



Drug Market Analysis

2008

South Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area



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

South Texas Border and San Antonio Market Areas 5

 South Texas Border 6

 Overview 6

 Production 6

 Transportation 6

 Distribution 8

 Drug-Related Crime 8

 Abuse 9

 Illicit Finance 10

 San Antonio Market Area 11

 Overview 11

 Production 11

 Transportation 11

 Distribution 12

 Drug-Related Crime 13

 Abuse 13

 Illicit Finance 14

Outlook 14

Sources 15



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PREFACE

This assessment provides a strategic overview of the illicit drug situation in the South 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 South Texas HIDTA.

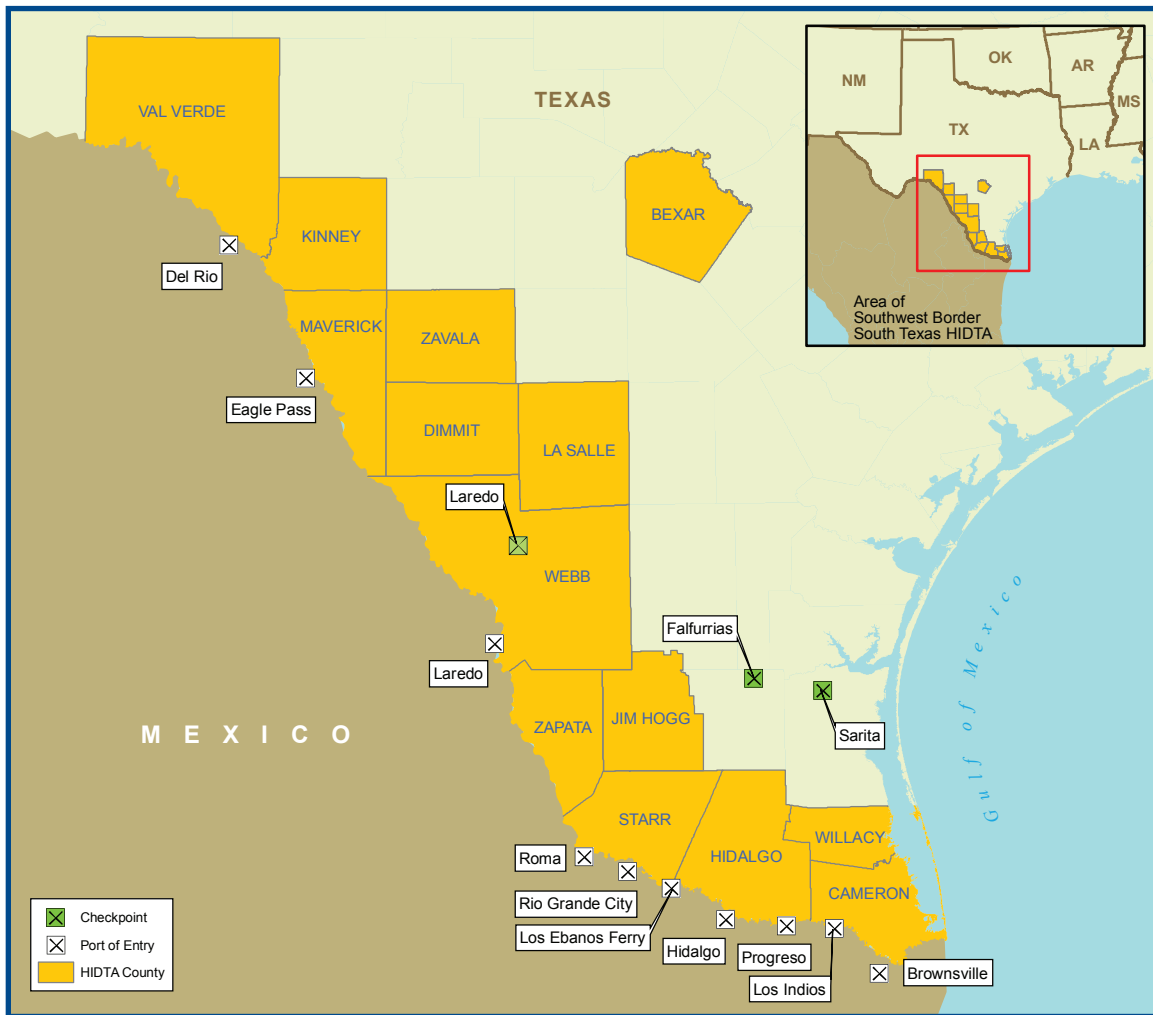


Figure 1. South Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.



STRATEGIC DRUG THREAT DEVELOPMENTS

- The South Texas HIDTA region is a principal drug smuggling corridor along the U.S.–Mexico border. Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) use the region as a key transportation, transshipment, and distribution center for large quantities of cocaine as well as Mexican heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine.
- Increased law enforcement operations in the United States and Mexico may be causing slight disruptions to some drug smuggling operations along the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas. Law enforcement officials throughout South Texas report seizing significantly less cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine than in past years. Law enforcement officials further report that Mexican DTOs may be altering their smuggling routes or experiencing supply chain problems as a result of seizures and arrests in the United States and Mexico.
- Drug trafficking-related violence is a constant threat to the South Texas HIDTA region. Violence against Mexican law enforcement and military personnel has increased in northern Mexico, despite a recent decrease in kidnappings and murders among rival drug traffickers.
- Cocaine abuse among adolescents and young adults in the South Texas border area is of considerable concern to public health officials. High school students residing in Texas counties along the U.S.–Mexico border are reportedly more likely to experiment with or abuse cocaine than are high school students living in other areas of Texas.

