



West Texas

High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area

Drug Market Analysis 2009



NATIONAL DRUG INTELLIGENCE CENTER

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE





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This assessment is an outgrowth of a partnership between the NDIC and HIDTA Program for preparation of annual assessments depicting drug trafficking trends and developments in HIDTA Program areas. The report has been coordinated with the HIDTA, is limited in scope to HIDTA jurisdictional boundaries, and draws upon a wide variety of sources within those boundaries.



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Table of Contents

Preface..... 1

Strategic Drug Threat Developments..... 2

HIDTA Overview 2

Drug Threat Overview 3

Drug Trafficking Organizations 4

Production..... 7

Transportation 7

Distribution 9

Drug-Related Crime..... 12

Abuse 13

Illicit Finance 14

Outlook 15

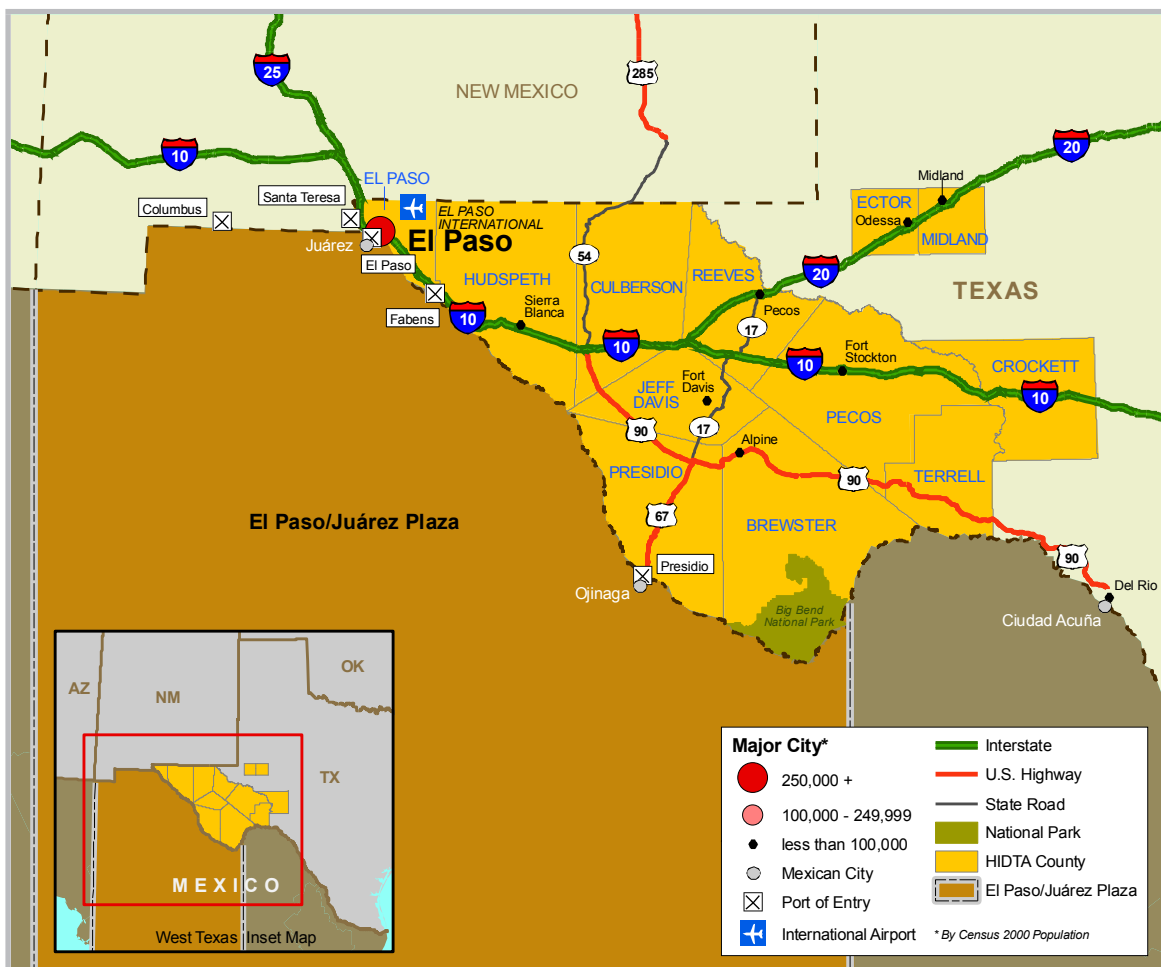
Sources..... 16

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Preface

This assessment provides a strategic overview of the illicit drug situation in the West Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), highlighting significant trends and law enforcement concerns related to the trafficking and abuse of illicit drugs. The report was prepared through detailed analysis of recent law enforcement reporting, information obtained through interviews with law enforcement and public health officials, and available statistical data. The report is designed to provide policymakers, resource planners, and law enforcement officials with a focused discussion of key drug issues and developments facing the West Texas HIDTA.

Figure 1. West Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area



Strategic Drug Threat Developments

- Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are the primary organizational threat to the West Texas HIDTA region. Mexican DTOs maintain sophisticated command-and-control centers in Mexico, where they exert nearly total control over drug smuggling operations in the region.
- Control of drug trafficking in the El Paso, Texas/Juárez, Mexico, plaza is currently in flux. The Juárez Cartel, Beltrán-Leyva Organization, and remnants of the Gulf Cartel (including Los Zetas) have been battling against the Joaquín Guzmán-Loera, Ismael Zambada-García, Juan José Esparragosa-Moreno, and Ignacio Coronel-Villareal Organizations for control of drug trafficking in the plaza; none of these organizations has been able to establish dominance.
- The disruption of the Barrio Azteca through the arrests and convictions of several key members has allowed other gangs, such as the Crips and Latin Kings, to increase their drug trafficking activities in the HIDTA region.
- Seizures of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine have decreased in the HIDTA region over the past 3 years, most likely the result of increased enforcement efforts in Mexico and the ongoing conflict between cartels in the El Paso/Juárez plaza and increased, coordinated law enforcement “surge” operations along the border.
- The West Texas HIDTA region is a source area for weapons smuggled into Mexico. Mexican DTOs and their associated enforcement groups generally rely on firearms smuggled from the United States into Mexico for their enforcement operations.

