



Center for Responsible Travel

Transforming the Way the World Travels

www.responsibletravel.org

Panel 5: Mutual understanding, peace, and security

Jon Barela, CEO, Borderplex Alliance

Hello, and thank you for inviting me here today. It's an honor to be here.

I'm CEO of [The Borderplex Alliance](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to economic development and policy advocacy in a region that encompasses two countries and three states—in particular, the cities of El Paso, Texas; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.

This region is a gateway for international trade, and the Alliance is the go-to resource for ideas, information, and influence. We're supported by a coalition of business, community and civic leaders, and we share one vision—to bring new investment and jobs to the Borderplex region and create a positive business climate. That, of course, includes making the region a topnotch tourist destination.

But one of our biggest challenges, my biggest challenge since taking this job, is dispelling the myths surrounding the region. I should mention, by the way, that I'm a native. I was born and grew up in Las Cruces, and my previous job was New Mexico's Economic Development Cabinet Secretary. So I know the region, inside-out.

I also know that it's safe. You heard that correctly—the border is, in fact, safe.

For decades, the U.S. border with Mexico has been described as a violent, lawless frontier. National debates about immigration, NAFTA, and border security amplify this belief, and during last year's presidential campaign, we heard all kinds of false claims about the region and its people.

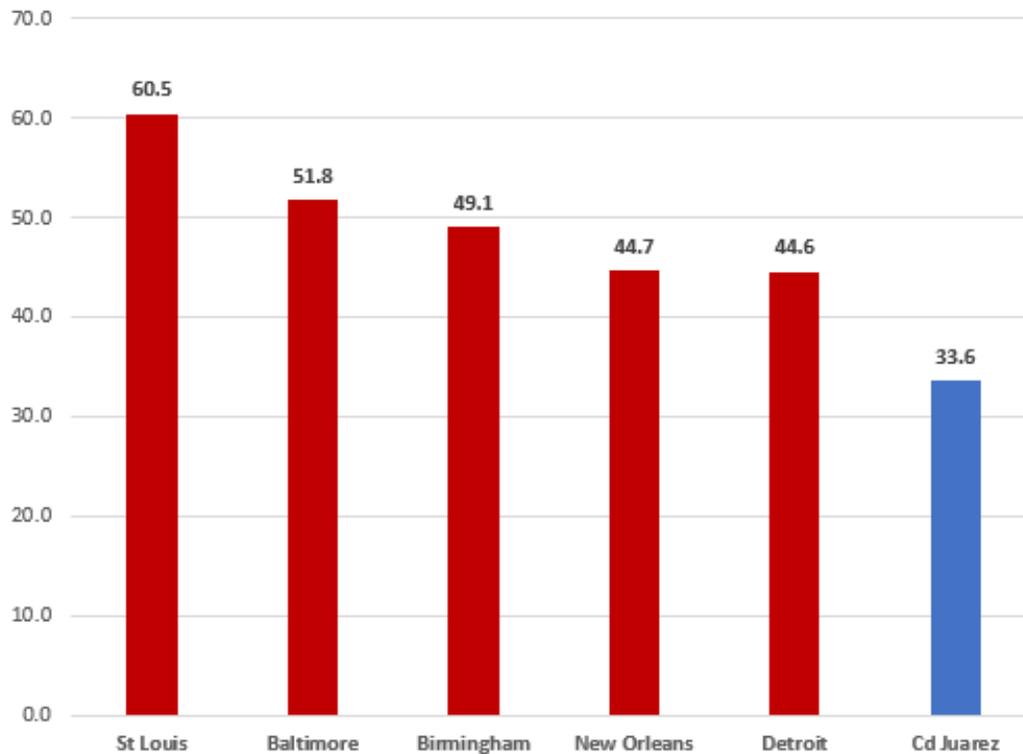
Hollywood doesn't help. Movies like *Sicario*, for example, depict a very violent Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which is far from the truth, as the video I've brought along with me will show. But these depictions, coupled with sensationalist headlines—including [a story](#) on how the film's crew survived a fact-finding trip to the border—perpetuate stereotypes about the border and its residents.

I'm here to tell you—these are myths, especially with regard to the North American Borderplex, the region surrounding Juárez and El Paso. And they are myths that hurt the region's potential as a tourist destination.

Here are the facts. For the past four years, El Paso has either been [among the safest cities](#) or the [safest city of its size in America](#). I have here a slide (below) that compares, in 2016, the homicide rate in Juárez with those of five very well-known, and well-visited, American cities. And in its most recent [crime report](#), the FBI [stated](#) that violent crime in the U.S. rose four percent, but dropped seven percent in El Paso and nine percent in Las Cruces.

Cd. Juárez's Reputation as a Dangerous City is Inaccurate

Homicide Rate Per 100k Residents (2016)



In 2016, major U.S. cities including Detroit, Birmingham, and New Orleans recorded a higher homicide rate than Cd. Juárez.

Sources:

1. Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y Justicia Penal, A.C.
2. Federal Bureau of Investigation
3. Plan Estratégico de Juárez Asociación Civil
4. United States Department of State, Overseas Security Advisory Council

Despite data like this, our current president, via an executive order, has claimed that activities along the border are “contributing to a significant increase in violent crime.”

Fallacies about the border adversely affect potential investment and job creation in the region, and that includes the tourism sector. As CEO, one of my responsibilities is to attract investment and create jobs. But these misconceptions about safety and security make that job difficult.

While I served as New Mexico’s Economic Development Cabinet Secretary, I was asked repeatedly whether the employees of companies looking to expand along the border would be safe. But I rarely heard that same question about other cities far from the border, cities where the crime rates were far higher than those in Las Cruces and El Paso.

On a trip to Phoenix, a store employee couldn’t believe I lived in the Borderplex region, with “all that crime and mayhem in the area.” So I shared with him that the violent crime rate in Phoenix is roughly twice that of El Paso. The Borderplex routinely competes for job expansion projects with the Phoenix area and other regions where crime is a real problem, so it’s crucial that people know the Borderplex is incredibly safe.

Here's another fact—the great majority of Americans have never visited the southern border. The same is true for many members of Congress. And I know this because, early in my career, I lived and worked in D.C. for many years. And as CEO of The Borderplex Alliance, I've testified on Capitol Hill and met with Congressional leaders to share this narrative. Many were very surprised to hear the message that the Borderplex is a safe and sophisticated manufacturing hub as well as a great destination for visitors.

I'd like to share with you a video that demonstrates just how rich in history, culture and outdoor activities Juárez, in particular, is. But first let me just say this—the citizens of that regions are hard-working, productive, and respectful people. I, for one, take great offense when people outside the area, including many here in Washington, assert otherwise.

For those reasons, The Borderplex Alliance will continue its fight to create jobs and educate the country about what a great place we have in which to live, invest, and visit. Thank you.