HIDTA OVERVIEW

The South Texas HIDTA region is one of the most strategically important drug smuggling

corridors in use by drug traffickers. It shares a longer portion of the international border with Mexico—625 miles—than does any other Southwest Border HIDTA region. It encompasses 14 counties—13 located adjacent to the U.S.–Mexico border—in South Texas. Much of the South Texas HIDTA region is sparsely populated; the largest populations are concentrated in San Antonio (Bexar County), Del Rio/Eagle Pass (Val Verde and Maverick Counties, respectively), Laredo (Webb County), and McAllen/Brownsville (Hidalgo and Cameron Counties, respectively). (See [Table 1 on page 3.](#)) Despite the limited population in this area, the South Texas HIDTA region influences national-level drug trafficking and drug availability more than any other area along the U.S.–Mexico border. Brownsville, Del Rio, Eagle Pass, Laredo, McAllen, and San Antonio are the major transportation and distribution centers in the South Texas HIDTA region; smaller border communities such as Rio Grande City and Roma also are significant transshipment zones and distribution centers for illicit drug shipments destined for drug markets in every region of the country.

The combination of vast stretches of remote, sparsely populated land and extensive cross-border economic activity at designated ports of entry (POEs) creates an environment conducive to large-scale drug smuggling. Few physical barriers exist between POEs to impede drug traffickers, particularly Mexican DTOs, from smuggling illicit drug shipments into the United States from Mexico. Along many areas of the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas, the Rio Grande River can be easily breached by smugglers on foot or in vehicles, enabling Mexican DTOs to smuggle multikilogram quantities of illicit drugs, primarily marijuana and cocaine, into the United States. In addition, drug traffickers can easily conceal drug shipments among the high volume of legitimate cross-border traffic at the region's POEs, creating significant challenges for area law enforcement officers. The thousands of private vehicles, commercial tractor-trailers, and pedestrians that cross the U.S.–Mexico border daily provide ideal cover for drug smuggling operations.

Table 1. South Texas HIDTA County Populations and Population Density Estimates, 2006

County	Population	Population Density*
Bexar	1,555,592	1,248
Cameron	387,717	428
Dimmit	10,385	8
Hidalgo	700,634	446
Jim Hogg	5,027	4
Kinney	3,342	2
La Salle	5,969	4
Maverick	52,298	41
Starr	61,780	51
Val Verde	48,145	15
Webb	231,470	69
Willacy	20,645	35
Zapata	13,615	14
Zavala	12,036	9

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

*Population density estimates are represented as persons per square mile.

The South Texas HIDTA region is vulnerable to both overland and maritime drug smuggling activity. Overland transportation, including the use of private and commercial vehicles, is the primary drug smuggling and transportation method used by traffickers operating in the South Texas HIDTA region; however, maritime smuggling operations are also quite common. Mexican drug traffickers often launch maritime smuggling operations from Tamaulipas, Mexico, using fishing vessels, shrimp boats, and shark boats (*lanchas*) to transport illicit drug shipments to locations along the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW), Padre Island National Seashore (PINS), and South Padre Island (SPI). Upon arriving in these areas, Mexican traffickers typically transfer drug shipments to waiting vehicles or bury them in sand dunes for retrieval at a later time. Additionally, law enforcement officers in these areas commonly discover bundles of marijuana and cocaine that have washed ashore from maritime

smuggling operations in the Gulf of Mexico. Traffickers also exploit Lake Amistad and the Lake Amistad National Recreation Area, which straddle the U.S.–Mexico border in Val Verde County, for maritime drug smuggling; traffickers using pleasure craft reportedly deliver drug shipments to boat ramps on the Texas side of the lake.

The South Texas HIDTA region’s location along the U.S.–Mexico border also renders it vulnerable to homeland security issues, some of which support drug trafficking operations. Drug traffickers and other criminal groups engage in activities such as firearms trafficking and alien smuggling along the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas. Firearms trafficking is a significant threat to the South Texas HIDTA region; many of the firearms used by DTOs in neighboring Mexican states either are obtained in South Texas HIDTA counties or transit the area en route to Mexico. Traffickers use these firearms to protect their smuggling operations from rival smuggling organizations and law enforcement personnel. Alien smuggling is a rising concern to law enforcement officials in the South Texas HIDTA region. In addition to smuggling migrant workers, alien smuggling organizations smuggle criminal aliens and gang members into the United States. These individuals typically have extensive criminal records and pose a threat not only to the South Texas HIDTA region, but also to communities throughout the United States. Alien smuggling organizations reportedly also smuggle aliens from countries other than Mexico, including special interest countries.¹

DRUG THREAT OVERVIEW

Mexican DTOs have established sophisticated and far-reaching drug transportation and distribution networks along the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas. Most of these networks incorporate operational cells based in communities within

1. Special interest countries are those designated by the intelligence community as countries that could export individuals who could bring harm to the United States through terrorism.