HIDTA Overview

The West Texas HIDTA region lies along a 520-mile section of the U.S.–Mexico border in Southwest Texas and encompasses 12 counties. (See [Figure 1 on page 1.](#)) The HIDTA region is used by Mexican DTOs as a principal smuggling corridor and staging area for drug transportation to markets in San Francisco, California; Denver, Colorado; Atlanta, Georgia; Miami, Florida; Chicago, Illinois; New York, New York; Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston, Texas; St. Louis, Missouri; Indianapolis, Indiana; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and many other major U.S. cities. The increasingly violent struggle among Mexican DTOs for control of drug smuggling as well as between these DTOs and Mexican military and law enforcement in the El Paso /Juárez plaza substantiates the West Texas HIDTA region’s strategic importance to Mexican traffickers. Moreover, the region’s location along the U.S.–Mexico border poses national security and law enforcement issues for the region, such as alien smuggling, weapons transportation, and terrorist entry into the United States through and between ports of entry (POEs).

Most drugs smuggled into and through the region pass through the El Paso/Juárez plaza, a major drug smuggling corridor that extends from the “boot heel” of New Mexico to the eastern boundary of Big Bend National Park and includes the El Paso, Fabens, and Presidio POEs in Texas and the Columbus and Santa Teresa POEs in New Mexico. Mexican DTOs use El Paso, the most populous metropolitan area in West Texas, as a principal staging area, transshipment point, and distribution center for illicit drugs destined for drug markets throughout the nation. El Paso is located on Interstate 10, a major drug trafficking route that links the HIDTA region to many national-level drug markets, generally through connections to I-20 and I-25.

Mexican DTOs exploit the robust, legitimate, cross-border economic activity and social interaction between El Paso and its sister city, Ciudad Juárez. On a smaller scale, they also exploit locations between Presidio and Ciudad Ojinaga, Mexico, to conduct their smuggling activities. The thriving *maquiladora* industry¹ is a major contributor to increased cross-border pedestrian, passenger vehicle, and commercial truck traffic—more than 200,000 U.S. and Mexican citizens traverse the border daily between these sister cities—creating ideal conditions for smuggling illicit drugs into the United States and returning drug proceeds to Mexico. Moreover, DTOs frequently arrange their smuggling activities to coincide with periods of high traffic, reducing the likelihood that their vehicles will be inspected. Mexican DTOs also use the sparsely populated, arid desert and semiarid mountains and canyons of the West Texas HIDTA region as well as numerous low-level water crossings along the Rio Grande River to conceal their smuggling activities. Big Bend National Park, which encompasses over 800,000 acres along the U.S.–Mexico border in West Texas, is exploited by these traffickers, who take advantage of the remote areas and limited law enforcement presence in the park to smuggle drugs into the HIDTA region.

Drug Threat Overview

The smuggling and transshipment of multi-ton quantities of marijuana and multikilogram quantities of powder cocaine are the principal drug problems in the West Texas HIDTA region. According to NDIC National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS) 2009 data, of the six responding law enforcement agencies in the West Texas HIDTA, four agencies report that powder cocaine was the greatest drug threat; the other agencies report marijuana and heroin as their greatest drug

threats.² Most responding agencies also report that powder cocaine and marijuana availability were high in their areas. (See Table 1 on page 4.) Cocaine and marijuana smuggled through the HIDTA region are distributed in drug markets throughout the country. The amount of cocaine smuggled through and from the HIDTA region decreased from 2006 to 2008. This decrease could be caused by increased violence in the El Paso/Juárez plaza; large cocaine seizures in transit from South America; violent conflicts between competing Mexican DTOs as well as between DTOs and Mexican military and law enforcement personnel; increasing seizures in Mexico; and increased smuggling of the drug to Europe. Another factor is the increased law enforcement “surge” operations conducted by HIDTA area law enforcement. The “surge” operations are coordinated between all federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies by flooding specific zones with extra law enforcement personnel in order to disrupt DTO activities. The amount of marijuana transported through and distributed from the HIDTA region decreased from 2006 to 2008. As with cocaine, this decrease is most likely the result of increased violence in the El Paso/Juárez plaza and increased counterdrug operations in the United States and Mexico.

Heroin, methamphetamine, other dangerous drugs (ODDs), controlled prescription drugs (CPDs), and precursor chemicals are also smuggled into and transshipped from the West Texas HIDTA region; however, the quantities seized in this region are well below those seized in other areas along the Southwest Border. According to NDIC NDTS 2009 data, most responding agencies

1. *Maquiladoras* are factories that obtain duty-free materials and components from foreign suppliers, including U.S. suppliers, and use them to manufacture finished products, such as textiles, in Mexico and return the products to the foreign suppliers.

2. National Drug Threat Survey (NDTS) data for 2009 cited in this report are as of February 12, 2009. NDTS data cited are raw, unweighted responses from federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies solicited through either the National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) or the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) program. Data cited may include responses from agencies that are part of the NDTS 2009 national sample and/or agencies that are part of HIDTA solicitation lists.

Table 1. Drug Availability in the West Texas HIDTA, National Drug Threat Survey 2009

Agency	Cocaine		Heroin	Methamphetamine		Marijuana	MDMA	GHB	LSD	PCP	CPDs
	Powder	Crack		Powder	Ice						
Ector County Sheriff's Office	High	High	High	Low	Moderate	High	Low	NA	NA	NA	Low
El Paso County Sheriff's Office	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	Low	High	Low	Low	NA	NA	Low
El Paso Police Department	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low	NA	High	Low	Low	NA	NA	Low
Midland County Sheriff's Office	High	High	High	Moderate	Low	High	Low	Low	Low	NA	High
Midland Police Department	High	High	Moderate	High	Moderate	High	Moderate	Low	Low	NA	High
Pecos Police Department	High	Low	High	Low	Low	NA	NA	High	NA	NA	High

Source: National Drug Threat Survey 2009.

report that methamphetamine availability was low to moderate and ODDs' availability (which includes MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as ecstasy), GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyrate), LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide), and PCP (phencyclidine)) was low to not available in their areas. Three of the responding agencies report that CPD availability was low, while the other three report that availability was high. (See Table 1.) A decrease in heroin trafficking to and from the HIDTA region from 2006 through 2008 could be attributed to the same pressures that affect marijuana and cocaine smuggling and to an increase in seizures of the drug in Mexico. Methamphetamine seizures in the HIDTA region decreased overall from 2006 through 2008, indicating a decreased flow of the drug from Mexico into the region that can be attributed to stronger precursor chemical control regulations and increased drug interdiction efforts in Mexico. The availability of all other drugs appears to have remained consistent with 2007 smuggling trends.

