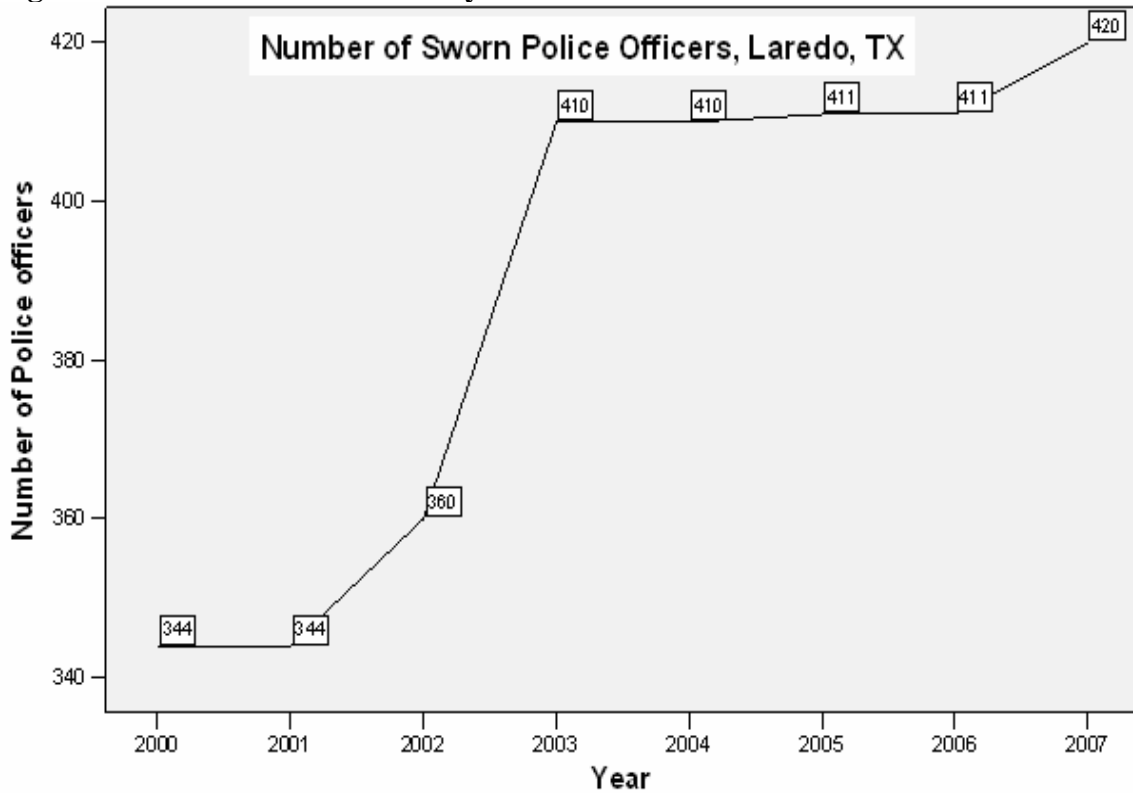
Table 3: Correlation between Number of Police Officers and the Type of Crime

Type of Crime	Type of Test	Number of Police Officers
Capital Murder	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.262 .265
Murder or Manslaughter	Sig. (2-tailed)	.109 .647
Assault of attempted murder	Sig. (2-tailed)	.097 .686
Sexual Assault of an Adult	Sig. (2-tailed)	.199 .401
Sexual Assault of a Child	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.052 .828
Robbery	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.095 .689
Burglary	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.523 .018
Theft	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.165 .487
Auto Theft	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.497 .026
Arson	Sig. (2-tailed)	.026 .912
Drug Trafficking of Manufacture	Sig. (2-tailed)	.144 .544
Drug Possession	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.175 .459
Felony DWI	Sig. (2-tailed)	-.083 .728

Table 3 also reveals that not many of the variables for the crime types are significantly correlated with the numbers of police officers. Two variables for crime type, burglary and auto theft are significantly correlated with the number of officers and both these relationships are negative. This means that as the number of officers goes up, the numbers of burglaries and auto thefts goes down as expected. All of the other variables for the different crime types have weak associations with the number of officers on the force.

The Laredo Police Department has in the last 6 years grown steadily in numbers ranging from 344 officers in the year 2000 to 420 officers in 2007. Figure 3 below graphs the number of sworn officers by year.

Figure 3: Laredo Police Officers by Year



The largest number of officers was added in between the years 2002 and 2003 where roughly 50 new officers joined the force. Since 2003, however, the number of sworn officers has remained relatively stable. It should be noted that the Laredo Police Department are not the only law enforcement agency in the city. In fact, in addition to the Laredo Police Department, some of the local and federal law enforcement agencies include: the Webb County Sheriff’s Office, Constables in different precincts, the FBI, the DEA, ICE, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the U.S. Marshals Service, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to name a few. Several of these agencies work together along the border region to combat terrorism, drug trafficking and human smuggling. Again, any correlations between the number of officers at the Laredo Police Department and crime in the Laredo area must be read with caution for the reasons listed in the introduction to this paper, but also because of the large number of other law enforcement agencies present in the area. The next step for this study is to obtain the numbers of officers for all agencies that have jurisdiction in the Laredo area. Although the federal agencies have jurisdiction only over violations of federal law, they often work in conjunction with local and state agencies in cases at various levels.

Conclusions

Although there is not a great correlation between the numbers of law enforcement officials and the number of crimes occurring in the area, law enforcement officers do play an important role in any community. Police perform valuable service roles as well as

maintaining the safety and security of the community. Police agencies and programs implemented to combat crime need to be well funded, have an accountability component, be measurable, achievable, and subject to constant review process. Sullivan and Weston (2006) report that the types of comprehensive programs that would meet these needs consists of legal framework, professional development of law enforcement staffs, technical measures, surveillance capability, asset tracing, witness protection schemes, system for handling persistent offenders, proactive use of informants/agents, and highly developed analytical techniques.

Dissemination of findings can be made available to the targeted audience that includes community leaders, law enforcement officials, local and state authorities, and general public in addition to its academic values. The acceptance of crime and denying that it exists can play in both directions. For example, escalation of crime can reduce the property values, people hesitate to move into a high crime area, and business is also affected. Some agencies do not want to admit the presence of a large amount of crime fearing that it will have a negative impression on the management of the city. It is easy to blame Laredo's sister city on the other side of the Rio Grande River. When a crime occurs, it will become a news item appearing in every newspaper and part of every radiocast in that locality. The use of technology plays a significant role in the crime fighting efforts. Innovative technology can help tremendously in curbing the crime and managing the necessary law enforcement activities (Kaza, 2005). As was pointed out, the security of our border and transportation systems is a critical component of the national strategy for homeland security. The information made available by local law enforcement agencies provide overwhelming and useful information in taking care of secured border and transportation infrastructure as the security-related concerns at the border will not be independent of law enforcement activities in the jurisdiction of border area. A combined analysis conducted using mutual information to identify suspicious vehicles and vehicles involved in criminal activities at the ports of entry (Kaza, 2005). These technologies are needed in order for law enforcement to better be able to prevent increased crime from occurring in the area. We must also, however, be cognizant that the occurrence of crime is due to a large number of factors that are beyond the control of the local community and law enforcement agencies. For instance, in times of economic downturn, crime will increase regardless of the numbers of law enforcement agents in a community. Police and other law enforcement agencies, however, do need to be well funded in order to perform services, and sometimes life saving duties that are part of their daily routine. Communities should also consider increasing opportunities for community outreach, request for increased welfare, and encourage application for unemployment compensation.

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