South Texas HIDTA counties. These expansive trafficking networks extend from the South Texas HIDTA region to all other regions of the United States and supply drug distributors in virtually every state in the country.

Law enforcement officials regularly seize multikilogram quantities of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine from drug traffickers in South Texas. In fact, law enforcement officers in South Texas typically seize significant quantities of marijuana and methamphetamine and even more cocaine and heroin than officers in other areas along the U.S.–Mexico border. Most of these drugs are intended not for local distribution but, rather, for transportation to and distribution in other areas of the United States. Recently, law enforcement officials in South Texas have reported a noticeable decline in the quantities of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine that they are seizing in the area. However, this decrease has not translated into any significant shortages of these drugs in South Texas drug markets.

Illicit drug production in the South Texas HIDTA region is limited—small quantities of powder methamphetamine, marijuana, and crack cocaine are produced in South Texas, primarily in San Antonio and throughout Bexar County. South Texas' proximity to Mexico and the abundance of illicit drugs available there mitigates the need for large-scale drug production in the area; drug production in this region generally supplies local or limited regional distribution.

DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

Mexican DTOs and their smuggling operations are firmly entrenched in border communities along both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border and throughout the entire South Texas HIDTA region. Their influence over and control of drug trafficking in South Texas is unrivaled by any other trafficking group. Mexican DTOs operate sophisticated and widespread drug smuggling, transportation, and

distribution networks that extend from Mexico and South Texas to all other regions of the United States and facilitate the transportation and nationwide distribution of large quantities of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine. In addition, many Mexican DTOs produce drugs themselves or maintain direct connections to organizations that produce illicit drugs in Mexico or South America. These connections provide a continuous and virtually unlimited supply of illicit drugs for distribution in the United States.

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.

Drug-related violence remains a constant threat to the South Texas HIDTA region. Large-scale Mexican DTOs, particularly the Gulf Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel, control drug trafficking activities in the South Texas HIDTA region through violence, corruption, and intimidation. These traffickers, often using violent enforcement groups, target rival drug traffickers and law enforcement officers. As such, drug-related violence is widespread. The Gulf Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel have battled for control of smuggling routes in the northern Mexico states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon since approximately 2004. The level of violence between

these competing cartels appears to have decreased in some areas of northern Mexico, primarily Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, because of a reported truce between the Gulf Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel as well as several Mexican counterdrug operations. However, violence directed at Mexican law enforcement and military personnel continues unabated, with shootouts between the Gulf Cartel and Mexican law enforcement officers having recently occurred in Rio Bravo, Tamaulipas (across the border from Donna, Texas).

Gatekeepers² assist the Gulf Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel in maintaining control over drug trafficking activities along the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas. They tax and protect illicit drug shipments transiting their specific areas of responsibility. Gatekeepers are typically high-ranking members of a cartel or are local traffickers who work, either forcibly or voluntarily, for larger DTOs. The Gulf Cartel has been able to maintain control of drug smuggling routes through northeast Mexico, despite competition from the Sinaloa Cartel and Mexican counterdrug operations, through the use of gatekeepers in border cities such as Matamoros, Reynosa, Miguel Alemán, Nuevo Laredo, Piedras Negras, and Ciudad Acuña.

Texas-based street gangs and prison gangs also are actively involved in drug distribution within the South Texas HIDTA region. Street gangs and prison gangs generate most of their income from criminal activities, including drug production, transportation, and distribution. Gangs such as Mexikanemi (Texas Mexican Mafia), Tri-City Bombers, Hermanos de Pistoleros Latinos (HPL), and Texas Syndicate transport and distribute illicit drugs throughout the South Texas HIDTA region. Mexikanemi is the most powerful and influential gang operating in the South Texas HIDTA region.

2. Gatekeepers are individuals who manage specific entry points, or plazas, typically Mexican border communities, along the U.S.–Mexico border on behalf of large-scale Mexican DTOs. They control plazas through bribery, extortion, and murder.

This gang controls much of the wholesale, midlevel, and retail drug distribution in San Antonio and maintains a network of distributors throughout South Texas. In some instances, Mexican DTOs have established connections with gangs or individual gang members to facilitate drug trafficking activities. The Gulf Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel reportedly use members of HPL, Mara Salvatrucha (MS 13), Mexikanemi, and Texas Syndicate for smuggling, transportation, and enforcement purposes. Connections to large-scale DTOs enhance the gangs' reputation and trafficking capabilities throughout the South Texas HIDTA region.

Drug traffickers in the South Texas HIDTA region use sophisticated surveillance, countersurveillance, and communications techniques and technology to aid their trafficking operations. Many Mexican DTOs maintain cells that monitor law enforcement activities and the smuggling operations of rival traffickers. Information obtained through these intelligence-gathering operations is used to plan the timing and routes of smuggling attempts. Traffickers also employ various communications technologies to conduct business. The use of cell phones remains prevalent; traffickers often maintain multiple phones and rotate or drop telephone numbers on a regular basis to avoid law enforcement detection.

SOUTH TEXAS BORDER AND SAN ANTONIO MARKET AREAS

The South Texas border area and San Antonio are the primary drug markets in the South Texas HIDTA region. The South Texas border area is a principal drug smuggling corridor between the United States and Mexico. San Antonio serves as a transshipment center for cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine smuggled into the United States from Mexico; the city is also a significant consumer market for these drugs.