Drug production in the West Texas HIDTA region is limited because of the ready supply of drugs smuggled from Mexico. Powder methamphetamine production is limited in West Texas because of a lack of demand for

the drug in most areas of the HIDTA region; however, methamphetamine laboratories were found in 2008. Indoor cannabis grows are virtually nonexistent in the region. Large, outdoor cannabis grows have previously been seized in Big Bend National Park; however, no large grows have been seized there since 2003.

Illicit drug abuse in the West Texas HIDTA region takes place primarily in Ector, El Paso, and Midland Counties (the HIDTA region's population centers). The scattered and sparse population in areas outside El Paso precludes collection of accurate information pertaining to drug abuse in other counties of the HIDTA region. Drug-related admissions in the HIDTA region decreased for all drugs except marijuana/hashish from 2006 to 2008, with the majority of admissions for powder cocaine and heroin abuse.

Drug Trafficking Organizations

Mexican DTOs are the primary organizational threat to the region. Maintaining sophisticated command-and-control centers in Mexico, they exert nearly total control over drug trafficking operations through the El Paso/Juárez plaza.

Table 2. Drug and Money Laundering Organizations Operating in the West Texas HIDTA Region*

Scope of Organization	Number of Organizations			Race/Ethnicity/Nationality of Organizations	Size of Organizations	Drugs Trafficked
	Drug	Money Laundering	Total			
International	7	7	14	Colombian, Mexican, and multiethnic	50-400 members	cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine
Multistate	124	14	138	African American, Caucasian, Colombian, Mexican, and multiethnic	5-200 members	cocaine, heroin, marijuana, methamphetamine, and PCP
Local	97	5	102	Caucasian, Mexican, and multiethnic	5-30 members	cocaine, heroin, and marijuana

Source: West Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.

*Data as of November 21, 2008.

Drug Trafficking Organizations, Criminal Groups, and Gangs

Drug trafficking organizations are complex organizations with highly defined command-and-control structures that produce, transport, and/or distribute large quantities of one or more illicit drugs.

Criminal groups operating in the United States are numerous and range from small to moderately sized, loosely knit groups that distribute one or more drugs at the retail level and midlevel.

Gangs are defined by the National Alliance of Gang Investigators' Associations as groups or associations of three or more persons with a common identifying sign, symbol, or name, the members of which individually or collectively engage in criminal activity that creates an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

According to the West Texas HIDTA, 14 international organizations conduct drug trafficking and money laundering activities in the HIDTA region. (See Table 2.) Most of these are Mexican organizations and include the Vicente Carrillo-Fuentes (VCFO) (Juárez Cartel), and the Armando Corral-Herrera, Ismael Zambada-García, Juan José Esparragosa-Moreno, Joaquín Guzmán-Loera Organizations. Mexican DTOs compart-

mentalize their organizations in order to insulate themselves from law enforcement. Contributing to the magnitude of this threat is the ease with which Mexican DTOs adapt to law enforcement efforts to detect and dismantle their operations. They also use violence and intimidation to deter law enforcement authorities, control organization members, and secure smuggling territories. These DTOs reportedly use their own financial resources and those of corrupt Mexican businessmen to conduct their trafficking activities. Additionally, these DTOs have enlisted corrupt law enforcement officials in Mexico and, to a lesser extent, in the United States to assist in their drug trafficking operations.

DTOs operating within the West Texas HIDTA region use numerous advanced communication techniques in order to facilitate drug smuggling across the Southwest Border. Traffickers commonly use prepaid cell phones, satellite phones, and two-way radios, which are often seized by law enforcement during investigations, to communicate with each other during trafficking operations. For example, an organization operating in the El Paso/Juárez plaza uses a sophisticated system of two-way radios and satellite phones to facilitate the smuggling of ton quantities of marijuana into the HIDTA region. Traffickers often change communication devices in order to avoid law enforcement detection. For instance, they frequently discontinue cell phone

Joint Operation Chihuahua

Joint Operation Chihuahua began in March 2008 in response to increased drug-related violence resulting from the battles for control of drug smuggling plazas between the Juárez and Sinaloa cartels. More than 3,500 soldiers and 2,000 federal agents have been deployed to Chihuahua; operations have been concentrated in the municipalities of Ascensión, Buenaventura, Casas Grandes, Chihuahua (in which the city of Juárez is located), Janos, Nuevo Casas Grandes, and Ojinaga.

service and start over with a new phone and phone number. Additionally, traffickers use numerous communication devices during a single transaction in order to avoid detection by authorities.

Control of drug trafficking in the El Paso/Juárez plaza is currently in flux. The Juárez Cartel, Beltrán-Leyva Organization, and remnants of the Gulf Cartel (including Los Zetas) have been battling against the Joaquín Guzmán-Loera, Ismael Zambada-García, Juan José Esparragosa-Moreno, and Ignacio Coronel-Villareal a.k.a. Nacho Coronel DTOs for control of drug trafficking in the plaza; none of these organizations has been able to establish dominance. The increased violence related to this struggle has had an impact on drug flow, particularly the flow of cocaine, from Mexico into the HIDTA region. Furthermore, since January 2008 these cartels have been engaged in violence, not only against each other, but also against the increased Mexican military and law enforcement presence in Juárez.

