



South Texas

High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area

Drug Market Analysis 2009



**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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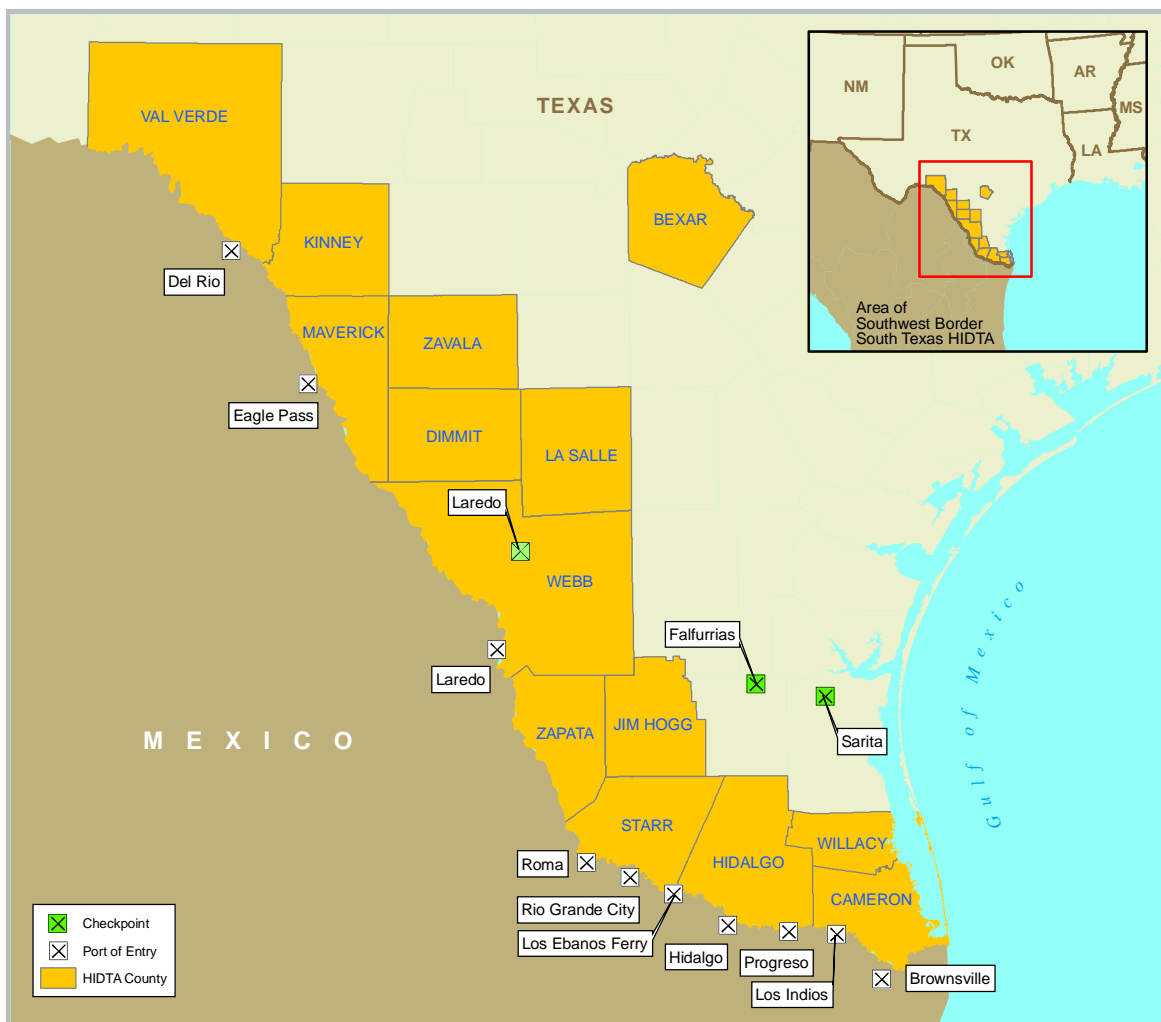
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Preface

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.
- Large-scale methamphetamine and heroin smuggling routes appear to be shifting back to South Texas from other areas along the Southwest Border, such as Arizona and California. The amount of methamphetamine and heroin seized in the South Texas HIDTA region increased significantly in 2008 after declining in 2007. This shift may be the result of DTOs seeking to avoid the violence-prone smuggling corridors of Tijuana, Baja California, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, and steering more smuggling operations through the states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas.
- Mexican DTOs, particularly the Sinaloa Cartel, Gulf Cartel, and their enforcement arm, Los Zetas, are expanding the use of South Texas-based prison gangs and street gangs such as Mexikanemi, Texas Syndicate, and Valluco Soldiers as well as individual gang members from various gangs in their drug trafficking operations. These drug traffickers also hire gangs and gang members to perform home invasion robberies, commit burglaries, and collect drug debts throughout the South Texas border area.