SOUTH TEXAS BORDER

OVERVIEW

The South Texas border area extends from Val Verde County in the western portion of the South Texas HIDTA region to Willacy and Cameron Counties along the Gulf of Mexico. The population in the region is concentrated in three areas—Del Rio/Eagle Pass, Laredo, and the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The South Texas portion of the U.S.–Mexico border is extremely rural and contains long stretches of uninhabited or sparsely populated land that is often used by drug traffickers to smuggle illicit drug shipments into the United States. They also use these areas to temporarily store drug shipments before transporting them to larger towns and cities within the border area. A bustling cross-border economy in the region provides additional avenues for drug smuggling operations. Traffickers exploit the transportation infrastructure that supports cross-border business to transport illicit drug shipments to other areas of Texas and the United States.

PRODUCTION

Abundant supplies of illicit drugs produced in Mexico dominate drug markets throughout the South Texas border area, minimizing the need for traffickers to produce drugs locally. However, limited drug production occurs along the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas. Cannabis is cultivated at small sites within the region, albeit infrequently because of unfavorable growing conditions. Small methamphetamine laboratories occasionally surface in the area, but such instances are decreasing because of the enactment of legislation regulating the sale of precursor chemicals and the growing prominence of Mexican ice methamphetamine. Retail quantities of crack cocaine are converted in the South Texas border area, primarily in Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Webb Counties. However, most of the crack cocaine available in the South Texas border area is supplied by distributors in San Antonio and Houston.

TRANSPORTATION

The South Texas HIDTA region is one of the most significant drug smuggling corridors along the U.S.–Mexico border. Seventeen border crossings are located within the South Texas HIDTA region; Mexican DTOs exploit the high volume of cross-border traffic at these crossings to smuggle illicit drugs into the United States. The South Texas HIDTA region also borders the most lucrative smuggling corridor along the U.S.–Mexico border—the Nuevo Laredo plaza—located directly across the Rio Grande River from Laredo at the Laredo POE. The Laredo POE is the busiest commercial POE in North America and, as a result, has been the focal point of violent conflicts between competing Mexican DTOs. In addition, the highest concentration of identified smuggling corridors is located along the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas. Mexican drug traffickers base their operations in the cities of Ciudad Acuña, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Alemán, Reynosa, and Matamoros and use the areas as principal drug smuggling corridors into the South Texas HIDTA region. Traffickers transit the corridors using overland transportation methods such as private vehicles, commercial tractor-trailers, passenger buses, and trains. Traffickers also use the Eagle Pass, Laredo, and Brownsville, Texas, POEs to cross the U.S.–Mexico border into South Texas by rail. In addition to being the busiest commercial POE, Laredo also handles more rail traffic than any other Southwest Border POE; approximately 55 percent of all rail traffic crossing the U.S.–Mexico border enters the United States through Laredo. The Falfurrias and Sarita Border Patrol Checkpoints, located in Brooks and Kenedy Counties, respectively—both of which are Houston HIDTA-designated counties—and the Hebronville Border Patrol Checkpoint, located in Jim Hogg County, are situated on primary transportation routes leading from the South Texas border area to interior distribution centers. U.S. Border Patrol (USBP) agents assigned to these checkpoints seize significant quantities of marijuana and cocaine annually, further illustrating the role and importance of the South Texas HIDTA in domestic

**Table 2. Illicit Drugs Seized in South Texas HIDTA Counties
Bordering Mexico, in Kilograms, 2005–2007**

County	Cocaine			Heroin			Marijuana			Methamphetamine		
	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007
Cameron	889.14	918.19	1,306.38	8.79	14.22	19.57	9,717.82	12,341.49	16,079.49	103.56	95.52	4.40
Dimmit	0.12	NR	0.00	NR	NR	NR	707.44	2,267.14	1,572.10	NR	0.02	NR
Hidalgo*	4,140.09	7,155.14	4,834.31	19.43	21.59	16.73	42,787.77	74,772.44	97,425.68	340.95	231.15	41.19
Jim Hogg	137.69	0.04	75.02	9.79	NR	NR	11,924.77	16,499.03	16,676.71	NR	2.72	0.86
Kinney	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	NR	1,577.97	3,431.10	1,283.25	0.02	1.45	NR
La Salle	133.00	NR	1.80	NR	NR	NR	1,114.13	613.39	146.51	NR	NR	NR
Maverick	401.07	549.89	461.11	8.73	1.32	3.91	11,628.11	17,054.49	13,184.07	49.26	19.07	NR
Starr	371.36	635.56	545.53	NR	17.34	10.84	37,625.31	62,832.32	69,258.75	16.92	13.88	NR
Val Verde	41.02	97.03	73.71	NR	2.67	NR	7,085.80	15,338.55	13,574.86	8.91	47.20	NR
Webb**	4,399.53	4,193.18	2,432.41	55.63	111.29	23.29	76,328.12	62,842.12	47,894.11	281.64	89.59	66.50
Willacy	5.88	54.98	18.82	NR	NR	NR	481.12	2,122.47	1,352.74	10.31	1.18	3.72
Zapata	0.04	0.00	29.21	NR	0.22	NR	6,658.28	4,440.27	3,491.96	NR	NR	NR
Zavala	0.29	0.03	8.79	0.62	NR	NR	16.27	994.18	72.21	NR	NR	NR
Total	10,519.23	13,604.04	9,787.09	102.99	168.65	74.34	207,652.91	275,548.99	282,012.44	811.57	501.78	116.67

Source: El Paso Intelligence Center, February 7, 2008.