Mexican DTOs in the region are battling with Mexican law enforcement as a result of increased Mexican counterdrug operations such as Joint Operation Chihuahua. (See text box.) Some DTOs have consolidated or formed alliances to combat law enforcement and military operations in Mexico. The level of violence against Mexican law enforcement officers and military personnel in areas of

Mexico adjacent to the West Texas HIDTA region is high. In fact, in 2008 at least 1,475 drug-related murders took place in the Juárez area; 67 were Mexican law enforcement officers.

Mexican DTOs have strengthened their control over drug trafficking operations in the region through working alliances with prison gangs,³ street gangs, and outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMGs) to transport, stash, and package illicit drugs and to assist in money laundering activities. Mexican DTOs have taken advantage of the established organizational networks of these gangs to distribute drugs in the area. Barrio Azteca (BA), a prison gang, is the primary gang operating in

Barrio Azteca Trial Reveals Details of the Gang's Operations

On December 2, 2008, six leaders and associates of the Barrio Azteca gang were convicted of Racketeering Influence Corrupt Organizations (RICO) charges, among other charges in federal court. Testimony during the trial revealed that the Barrio Azteca gang facilitated criminal racketeering, drug trafficking, and money laundering activities in the El Paso and Juárez areas through threats of force, intimidation, assault, and murder since the organization's inception in 1986. Furthermore, testimony of gang members revealed that high-ranking members in prison communicated orders to members on the street through letters written in code in a mixture of English, Spanish, and Nahuatl (a language of the Aztecs, spoken mainly in central Mexico) to hide the meaning of the letters from law enforcement officers. Barrio Azteca members also extorted street gang members by "taxing" their drug sales and providing the funds to high-ranking members in prison or in Juárez.

Source: Federal Bureau of Investigation El Paso Field Office; U.S. Attorney Western District of Texas.

3. Prison gangs operate within state correctional facilities located in the West Texas HIDTA and on the streets, particularly in El Paso.

the HIDTA region and is aligned with the VCFO. Other gangs such as the Mexicles and Sureños have increased their presence in the area at the behest of the Sinaloa Cartel. Other street gangs such as Bloods, Crips, Folk Nation, and Latin Kings as well as OMGs such as Bandidos are also active in the area. BA's organizational structure is currently in flux since several of their key leaders were arrested and convicted in 2008. (See text box on page 6.) Also, the Sinaloa Cartel has been murdering many BA members in Juárez in an attempt to convince them to change their allegiance from the VCFO. These events disrupted their drug trafficking activities, and the gang is attempting to restructure its organization. Because of the disruption of BA, other gangs, such as Crips and Latin Kings, are increasing their drug trafficking activities in the HIDTA region.

Other organizations operating in the West Texas HIDTA region include African American, Caucasian, and Colombian DTOs and criminal groups. According to the West Texas HIDTA, 124 multistate and 97 local DTOs conduct drug trafficking activities in the area.⁴ (See Table 2 on page 5.) African American DTOs and criminal groups transport and distribute PCP from California and participate in money laundering activities.

Production

Drug production in the HIDTA region is limited because of the ready supply of drugs smuggled into the area from Mexico by Mexican traffickers. Powder methamphetamine production is limited in West Texas because of a lack of demand for the

4. Multistate drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) are organizations or groups of 5 to 15 individuals who operate in the United States and Mexico. These DTOs typically operate outside the Southwest Border area and assist other DTOs in drug trafficking and money laundering activities; however, they usually specialize in one type of activity, such as transportation of drugs through checkpoints. Local DTOs are organizations of 5 to 12 individuals who operate in the United States and Mexico. They generally operate within the Southwest Border area and assist larger DTOs in various drug trafficking and money laundering activities.

drug in most areas of the HIDTA region; moreover, available supplies of Mexican methamphetamine satiate local demand. According to NDIC NDTs 2009 data, five of the six responding agencies report that the level of methamphetamine production was low in their jurisdiction. According to the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC) National Seizure System (NSS), only 10 methamphetamine laboratories were seized from 2006 through 2008; all were located in Ector (8), El Paso (1), and Midland (1) counties. Only small amounts of methamphetamine were produced at seized laboratories, and most of the drug was intended for personal use by the laboratory operators or for distribution in small networks.

Cannabis cultivation, both indoor and outdoor, is limited in the West Texas HIDTA region as a result of the wide availability of Mexican marijuana. According to NDIC NDTs 2009 data, five of the six responding agencies report that cannabis is not cultivated in their areas. Indoor cannabis grows are virtually nonexistent in the region. The terrain in West Texas is not conducive to outdoor cannabis cultivation, except along the Rio Grande River in Big Bend National Park. Large outdoor cannabis grows have previously been seized in Big Bend National Park; however, no large grows have been seized there since 2003.

Transportation

Mexican DTOs smuggle multiton shipments of marijuana and multikilogram quantities of cocaine into the West Texas HIDTA region for transshipment to drug markets throughout the United States; some is distributed in the region. Mexican DTOs also smuggle heroin and methamphetamine into and through the area, but to a much lesser extent. Marijuana, methamphetamine, and heroin are generally transported from production sites in Mexico to warehouses and stash houses on the Mexico side of the U.S.–Mexico border for staging prior to being smuggled into the United States. Cocaine, which is obtained by Mexican DTOs

from Colombian DTOs in South America, is transported through Mexico to these same staging areas. The Mexican DTOs that transport illicit drugs to staging areas in Mexico typically contract with other Mexican organizations to transport the drugs from the staging areas into the West Texas HIDTA region, where the drugs typically are consolidated and stored in stash houses for later transportation to drug markets throughout the United States. Mexican DTOs commonly employ independent transportation brokers to facilitate the movement of drug shipments across the U.S.–Mexico border and into and through the West Texas HIDTA region. These brokers help to further insulate DTOs from law enforcement.

