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# Government study finds U.S. side of Mexico border area low on violent crime

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Martha Mendoza, The Associated Press

It's one of the safest parts of America, and it's getting safer.

It's the U.S.-Mexico border, and even as politicians say more federal troops are needed to fight rising violence, government figures show it isn't so dangerous after all.

The top four big cities in America with the lowest rates of violent crime are all in border states: Austin, El Paso, [Phoenix](#) and [San Diego](#), according to a new [FBI](#) report. And a U.S. Customs and Border Protection report shows that Border Patrol agents face far less danger than street cops in most U.S. cities.

The Customs and Border Protection study, obtained with a Freedom of Information Act request, shows that 3 percent of Border Patrol agents and officers were assaulted last year, mostly when assailants threw rocks at them.

That compares with 11 percent of police officers and sheriff's deputies assaulted during the same period, usually with guns or knives.

In addition, violent attacks against agents declined in 2009 along most of the U.S.-Mexican border for the first time in seven years.

"The border is safer now than it's ever been," said Customs and Border Protection spokesman Lloyd Easterling.

He said one factor is that with fewer jobs available amid the U.S. recession, illegal immigration has dropped. And, responding to security concerns after 9/11, the Border Patrol has doubled its number of agents since 2004.

Nonetheless, border lawmakers and governors say their region is under siege and needs more troops.

In response to the concerns from the border states, Obama pledged to send 1,200 [National Guard](#) troops to help and spend an extra \$500 million on border security.

His one-time rival for the presidency, Sen. John McCain of Arizona, said he should send at least 6,000 troops, which he said are needed because Arizona leads the nation in marijuana seizures, had 368 kidnappings in 2008, and has the highest property crime rates in the U.S.

But violent crimes in counties along the Mexican border are among the lowest in the nation per capita, and they've dropped by more than 30 percent in the last two decades.

Governors along the border say improved crime rates don't counter their concerns.

In Texas, "we respond to threats based on risk, not occurrence," said Gov. [Rick Perry's](#) spokeswoman Katherine Cesinger.

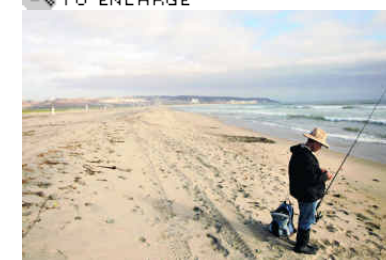
And there are exceptions to the trend: Assaults on agents in the Laredo region increased from 44 in 2008 to 118 in 2009, and they increased in the neighboring Rio Grande Valley as well.

Concerns about danger come, in part, from Mexico, where raging cartel violence has taken 23,000 lives in three years, often within view of the U.S. border.

There's frequent talk of the potential for that violence to spread across the border, but so far it hasn't happened to a significant degree.

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GREGORY BULL/The Associated Press  
**Min Wu fished** less than a mile from Mexico in San Ysidro, Calif., on Wednesday. A federal study found the area safe.