NR = Not Reported

*The significant increase in the amount of cocaine seized in Hidalgo County in 2006 is most likely attributed to a temporary shift in cocaine smuggling operations from Laredo (Webb County) toward McAllen (Hidalgo County) as a result of high levels of violence occurring in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico.

**Three unusually large heroin seizures, totaling approximately 60.8 kilograms, account for the increase in the amount of heroin seized in Webb County in 2006.

drug trafficking. For example, in June 2007 USBP agents assigned to the Falfurrias Checkpoint seized over 20,000 pounds of marijuana concealed inside a tractor-trailer.

Drug traffickers use the South Texas border area as a key storage center for drug shipments smuggled into the country from Mexico; they often store shipments temporarily in the South Texas border area, particularly in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Laredo, before transporting them to markets throughout the country. Traffickers use ranches, warehouses, residences, and trailers in these locations to store drug shipments pending future transportation and distribution arrangements.

South Texas is the most dominant entry point for cocaine within the Southwest Border corridor.

More cocaine and heroin have been seized by law enforcement officials in the South Texas region than in any other area along the U.S.–Mexico border (Arizona, California, New Mexico, and West Texas). Significant quantities of marijuana and methamphetamine have also been seized in the region. However, recent law enforcement reporting indicates that significantly lesser quantities of cocaine, heroin, and methamphetamine are currently being seized than in the past; marijuana is the only drug for which seizure quantities have increased during the past year (see Table 2). While this trend is particularly evident in the South Texas HIDTA region, it is being observed by law enforcement officials along the entire U.S.–Mexico border. This development appears to be the result of a combination of factors, including U.S. and Mexican counterdrug operations, the



continuing presence of National Guard troops as part of Operation Jump Start, the deployment of additional Mexican law enforcement and military personnel to northeastern Mexico, the stockpiling of drug shipments by drug traffickers, the difficulty that drug traffickers may be having in obtaining supplies, and—in terms of methamphetamine—traffickers’ potential difficulty in obtaining precursor chemicals. The seizure of large quantities of precursor chemicals in Mexico may be limiting methamphetamine production in Mexico; this development is most likely contributing to a decrease in methamphetamine seizures in the South Texas HIDTA region. However, the decline in the quantity of cocaine and methamphetamine currently being seized in South Texas does not indicate that the role or importance of South Texas in cross-border drug smuggling is decreasing; the region continues to be a major illicit drug smuggling corridor.

In addition to the illicit drugs routinely seized in South Texas, Mexican law enforcement and military personnel regularly seize large quantities of illicit drugs destined for the HIDTA region in Mexican states bordering South Texas. In October 2007 Mexican military personnel seized approximately 12 tons of cocaine following a shoot-out with drug traffickers in Tampico, Tamaulipas, Mexico. In a November 2007 incident, Mexican military personnel seized over 23 metric tons of marijuana from three trailers near Juamave, Tamaulipas.

The Gulf Coast of Texas, including portions of the South Texas HIDTA region, is a common destination for maritime drug smuggling operations originating in Mexico. The Gulf Cartel, which controls drug trafficking through northeast Mexico, is the dominant trafficking organization engaging in maritime smuggling to South Texas. Mexican drug traffickers frequently use *lanchas* to transport marijuana and cocaine shipments to coastal areas of South Texas, often operating at night to exploit the limited law enforcement presence in these areas. However, traffickers quickly adjust their maritime smuggling operations when confronted by increased interdiction assets along

the coast or in the Gulf of Mexico. As a result of maritime smuggling operations, law enforcement officials periodically encounter marijuana and cocaine bundles that have washed ashore. The first known “washup” of methamphetamine occurred in 2007, when law enforcement officials discovered 1 kilogram of methamphetamine along SPI. This washup is the first indication that traffickers are smuggling limited quantities of methamphetamine through maritime conveyances.

DISTRIBUTION

Wholesale distribution networks controlled by Mexican DTOs are the primary distribution threat to the region. Wholesale distribution networks operating in the South Texas border area extend from source areas in South America and Mexico to all regions of the United States. The South Texas border area plays a pivotal role in these distribution operations—not only is the region a significant cross-border smuggling area, but wholesale drug distributors in the South Texas border area greatly affect drug availability and distribution throughout much of the United States. Once cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine shipments have been smuggled into the United States, drug traffickers often store them temporarily in stash houses in communities throughout the South Texas border area. At these stash houses, drug shipments are either consolidated into large shipments or broken down into smaller quantities for individual distributors. From these locations, cells arrange for the transportation and distribution of the drug shipments to other distribution centers in Texas, such as Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio, or directly to other U.S. drug markets. In addition, drug distributors from across the country travel to the South Texas border area to purchase illicit drugs for distribution in their home markets.