Gatekeepers⁵ regulate the drug flow from Mexico across the U.S.–Mexico border into the United States by controlling drug smugglers' access to areas along the border. Gatekeepers collect “taxes” from smugglers on all illicit shipments, including drugs and illegal aliens, moved through these areas. The taxes are generally paid to the DTO that controls the area; the DTO then launders the tax proceeds. Gatekeepers sometimes resort to extortion, intimidation, and acts of violence to collect taxes from smugglers. Gatekeepers also reportedly bribe corrupt Mexican police and military personnel in order to ensure that smuggling activities can proceed without interruption.

The West Texas HIDTA region's geographic location, large amount of cross-border traffic, and highway infrastructure make it a significant entry point for drugs along the Southwest Border. The West Texas HIDTA region is located in the center of the Southwest Border, making it accessible to eastern and western markets through its highway infrastructure. Further, the El Paso, Fabens, and Presidio POEs are located in the re-

gion. These POEs, particularly the El Paso POE (the second-busiest for commercial traffic after Laredo), are extensively used by traffickers to smuggle drug shipments into the HIDTA region. Traffickers use private and commercial vehicles and couriers on foot to transport drug shipments into the United States.

Transportation and Concealment Methods Used by Traffickers at POEs in the West Texas HIDTA Region

Drug traffickers use various methods to smuggle illicit drugs into the West Texas HIDTA region from Mexico; however, most illicit drugs are transported by land conveyances through POEs. Following are some examples of drug seizures that demonstrate the methods that traffickers use to conceal and transport illicit drugs into the HIDTA region:

- U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers seized 30 pounds of cocaine and 22 pounds of marijuana from a secret compartment in a pick-up truck driven by a 60-year-old man at the El Paso POE, Ysleta crossing (September 2008).
- CBP officers seized 7,000 pounds of marijuana commingled with a coffee shipment in a tractor-trailer at the El Paso POE, Bridge of the Americas (BOTA) commercial cargo crossing (October 2008).
- CBP officers seized over 6 pounds of marijuana that was packaged in bundles and taped to the legs and midsection of a pedestrian at the El Paso POE, Paso del Norte crossing (October 2008).
- CBP officers seized 265 pounds of marijuana that was concealed in the fuel tanks of a tractor-trailer at the El Paso POE, Ysleta crossing (December 2008).

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

5. Gatekeepers are smuggling organizations that oversee the transportation of drugs into the United States from Mexico. Gatekeepers generally operate at the behest of a Mexican DTO and enforce the will of the organization through bribery, intimidation, extortion, beatings, and murder.

They also use various concealment methods, including commingling the drugs with legitimate cargo; secreting drugs in hidden compartments; and/or hiding drugs in luggage, purses, or other personal items to transport illicit drugs through POEs in the HIDTA region. (See text box on page 8.) Additionally, the geographic layout of highways and checkpoints gives traffickers more options to move their drug shipments undetected, unlike some other areas of the border. For example, the Kingsville/Sarita checkpoint on U.S. Highway 77 and the Falfurrias checkpoint on US 281 in south Texas are strategically located to funnel all northbound traffic entering the United States from approximately Roma to Brownsville, making it difficult for traffickers to bypass these checkpoints. Conversely, the Sierra Blanca checkpoint on I-10 in the HIDTA region is less effective at funneling drug shipments coming across the border to one area, giving traffickers numerous other possible routes to transport their shipments.

Mexican DTOs also transport illicit drugs, primarily marijuana, between POEs, particularly in the eastern portion of the West Texas HIDTA region, but to a lesser extent. Drug traffickers take advantage of the sparse population, relatively open border, and rugged terrain to conceal their drug smuggling activities. Couriers smuggle significant quantities of illicit drugs into the area at numerous low-water crossings, using vehicles, horses, and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). They also cross on foot. The number and remoteness of the crossings make it difficult for law enforcement agencies to effectively monitor these activities.

In addition to overland smuggling, Mexican DTOs use private aircraft to smuggle illicit drugs into the area, but to a much lesser extent than land conveyance methods. The financial resources of Mexican DTOs and their ability to adapt their trafficking operations to avoid law enforcement detection render this mode of transportation a potentially significant vulnerability for the West Texas HIDTA region. Dirt roads, dry lake beds,

and other flat terrain on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border are particularly useful to traffickers as makeshift landing strips. Traffickers use makeshift strips in northern Mexico to offload and store illicit drugs near the border pending transportation into the region; they also use strips on the U.S. side of the border to fly directly into the HIDTA region, employing low-level flights to avoid radar detection.⁶

Big Bend National Park, which shares a 118-mile-long border with Mexico, is vulnerable to drug and alien smuggling. As with other areas between POEs along the U.S.–Mexico border in West Texas, limited law enforcement presence and rugged terrain make the park conducive to smuggling activities. National Park Service (NPS) officials report that Mexican DTOs commonly transport large shipments of drugs, primarily marijuana, through the park. In 2002 CBP closed the Boquillas Crossing in Big Bend National Park. Currently, no official POEs exist along the park's border with Mexico; however, many areas along the Rio Grande River are routinely traversed by traffickers and illegal aliens. Smuggling activities in this area also pose a potential threat to park visitors, particularly those who inadvertently encounter a smuggling operation in progress.

Distribution

Illicit drugs smuggled from Mexico into the West Texas HIDTA region are typically transported to stash houses in El Paso or Midland/Odessa, where the drugs are consolidated, repackaged, and transshipped to drug markets nationwide. El Paso is the primary transshipment point for drugs smuggled into the western half of the

6. The Air and Marine Interdiction Coordination Center (AMICC), which uses radar to track aircraft approaching the U.S.–Mexico border, reports that aircraft often fade from radar near the border and appear to land at airports, airfields, and remote locations in Mexico. Many “fades” are indicative of traffickers’ moving drugs to locations near the border and offloading the shipments overland into the United States.

Table 3. Drug Seizures in Mexico, in Kilograms, * 2005–2007

Drug	Year				
	2005	2006	Percent Change 2005-2006	2007	Percent Change 2006-2007
Cocaine	30,000	21,000	-30	48,000	129
Heroin	459	351	-24	298	-15
Marijuana	1,786,000	1,849,000	4	2,174,000	18
Methamphetamine	979	621	-37	899	45

Source: Mexico Attorney General's Office (PGR) National Center for Analysis, Planning and Intelligence Against Organized Crime statistics as reported in the Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *2008 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*.

