

Amid 'crisis' rhetoric, local leaders defend border region from misconceptions

Staff Reports - January 10, 2019



A sign that reads "Welcome to McAllen 7th safest city in America" is seen on the Cine El Rey marquee on Wednesday, Jan. 9, 2019, in McAllen. (Joel Martinez | jmartinez@themonitor.com)

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In preparation for President Donald Trump's first visit to the Rio Grande Valley, Cine El Rey, the historic theater located in downtown McAllen, wanted to send a message.

"Welcome To McAllen 7th Safest City in America," the theater's marquee reads, citing a 2015 ranking by the financial technology website SmartAsset.

While the website assessed both crime rate and air quality when ranking U.S. cities in terms of safety, it reflects a point local leaders, law enforcement agencies and residents believe is overlooked in the president's rhetoric about a "security crisis" on the border: the U.S. side is quite safe.

"You're almost more than eight or nine times likely to get murdered in Houston than you are along the border," McAllen Police Chief Victor Rodriguez said Wednesday as he reviewed a spreadsheet of violent crime rates for Texas cities.

The 2017 rates, compiled by Texas Department of Public Safety data, calculate the number of offenses per 100,000 people.

McAllen, Rodriguez said, experienced its lowest crime rate in 34 years in 2018, and the city's crime rate decreased for the ninth consecutive year — detailed data the police department plans to release late next week. The Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office, which investigated three murders in 2018, also saw violent crime decrease.

The chief emphasized that the increased law enforcement presence along the border has aided in the region's low crime rate, which is contrary to public misconception that the heightened presence resulted from increased levels of crime.

"The (state and federal) responses have been in part responsible for crime decreases in our community here," Rodriguez said of efforts to secure the border since Sept. 11, 2001, which include elevated levels of state troopers and U.S. Border Patrol agents in the Valley.

"Having people understand that McAllen, USA is not Mexico ... that the corruption and the criminal justice system in Mexico is not what happens on the U.S. side" is key to changing national and international perspectives of border communities, Rodriguez said.

The police chief's sentiment is shared by mayors of Hidalgo County cities who routinely grapple with correcting false understandings of the border.

"Hidalgo is one of the safest cities in the county (and) these do not have a lot of criminal activity; in fact, we don't have criminal activity whatsoever," said Hidalgo Mayor Sergio Coronado.

The city of Hidalgo shares a border with Reynosa, Mexico.

Donna Mayor Rick Morales agrees the city he represents remains safe.

The president, ahead of November's midterm election, deployed the U.S. Army to the border, stationing them near the Donna-Rio Bravo International Bridge and inside a building previously housing Craig's furniture in neighboring Weslaco. While it's not unusual for residents to maneuver around U.S. Border Patrol vehicles, the Humvees driven by troops added to traffic on roads and Interstate 2, the region's main thoroughfare.

"At first, people were kind of wondering, 'What are the troops doing here,'" Morales, a self-identified conservative Independent, said. "The people of Donna understand that they have a job to do (while deployed to the border)."

Though mayors of border cities in the heavily Democratic region have not been invited to meet with the president, U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, will host a roundtable with a handful — including those of McAllen, Hidalgo and Donna — to update them on the border security debate in Congress.

Morales, though, said it would benefit the area to have a discussion with the president, "and put all that on the table; put the border wall as one of the things to discuss, trade, border security," Morales said, stopping short of addressing "political issues going on in Washington."

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