DRUG-RELATED CRIME

The northern Mexico states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon have been the center of violent conflicts between the Gulf Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel. Their struggle for control of lucrative smuggling routes through northern Mexico and South

Texas resulted in a rise in the number of violent incidents and drug-related murders in these states. However, since fall 2007, violence associated with these conflicts has decreased in some areas of northern Mexico. Law enforcement officials in the region report a decrease in the number of murders and kidnappings in Nuevo Laredo. This decrease may be the result of counterdrug operations initiated by the government of Mexico as well as a reported truce between the Gulf Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel. Despite these decreases, violence continues throughout northern Mexico and could escalate at any time. Moreover, recent violence in northern Mexico indicates that the cartels are now targeting Mexican military personnel and law enforcement personnel conducting counterdrug operations along the U.S.–Mexico border.

Widespread drug trafficking in the area also contributes to property and violent crime within the South Texas border area. Drug traffickers and

gang members involved in drug smuggling frequently commit assault, automobile theft, burglary, extortion, and murder throughout the South Texas border area to facilitate smuggling activities and to protect their operations from rival trafficking organizations or gangs. However, the high level of violence in Mexico has not led to similar levels of violence in the South Texas border area. In fact, communities in South Texas often record crime rates at or below state and national averages. While it is highly unlikely that the level of violence and public fear generated by cartels in Mexico will develop in the South Texas border area, drug-related crime will remain a threat because of the area’s role in national-level drug trafficking activities.

ABUSE

Illicit drug abuse is a serious concern for law enforcement and public health officials in the

Table 3. Number of Substance Abuse Treatment Admissions to Publicly Funded Facilities by HIDTA County Bordering Mexico and by Drug, 2004–2006**

County	Cocaine			Heroin			Marijuana			Methamphetamine		
	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006
Cameron	190	238	195	60	89	49	234	207	178	*	*	*
Dimmit	*	*	*	*	0	*	30	57	17	0	0	0
Hidalgo	285	281	311	106	59	52	211	131	195	*	*	0
Jim Hogg	0	*	0	0	0	0	0	*	0	0	*	0
Kinney	0	0	*	0	0	0	*	0	0	0	0	0
La Salle	*	*	*	0	*	0	29	14	0	0	0	0
Maverick	*	*	12	*	*	*	23	55	47	0	0	0
Starr	98	165	133	0	*	0	42	82	74	0	*	*
Val Verde	11	0	*	*	23	27	17	*	*	0	0	0
Webb	232	304	242	286	229	247	201	181	177	0	*	*
Willacy	*	20	*	0	0	*	*	*	14	0	0	0
Zapata	28	26	15	0	*	*	21	34	33	0	0	0
Zavala	*	12	*	23	18	19	25	28	27	0	0	0

Source: Texas Department of State Health Services.
 *Represents fewer than 10 treatment admissions.
 **The latest year for which treatment data are available.



South Texas HIDTA region. The highest levels of illicit drug abuse in the South Texas border area occur in Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Webb Counties—the most heavily populated counties in the South Texas border area. (The highest levels of drug abuse in the entire South Texas HIDTA region occur in Bexar County. [See the “Abuse” section on page 13 for a discussion about drug abuse in Bexar County](#).) Marijuana is the most readily available and abused drug in the border area; however, cocaine is the primary illicit drug abuse threat—it is the primary illicit drug for which local residents seek treatment. Treatment admissions to publicly funded facilities for cocaine have outnumbered treatment admissions for all other drugs since 2004. ([See Table 3 on page 9.](#)) Additionally, cocaine abuse among adolescents in South Texas is a growing concern in the area. A recent survey conducted by the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) revealed higher levels of powder cocaine or crack cocaine use among students along the U.S.–Mexico border in Texas than among students who live in nonborder areas. For example, 20 percent of high school seniors along the border reported previous cocaine use, compared with 11 percent of students in nonborder areas.

Methamphetamine abuse rates in the South Texas border area remain relatively low compared with abuse rates for other illicit drugs. According to the University of Texas Center for Social Work Research, methamphetamine abuse is a greater problem in northern Texas than in the South Texas border area, and treatment admissions to publicly funded treatment facilities for methamphetamine remain low. However, as more methamphetamine abusers switch to Mexican ice methamphetamine, methamphetamine abuse rates and treatment admissions may increase slightly in the South Texas border area. Heroin and pharmaceutical abuse rates typically rank behind those for cocaine and marijuana; however, high numbers of heroin treatment admissions in Cameron, Hidalgo, and Webb counties indicate that these areas are also experiencing heroin abuse problems.

ILLICIT FINANCE

The Lower Rio Grande Valley in the South Texas border area is one of the primary smuggling corridors for bulk cash shipments destined for Mexico. Traffickers exploit the high concentration of border crossings and cross-border traffic in this area for bulk cash smuggling operations. Law enforcement reporting and seizure data reveal that Brownsville, Edinburg, Mission, McAllen, Pharr, Roma, and Rio Grande City are primary destinations in the area for bulk cash shipments originating in the eastern half of the United States, whereas cash shipments originating from western markets of the United States typically flow through points of entry in California and Arizona. Locations in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia have all been identified as sources of bulk cash shipments seized en route to or within the South Texas border area. Additionally, traffickers in the area capitalize on its location to move their illicit proceeds into Mexico.