*Data are as of October 25, 2007, and are the latest information available.

HIDTA region, while Midland/Odessa is the principal transshipment point for drugs smuggled into the eastern half of the HIDTA region. These transshipment points are used by Mexican DTOs to supply significant market areas—particularly the southeastern United States, including Atlanta, as well as other midwestern and central U.S. markets such as Chicago, Dallas/Fort Worth, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Denver. Most drug shipments are transported from the HIDTA region to these distribution centers over interstate and secondary highways. Because Mexican DTOs generally use stash houses in the HIDTA region to store illicit drugs prior to shipment, the investigation and dismantlement of such locations are a major focus of law enforcement in the area. The West Texas HIDTA Stash House Initiative, which targets stash houses in the El Paso area, has been very successful since its inception in 1999. In 2008 the Stash House Initiative resulted in the seizure of 23,919 pounds of marijuana, 86.219 kilograms of cocaine, and \$418,039 in U.S. currency.

Seizures of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine have decreased in the HIDTA region over the past 3 years, most likely the result of increased enforcement efforts in Mexico and the United States and the ongoing conflict between cartels in the El Paso/Juárez plaza. The government of Mexico (GOM) increased the number of military personnel in the state of Chihuahua; this increase likely has resulted in seizures of

drug shipments before they reach the Southwest Border. (See Table 3 above and text box on page 8.) Moreover, increased law enforcement operations in the areas of the HIDTA region along the Southwest Border have caused traffickers to adjust their smuggling routes, likely displacing them to other parts of the border area outside the HIDTA region. Furthermore, the decrease in drug seizures can also be attributed to the intense conflict between DTOs in the El Paso/Juárez plaza. Traffickers are smuggling fewer drug shipments through the plaza because they fear that they will be “ripped off” by rival organizations.

The amount of marijuana transported into and through as well as distributed from the HIDTA region is decreasing. According to West Texas HIDTA data, the amount of marijuana seized by law enforcement in West Texas HIDTA counties decreased 23 percent from 2006 through 2008. (See Table 4 on page 11.) Law enforcement reporting also indicates that marijuana seizures have decreased in frequency and size in 2008. Despite lower marijuana seizure totals within the HIDTA region, the El Paso POE remained the primary POE for marijuana seizures along the Southwest Border in 2007 and 2008. Additionally, the HIDTA Stash House Unit continues to seize large quantities of the drug at stash houses in the region. For example, in October 2008 officers seized 2,452 pounds of marijuana from two vehicles at a local stash house.

Table 4. Drug Seizures in the West Texas HIDTA Region, in Kilograms, 2006–2008

Drug	Year			Percent Change 2006-2008
	2006	2007	2008	
Cocaine	3,135	1,143	506	-84
Heroin	101	19	30	-70
Marijuana	173,958	131,953	134,179	-23
Methamphetamine	150	9	8	-95
Total (4 Drugs)	117,344	133,124	134,723	-24

Source: West Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.

*Seizures reported by the West Texas HIDTA include federal, state, and local drug seizures.

The amount of cocaine smuggled into and through as well as distributed from the HIDTA region has decreased. According to HIDTA data, the amount of cocaine seized by law enforcement in HIDTA counties decreased 84 percent from 2006 through 2008. (See Table 4.) This decrease reflects an overall trend in cocaine seizures along the Southwest Border and reduced availability of the drug in some domestic markets. Cocaine shortages in these markets are attributed to large cocaine seizures in transit from South America, law enforcement efforts against prominent Mexican DTOs, violent conflicts among competing Mexican DTOs as well as DTOs and Mexican military and law enforcement personnel, increasing seizures in Mexico, and increased smuggling of the drug to Europe. Additionally, the decrease in cocaine seizures within the HIDTA region can also more specifically be attributed to the ongoing struggle for control in the El Paso/Juárez plaza. DTOs are more reluctant to smuggle cocaine through the plaza because of the drug's value and the potential financial loss to the organization.

The amount of heroin seized in the HIDTA region decreased from 2006 through 2008. According to West Texas HIDTA data, heroin seizures decreased 70 percent overall during this time. (See Table 4.) The decrease in heroin seizures within the HIDTA can most likely be attributed to the intense conflict between

DTOs operating in the El Paso/Juárez plaza. This conflict has caused the DTOs' organizational infrastructure and smuggling operations to be disrupted. For example, the faction of the BA located in Juárez (which smuggles drugs and provides enforcement for the Juárez Cartel) has been greatly disrupted by the ongoing battle for control in the plaza, impacting its ability to smuggle drugs into the HIDTA region.

Methamphetamine seizures in the West Texas HIDTA region decreased from 2006 through 2008, indicating a decreased flow of the drug from Mexico into the region. According to HIDTA data, methamphetamine seizures decreased 95 percent from 2006 to 2008. (See Table 4.) The GOM strengthened precursor chemical control regulations and increased drug interdiction efforts, actions that most likely resulted in a decreased flow of methamphetamine through the HIDTA region.⁷ Despite this decrease, the Presidio area could see an increase in methamphetamine seizures in the near future. Law enforcement reporting indicates that the activities of a prominent methamphetamine DTO have been observed in the Presidio and Ojinaga areas, suggesting the possibility of increased methamphetamine smuggling into the eastern portion of the HIDTA region in 2009.

7. The government of Mexico (GOM) banned all imports of pseudoephedrine and ephedrine in January 2008. Sellers of pseudoephedrine products must deplete their remaining supplies by January 2009, after which the use of these precursors will be illegal in Mexico.

Retail drug distribution in the area is greatly overshadowed by wholesale drug transshipment; however, retail distribution does take place and is often associated with violent and property crime. Most retail distribution in the HIDTA region takes place in El Paso, Midland, and Odessa (the HIDTA region's largest population centers). Limited retail distribution occurs in various locations, including private residences, parking lots, and nightclubs. Powder and crack cocaine, marijuana, and heroin are the primary drugs distributed at the retail level; methamphetamine is available in limited quantities.

