

Juarez, the sequel: murder capital no more

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A giant "No More Weapons" billboard made with crushed firearms stands near the U.S. border in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. (Raymundo Ruiz/AP)

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico — Young daughter in hand, Isabel Aguilera recounts the mayhem that stalked these streets.

Here they dragged a father from the breakfast table, shooting him dead outside in front of his family. There they came for a shopkeeper, gunning him down behind the counter. Yonder they snuffed two brothers after pulling them from their beds before sunrise.

"They were people from outside," Aguilera, 38, said of the killings that recently swept like cholera through Riveras del Bravo, a teeming sprawl of Mexico's working poor. "They wanted to inject power, fear."

These thousands of matchbox houses once ranked among Earth's deadliest patches through years of criminal war in Ciudad Juarez, an industrial and narcotics corridor bordering America's [safest large city El Paso](#), Texas.

More than 10,000 people were murdered across the Mexican city of 1.3 million in less than five years. Many were young men gunned down on streets like these.

But the fever has broken. At fewer than two a day, murders citywide likely will finish the year at about a seventh (14 percent) of those three years ago.

Endemic extortion endures. But most other violent crimes, including kidnappings, stand at a fraction of what they were.

Riveras del Bravo and Juarez's other former cauldrons of carnage may now prove vanguards of Mexico's long-promised peace. They're providing a road map for a nationwide pacification campaign in gangster-spawning communities being rolled out by President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Will the peace last? Many think not. Nearly all the causes of the violence remain, lurking.

But a hopeful few like Aguilera are determined to rebuild.

"There are a lot of good people here. They must have confidence in themselves," says Aguilera, a community organizer paid in part with US government aid. "We have to search for a solution."

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The fitful turnaround began here in 2010, following the massacre of 16 innocents at a block party in Villas

de Salvarcar, a poor neighborhood similar to Riveras del Bravo.

Then-President Felipe Calderon clumsily suggested the victims, mostly high school and university students who'd avoided gang life, somehow deserved their deaths.

Mexico howled in outrage.

A chastened Calderon responded by pouring many millions of dollars into Juarez community centers and sports fields, scholarships and job training. Nearly all the 10,000 federal troops and police that had deployed to the city — blamed by many here for much of the killing — were pulled out.

A new mayor and state governor changed security tactics. An iron-fisted chief was brought in to purge and professionalize the corrupt Juarez police.

Chief Julian Leyzaola imposed zero tolerance on crime, earning accusations of human rights abuses.

Pressured street gangs cut back on car thefts, robberies and assault. They set aside fights in favor of sharing the local narcotics market.

The drug trade is still thriving. Tons of cocaine, marijuana and other drugs flow north to US consumers. Increasing amounts stay on the streets of Juarez, feeding vibrant local demand.

But the all-out war between the Juarez and Sinaloa cartels for dominance of the businesses has ebbed.

"They don't bother us and we don't mess with them," Javier, a 17-year-old gang member on Juarez's west side, says of once-deadly rivals a few blocks away. "There is so much business now that the feuds don't really serve for anything."

Some believe Sinaloa's Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman won, that he's maintaining relative peace in a deal with the government. Others say the gangsters simply divvied up the city's various rackets and smuggling routes among them.

Authorities deny having made any backroom deals. They suggest cartel bosses have wisely begun favoring profits over bullets.

"It's completely logical," Raul Avila, the senior Chihuahua state police official in Juarez, says of the rumored inter-cartel deals perhaps behind the lessened bloodshed. "If you are interested in making money you want to try to have more peace."

Whatever its causes, the respite has pulled Juarez back from the abyss.

Businesses have returned to the area as violent crime decreased. (Deborah Bonello/GlobalPost)

Some [restaurants](#), bars and shops targeted during the [drug war](#) have reopened. Foreign-owned factories, the "maquiladoras," have been hiring. Many



who had fled the city — the wealthier to El Paso, the poor to their native southern Mexican states — have returned.

Though keeping a jaundiced eye out for the next storm, a determined few struggle to mend their city.

“We organized out of necessity,” says factory owner Jorge Contreras, who heads a Juarez civic group that monitors government anti-crime efforts. “It was

chaos. We were all victims. Instead of running we decided to face the situation.”

The years of bloodshed finally awakened some, like Contreras, to the threat from Juarez's prevalent poverty.

Hundreds of foreign-owned factories spurred a decades-long population boom. But most of the more than 200,000 factory jobs pay little more than survival wages.

Stunted ambition and rising resentment push too many toward the gangs.

“Depending upon the maquiladoras has not allowed us to lessen social inequality or extreme poverty,” Contreras says of the factories. “In countries where there is greater respect for the law there is more wealth, less inequality.”

Tale of two Ciudades Juarez

On Juarez's ragged eastern flank, Riveras del Bravo residents live and breathe that divide.

Financed with government guarantees, many of the neighborhood's 14,000 three-room attached homes were built on a floodplain alongside the canal that flushes Juarez's raw sewage into the desert.

The houses replaced the cardboard and wooden shacks long occupied by workers flocking to the city's factories.

They had children, took jobs and settled. Many were thrilled by home ownership with affordable mortgages gauged to \$65 a week jobs on factory floors.

“There were a lot of single women, independent and with their freedom,” Aguilera says, noting that just one of 44 houses on her street is occupied by a married couple. “But that causes a lot of broken families. Husbands are lost. It's very rare they hold ties to those left behind.”

Parents worked long shifts at the plants, leaving children to fend for themselves. Schools were inadequate, dropout rates high. Gangs and drug trafficking flourished.

The cartel war that broke out here in 2008 brought hit squads into Riveras del Bravo.

The killings coincided with the US-led global crisis that sapped factory employment. First a few families packed up and left, Aguilera says. Then whole streets, entire blocks, did so.

Thieves ransacked the abandoned houses, taking everything that could be pried loose and carted away. Gangs took up residence in the shells that remained. They slapped graffiti on every available wall, and partied in the ruins.



Riveras residents try to rebuild amid the emptied neighborhood. (Julian Cardona/GlobalPost)
Riveras today reflects the battleground that it was. Few of the ills that wrought the savagery have been remedied.

More than a quarter of Riveras' houses stand empty, barely salvageable. The sun-kilned and weed-strangled parks have been flushed of children, sacked of swings and merry-go-rounds.

Nightfall brings fearful, pitch-dark streets.

Still, some have realized this is the only home they'll have. They're determined to make their place something prideful.

They teach workshops, try to organize neighbors, preach optimism.

"People are very negative. There is a lot of apathy," says Isela Calamaco, another Riveras mother who leads Aguilera's small band of activists. "The danger of violence is always there. It always will be. But we as a society have to try to cure it. You need to have the courage to stay."

A single mother of three, Aguilera devotes weekdays to the organizing work. She survives by preparing carryout meals that she sells from her front window on weekends.

Aguilera's 7-year-old daughter and a 16-year-old son are in school. She intends to keep them there. Her eldest son, 19, studies engineering in a technical college. He works long Saturday and Sunday factory shifts to help with family expenses.

"You are my help," Aguilera says she often tells her first born. "You are my hope."