Traffickers in the South Texas border area also use other money laundering methods in an attempt to conceal their illicit drug proceeds. Some traffickers establish cash-intensive businesses, including automobile repair shops, restaurants, construction companies, and transportation companies, to mask the nature of their funds. They commingle illicit drug proceeds with profits generated by these businesses to conceal the source of the funds. Some traffickers also use money services businesses, such as electronic wire transfer businesses and money transmitters, to launder their drug proceeds. Wire transfer businesses and money transmitters offer these traffickers a quick, electronic, and often anonymous means of laundering their drug proceeds. Traffickers conceal their illegitimate transactions among the large volume of legitimate transfers that take place daily. Money transmitters are located throughout the United States and enable drug traffickers in most drug markets to wire drug proceeds to the South Texas border area or directly to Mexico. When funds are transferred to this area, they are often collected and then transported in bulk to Mexico.

SAN ANTONIO MARKET AREA

OVERVIEW

San Antonio, county seat for Bexar County, is the largest and most populous drug market in the South Texas HIDTA region. The city is home to approximately 1.3 million people, rendering San Antonio the seventh most populous city in the United States. The economic and transportation systems that support the city create an environment conducive to drug trafficking. Mexican drug traffickers conceal their operations among the city’s large Hispanic population, use the extensive highway system to receive and transport illicit drug shipments, and exploit commercial businesses and financial institutions to launder illicit proceeds. Many Mexican DTOs place cells in San Antonio to facilitate the transportation and distribution of illicit drugs from Mexico, the South Texas border area, and San Antonio to drug markets across the country.

PRODUCTION

Bexar County—specifically, San Antonio—is the principal drug production center in the South Texas HIDTA region; considerably more illicit drug production takes place in the metropolitan area than any other locale in South Texas.

Bexar County is the primary location for methamphetamine production within the South Texas

HIDTA region. However, because of an abundant supply of Mexican ice methamphetamine, production is at a relatively low level. In 2007 six methamphetamine laboratories were seized, compared with 15 in 2006. (See Table 4.) Despite the slight decrease in laboratory seizures from 2006 to 2007, some local law enforcement officials believe that local production levels may be trending upward again. Some local methamphetamine abusers still prefer to produce and abuse locally produced powder methamphetamine despite the prevalence of Mexican ice methamphetamine. The recent seizure of 58 kilograms of pseudoephedrine is an indication that precursor chemical smuggling from Mexico is supplying some local methamphetamine producers. Additionally, local methamphetamine producers circumvent restrictions on the purchase of large quantities of cold medicines containing pseudoephedrine by purchasing these products at numerous locations throughout San Antonio and in surrounding states.

Marijuana is produced in San Antonio and Bexar County, but its availability pales in comparison with that of Mexican marijuana. Limited quantities of marijuana are produced from outdoor and indoor cannabis grow sites throughout Bexar County. In recent months the San Antonio Police Department and Bexar County Sheriff’s Office have reported an increase in local indoor cannabis cultivation, including the use of hydroponic growing techniques. According to officials from both agencies, indoor cultivation operations in the area are relatively small and lack the sophistication of indoor operations documented in other areas of the country. Moreover, these indoor grow sites produce personal use quantities of marijuana insufficient for distribution.

TRANSPORTATION

San Antonio serves as a transshipment center for Mexican DTOs as a result of its proximity to Mexico and its extensive transportation network. San Antonio is located approximately 150 miles from the U.S.–Mexico border; consequently, it does not receive the heightened law enforcement scrutiny common along the border. As a result,

Table 4. Number of Methamphetamine Laboratory Seizures in the South Texas HIDTA, 2005–2007

County/Region	2005	2006	2007	Total
Bexar	31	15	6	52
Remainder of South Texas HIDTA Region	0	0	0	0
Remainder of Texas	139	56	38	233
Total	170	71	44	285

Source: National Seizure System,* run date January 28, 2008.

*NSS is a voluntary seizure reporting system and may not reflect all laboratory seizures.



Figure 2. South Texas HIDTA region transportation infrastructure.

many Mexican DTOs are establishing cells in the city that specialize in drug transportation to other transportation and distribution centers in Texas and to drug markets in other regions of the United States. The highway network that supports San Antonio facilitates the movement of illicit drug shipments into and through the city. Most of the major roadways serving the area originate at the U.S.–Mexico border and connect with other roadways that serve drug markets throughout the country. (See Figure 2.) This transportation network also provides drug traffickers with various routes to transport bulk quantities of illicit drug proceeds to the South Texas border area and eventually into Mexico.

DISTRIBUTION

Mexican DTOs use San Antonio as a national-level distribution center for wholesale quantities of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine. San Antonio’s role in drug distribution is evident in the quantity of illicit drugs seized. Although cocaine and heroin seizures by the San Antonio Police Department declined from 2006 to 2007, the overall quantity of drugs seized is large, as evidenced by the 353 percent increase in marijuana seized from 2006 to 2007. (See Table 5 on page 13.) The larger population in San Antonio, as compared with that in the South Texas border area, enables drug traffickers to better conceal their operations. In addition, some Mexican DTOs use familial ties and long-established

Table 5. Drug Seizures by San Antonio Police Department Narcotics Unit in Pounds,* 2006–2007

Drug	2006	2007
Cocaine	319.60	144.26
Heroin	23.10	16.97
Marijuana	1,281.90	5,808.27
Methamphetamine	14.93	25.44

Source: San Antonio Police Department Narcotics Unit.
*All weights have been converted from grams to pounds.

criminal connections to maintain control over wholesale drug distribution in San Antonio and throughout the South Texas HIDTA region. As a result, the city is an ideal location for Mexican DTOs to base distribution operations and maintain drug and money stash houses.