Local independent distributors, street gangs, and prison gangs are the primary retail-level drug distributors operating in the HIDTA region. According to law enforcement reporting, 500 street gangs and 20 prison gangs are involved to varying degrees in retail drug distribution. NDIC NDTS 2009 data indicate that five of the six responding agencies report that the level of involvement of street gangs in drug distribution is high, while three of the six agencies report that the level of involvement of OMGs in drug distribution is high. For instance, BA controls cocaine, heroin, and marijuana distribution in El Paso. Because of its connections to Mexican DTOs operating in the El Paso/Juárez plaza, BA has a direct source of supply for heroin and other illicit drugs. However, the gang's activities have been limited as a result of a "safe zone" injunction initiated in 2003 that prohibits its members from being on the street after dark as well as the arrests and indictments of several key members in 2008.

Drug-Related Crime

Violent crime in the West Texas HIDTA region is largely the result of large-scale drug trafficking through the region. NDIC NDTS 2009 data indicate that powder and crack cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamine contribute most to violent crime in the West Texas HIDTA. Mexican DTOs operating in the West Texas HIDTA region are

violent, powerful, well-financed organizations. These DTOs have intelligence, weaponry, and communication capabilities that they use against each other as well as against U.S. law enforcement. The capabilities and violent tendencies of these sophisticated organizations are a significant challenge for law enforcement officials at the U.S.–Mexico border in West Texas, particularly since the resources of Mexican DTOs often surpass those of law enforcement. Violence in Juárez has increased substantially since the beginning of 2007. This violence has extended into the HIDTA region when traffickers felt pressure from U.S. law enforcement. For example, a number of armed encounters between Mexican traffickers and U.S. law enforcement personnel occurred on the U.S. side of the border in 2006. On two separate occasions, heavily armed units of traffickers appeared on the banks of the Rio Grande River east of El Paso during smuggling attempts, preventing law enforcement officers from pursuing couriers, who fled across the border into Mexico. Although these confrontations did not escalate into violent shootouts, U.S. law enforcement officers were prevented from apprehending drug couriers because of the manpower and cache of weapons possessed by Mexican traffickers.

The West Texas HIDTA region is a source area for weapons smuggled into Mexico. Mexican DTOs and their associated enforcement groups generally rely on firearms smuggled from the United States into Mexico as a source of weapons for their enforcement operations. Drug traffickers, firearms smugglers, and independent criminals smuggle firearms and ammunition from the HIDTA region to Mexico on behalf of Mexican DTOs and criminal groups that use these weapons to defend territory, eliminate rivals, enforce business dealings, control members, and challenge law enforcement. For example, in December 2008, a Mexican national from Juárez and a U.S. citizen from El Paso were sentenced to federal prison on weapons trafficking charges.

Table 5. Number of Adult Drug-Related Treatment Admissions to Publicly Funded Facilities in the West Texas HIDTA Region, 2006–2008

County	Powder Cocaine			Crack Cocaine			Heroin			Marijuana/Hashish			Amphetamines		
	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008
Brewster	*	*	0	*	*	0	*	0	0	10	*	*	*	*	*
Crockett	*	*	0	*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	*	*	*	0
Culberson	11	12	20	*	*	*	*	*	*	11	10	*	0	*	0
Ector	44	37	22	77	89	66	54	72	56	*	11	*	44	36	30
El Paso	474	391	401	269	194	201	347	344	364	156	176	200	49	35	30
Hudspeth	*	0	0	0	0	0	0	*	0	0	0	*	0	0	0
Jeff Davis	0	*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Midland	30	27	23	73	63	65	17	29	20	12	28	17	18	11	15
Pecos	*	10	*	*	0	*	*	*	*	0	0	0	0	0	0
Presidio	*	*	*	0	0	0	0	*	*	0	*	*	0	0	0
Reeves	*	*	0	0	*	*	39	11	*	*	0	0	0	0	0
Terrell	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
West Texas HIDTA**	559	477	466	419	346	332	457	456	440	189	225	217	111	82	75

Source: Texas Department of State Health Services.

*As a result of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act confidentiality requirements, treatment admissions with a frequency of less than 10 cannot be reported.

**West Texas HIDTA region totals have omitted admissions in any category with a frequency less than 10; therefore, totals are slightly higher than those represented.

The individuals participated in a straw purchasing scheme from May 2007 to March 2008, during which they purchased over 98 firearms from licensed gun dealers in El Paso and then smuggled the firearms to Mexico for buyers who could not legally obtain them in the United States. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) estimates that thousands of weapons are smuggled into Mexico every year. Firearms are typically purchased or stolen from U.S. gun stores, pawnshops, gun shows, and private residences prior to being smuggled into Mexico, where they are often sold for a profit of 300 to 400 percent. Moreover, Mexican DTOs store large caches of firearms on both sides of the Southwest Border for their own use and the use of their enforcement groups. Law enforcement reporting indicates that there are shortages of weapons and ammunition in Juárez (which

are in high demand among traffickers because of ongoing turf battles) that could lead to increased weapons smuggling from the HIDTA region.

Abuse

Illicit drug abuse in the West Texas HIDTA region takes place primarily in Ector, El Paso, and Midland Counties, where the largest population centers are located. Drug-related treatment admissions in the West Texas HIDTA decreased in all drug categories except for marijuana/hashish from 2006 through 2008. (See Table 5.) According to the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), most drug-related treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities in the HIDTA region are in Ector, El Paso, and Midland Counties and are for cocaine. (See Table 5.) The scattered and sparse population in areas outside

Ector, El Paso, and Midland Counties precludes collection of accurate information pertaining to drug abuse in other counties of the HIDTA region. However, Texas DSHS reporting does reveal that treatment admissions appear to be low in these counties; most have fewer than 10 reported treatment admissions each year.