Midlevel and retail drug distribution takes place in all areas of San Antonio, resulting in varying degrees of abuse and crime throughout the city. In low-income areas, dealers distribute crack cocaine and heroin on neighborhood streets; in middle-class and high-income neighborhoods, drugs are often sold in bars or private residences. San Antonio also has a sizeable street and prison gang population. Many gangs, including Mexicanemi and HPL, rely on drug distribution as their primary income source, but they also commit crimes in the course of their drug distribution activities.

DRUG-RELATED CRIME

Drug trafficking and abuse contribute significantly to crime in San Antonio and throughout Bexar County. Distributors and abusers of all illicit

drugs commit property crimes and violent crimes to varying degrees. However, local law enforcement officials report that those involved with cocaine trafficking commit the largest percentage of drug-related crime. Additionally, law enforcement officials report that methamphetamine abusers commit a host of property crimes in the city. Methamphetamine abusers frequently commit property crimes, such as residential burglaries, to acquire money or merchandise that can be sold or traded for methamphetamine. Law enforcement officials have also noted a recent increase in home invasions linked to drug trafficking in San Antonio. Such home invasions often target residents known or suspected to be involved in the illicit drug business; drugs or money are commonly stolen from these residences. Prison gangs and street gangs are very active in San Antonio; they are often implicated by law enforcement officials in drug-related crime.

ABUSE

San Antonio has a much larger drug abuser population than all other areas in the South Texas HIDTA region. As a result, San Antonio regularly posts significantly higher drug abuse and drug treatment rates than other South Texas locations. Marijuana is the most frequently abused drug in San Antonio, but more San Antonio residents seek treatment for heroin abuse than for abuse of any other illicit drug. Admissions at publicly funded treatment centers for heroin and marijuana abuse increased each year from 2004 through 2006 in Bexar County. (See Table 6.) Heroin abuse levels have historically been high in San Antonio and may be increasing as the city’s role in national drug transportation and distribution increases.

Table 6. Number of Substance Abuse-Related Admissions to Publicly Funded Treatment Facilities, Bexar County, 2004–2006*

Cocaine			Heroin			Marijuana			Methamphetamine		
2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006	2004	2005	2006
978	1,409	1,242	1,291	1,437	1,557	943	1,315	1,433	166	318	322

Source: Texas Department of State Health Services.
*The latest year for which data are available.



The high levels of cocaine trafficking and wide availability of the drug also result in high levels of cocaine abuse in the city.

ILLICIT FINANCE

Mexican DTOs use San Antonio as a consolidation point for illicit drug proceeds generated in the city at markets throughout the country because of the city's highly developed transportation infrastructure and proximity to multiple border crossings along the U.S.–Mexico border. In addition, traffickers invest in cash-based businesses, such as auto body shops, and restaurants, and commingle illicit funds with profits generated from their businesses to conceal the source of the funds.

OUTLOOK

Despite a decrease in quantities of illicit drugs seized along the U.S.–Mexico border in South Texas, the South Texas HIDTA region's position as a major transportation and distribution area will persist. The entrenched nature of Mexican DTOs in South Texas and the area's proximity to sources of supply in Mexico and large drug markets in the United States render it one of the most lucrative smuggling corridors along the Southwest Border.

The amount of cocaine and methamphetamine seized in South Texas may remain below normal levels in the near term. Continued law enforcement pressure and the recent arrests of high-ranking cartel members will quite likely be the driving factors behind decreasing seizure amounts. If ongoing law enforcement operations continue to successfully disrupt or alter smuggling operations into South Texas, a further decrease in seizure amounts will most likely occur.

The threat of drug trafficking-related violence in the South Texas HIDTA region will persist. The Mexican Government's counterdrug pressure against the drug cartels has resulted in the targeting of law enforcement and military personnel operations in Mexico. In addition, the truce and reduction in violence between the Gulf Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel could easily dissipate, and the violent cartel wars that have burdened this region in recent years could reignite.

SOURCES

Other

University of San Diego
 Trans-Border Institute

Local, State, and Regional

Bexar County Sheriff's Office
 City of San Antonio
 San Antonio Police Department
 State of Texas
 Texas Department of Public Safety
 Texas Department of State Health Services
 University of Texas
 Center for Social Work Research
 Unified Narcotics Intelligence Task Force

Federal

Executive Office of the President
 Office of National Drug Control Policy
 High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas
 Houston
 South Texas
 South Texas HIDTA Investigative Support Center
 Laredo Intelligence Support Center
 U.S. Department of Homeland Security
 U.S. Coast Guard
 U.S. Customs and Border Protection
 U.S. Border Patrol
 Border Patrol Intelligence Center
 U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
 U.S. Department of the Interior
 National Park System
 Padre Island National Seashore
 Amistad National Recreation Area
 U.S. Department of Justice
 Drug Enforcement Administration
 El Paso Intelligence Center
 National Seizure System
 Houston Field Division
 Executive Office of U.S. Attorneys
 U.S. Attorneys Office
 Southern District of Texas
 Federal Bureau of Investigation
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