Illicit Finance

Bulk cash smuggling is the primary method used by traffickers to move drug proceeds from the West Texas HIDTA region to Mexico, as a result of the area's proximity to the border, the limited inspections of southbound traffic by U.S. and Mexican law enforcement officers, and the relative ease with which cash can be placed into Mexican financial systems. According to NDIC NDTs 2009 data, five of the six agencies report that bulk cash movement was used by wholesale-level traffickers in their area to launder drug proceeds; four of the agencies report that the level of use of this technique was high. It is difficult to assess the quantity of U.S. currency transported from market areas through the HIDTA region to Mexico as a result of the limited inspection of southbound traffic. However, seizure data indicate that large quantities, some totaling \$1 million or more, are smuggled through the area. For example, in January 2008 the El Paso County Sheriff's Office seized approximately \$1 million from a tractor-trailer during a routine traffic stop on I-10 in eastern El Paso County. Additionally, CBP agents conducting inbound and outbound inspection operations at POEs in the El Paso Office of Field Operations (OFO)⁸ seized over \$2.7 million in unreported currency in fiscal year (FY) 2008—a notable increase compared with approximately \$430,000 seized in FY2007.⁹ The largest seizure of undeclared

currency in FY2008 occurred in February 2008 when officers working at the El Paso POE BOTA crossing intercepted an inbound vehicle with over \$1.8 million secreted in its door panels and rear cargo door in denominations ranging from \$5 to \$100; this was the largest currency seizure at the POE in at least the past decade. When bulk cash is transported through the West Texas HIDTA region and smuggled across the Southwest Border, it is further processed in any of the following ways: individuals deposit the cash into banks and *casas de cambio* (exchange houses)¹⁰ in Mexico and electronically wire it back to the United States; complicit Mexican financial institutions repatriate the cash to the United States using cash couriers, armored cars, or deposits into correspondent accounts; smugglers transport the money to Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, or other Latin American countries, where it can be used to pay for goods—both legitimate and illicit—on the black market in Colombia; or individuals move the funds to offshore jurisdictions in which bank secrecy regulations are strict.¹¹

Mexican DTOs operating in the West Texas HIDTA region also use traditional depository financial institutions (DFIs) and money services businesses (MSBs), such as money transmitters and *casas de cambio* located in the area, to launder drug proceeds within the HIDTA region, although to a much lesser extent. DFIs and MSBs are used to a much greater degree in Mexico, where bulk currency smuggled through West Texas into Mexico is processed and often sent back to the United States.

8. The El Paso Office of Field Operations encompasses the El Paso, Fabens, and Presidio POEs in Texas and the Columbus and Santa Teresa POEs in New Mexico.

9. Under federal law, individuals must declare currency or mon-

etary instruments totaling \$10,000 or more upon entry into or exit from the United States.

10. Because of strict Texas laws and their associated robust enforcement, DTOs use *casas de cambio* located in Mexico rather than in Texas to launder drug proceeds.

11. A correspondent account is established by a foreign bank at a financial institution in the United States in order to conduct business in the United States without maintaining a physical presence. This account is used to receive deposits from, make payments or other disbursements on behalf of, or handle other financial transactions related to the foreign bank.

Outlook

In the near term, drug flow from Mexico into the West Texas HIDTA region will occur at the lower levels experienced over the past 2 years. Violence occurring in Juárez and the increased military and Mexican and U.S. law enforcement presence on the U.S.–Mexico border will continue to cause traffickers to avoid the area for fear of losing their drug loads. The high level of violence is not very likely to subside in the near future. Mexican military and law enforcement operations that target the violence caused by DTOs fighting for control of the El Paso/Juárez plaza have further aggravated the situation, causing the violence to increase. Consequently, Mexican traffickers will likely seek alternative routes for their drug shipments, such as the eastern portion of the HIDTA region (where the Presidio POE is located) or Arizona and New Mexico, where less violence and fewer counterdrug operations are occurring. Drug flows have also been affected by increased seizures of cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamine in Mexico and other foreign countries that have lessened the amount of illicit drugs available for smuggling into the United States through the West Texas HIDTA region.

The disruption of BA's command-and-control structure has hindered the gang's drug trafficking operations in the West Texas HIDTA region. Recent convictions of several key members and the various alliances between BA members and Mexican DTOs have weakened the structure of the organization. Other gangs, such as Crips and Latin Kings, have taken advantage of these circumstances to increase their drug trafficking activities in the area. BA is attempting to reorganize its structure to regain its position as the dominant drug traffickers; however, it is unlikely that the gang will be successful in doing so in the near term. Because BA exercised significant influence over drug smuggling in the HIDTA

region, particularly in El Paso, its current weakened structure has likely disrupted the drug supply chain from Mexico.

Weapons trafficking from the West Texas HIDTA region to Mexico may increase as traffickers attempt to fill the demand created by the shortages of weapons and ammunition supplies in Juárez. Because of the ongoing confrontations among Mexican military and law enforcement officers and DTOs, the demand for weapons and ammunition in the El Paso/Juárez plaza is high. Weapons trafficking organizations in West Texas that supply Mexican DTOs operating in the plaza will most likely increase the amount of guns and ammunition that they smuggle into Mexico. Other entrepreneurial traffickers also may begin to smuggle weapons into Mexico because of the high profit potential.

Sources

Federal

Executive Office of the President
Office of National Drug Control Policy
High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas
Southwest Border
West Texas Region

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
U.S. Border Patrol
El Paso Sector
Marfa Sector

U.S. Department of Justice
Drug Enforcement Administration
El Paso Field Division
Alpine Resident Office
Midland Resident Office

Federal Bureau of Investigation
El Paso Division

U.S. Department of the Interior
National Park Service
Big Bend National Park
Law Enforcement Office

Local, State, and Regional

Ector County Sheriff's Office
El Paso County Sheriff's Office
El Paso Metro Task Force
El Paso Police Department
Midland County Sheriff's Office
Midland Police Department
Odessa Police Department
Pecos Police Department
State of Texas
Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse
Texas Department of Public Safety
Union Pacific Railroad Police Department
University of Texas at Austin
Center for Social Work Research
School of Social Work
Gulf Coast Addiction Technology Transfer Center
West Texas Narcotics Enforcement Task Force

Other

El Paso Times

**Questions and comments may be directed to
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