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). 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.

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.

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

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 officers regularly seize multikilogram quantities of cocaine, heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine from drug traffickers in South Texas. Law enforcement officers in South Texas often seize greater amounts of cocaine and heroin than officers seize in other areas along the U.S.–Mexico border, in addition to significant quantities of marijuana and methamphetamine. However, during the past year apparent changes in smuggling operations and shifts in smuggling routes have resulted in noticeable fluctuations in drug seizure totals along the U.S.–Mexico border, including in South Texas. Cocaine seizure totals declined significantly in South Texas during the past year, while total seizures for methamphetamine more than quadrupled, marijuana increased significantly, and heroin increased substantially. Despite these fluctuations and varying volumes of illicit drugs being smuggled across the U.S.–Mexico border into South Texas, the region continues to be one of the most influential drug transportation and distribution areas in the United States. Most illicit drugs smuggled into South Texas HIDTA counties from Mexico transit the area en route to drug markets primarily in the Southeast, Great Lakes, and West Central regions of the United States.

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; however, other ethnic drug traffickers also contribute to the threat that drug trafficking poses to the South Texas HIDTA region. (See Table 1 on page 6). 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.

The Gulf Cartel and Sinaloa Cartel are the most prominent large-scale Mexican DTOs impacting the South Texas HIDTA region. These cartels have battled each other for control of smuggling routes through northeastern Mexico and the South Texas area since 2004. During the past year, the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas¹ have finally cemented their control over plazas² between Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas, across the Rio Grande River from

1. Los Zetas are extremely violent former Mexican Special Forces soldiers who initially served as Gulf Cartel enforcers under former Gulf Cartel leader Osiel Cárdenas-Guillén but have since risen to leadership positions with the Gulf Cartel and may be seeking to form their own drug trafficking organization (DTO).
2. Plazas refer to specific cities or geographic locations along the U.S.–Mexico border that are used to smuggle illicit drugs from Mexico into 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.

Del Rio and Brownsville, respectively. This is most evident as cartel-related violence between these DTOs has reportedly decreased in the Mexican states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas or has shifted to other areas along the U.S.–Mexico border and elsewhere throughout Mexico. However, cells of the Sinaloa Cartel still operate in these areas and throughout South Texas, and violent confrontations could reemerge at any time.

Several recent large-scale investigations demonstrate the dominant position that Mexican drug cartels, specifically the Gulf Cartel, maintain over drug trafficking in the South Texas HIDTA region and illustrate the range of their drug distribution and money laundering networks throughout the United States. Operations Puma, All Inclusive, and Prophecy, and Project Reckoning targeted the Gulf Cartel, which is based in Matamoros and operates extensively throughout South Texas. The Gulf Cartel is responsible for the smuggling of multiton quantities of cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin, and marijuana into

the United States from Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, and Panama. In addition to drug and money laundering operations, Gulf Cartel members in Mexico and South Texas engage in firearms smuggling, kidnapping, and other violent crimes. These investigations resulted in the dismantlement or disruption of numerous Gulf Cartel distribution cells, the seizure of significant quantities of illicit drugs, the arrest of the Gulf Cartel's gatekeeper³ in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, and the indictment of Gulf Cartel leadership, including Consolidated Priority Organization Targets (CPOTs)⁴ Ezequiel Cárdenas-Guillén, Jorge Eduardo Costilla-Sánchez, and Heriberto Lazcano-Lazcano. For example, Project Reckoning resulted in more than 500 arrests and the seizure of more than 16 tons of cocaine, 1,000 pounds of methamphetamine, 25 tons of marijuana, and \$60 million in U.S. currency.

Texas-based prison gangs and street gangs also are active in drug distribution within the South Texas HIDTA region. Prison gangs and street gangs generate most of their income from criminal activities, including drug production, transportation, and distribution. Gangs such as Mexicanemi (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. These gangs often maintain chapters throughout Texas and use chapters along the border to facilitate drug transportation to other areas of the state. For example, two recent Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF) investigations—Operation Pistol Whipped and Operation Smoking Guns—targeted HPL chapters in Laredo and Houston. These investigations revealed that HPL members in

Houston often make arrangements with Laredo-based HPL members for the delivery of marijuana and cocaine shipments from the border area to Houston. Mexicanemi is the most powerful and influential gang operating in the South Texas HIDTA region. 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, Los Zetas, and Sinaloa Cartel reportedly use members of HPL, Texas Syndicate, Tri-City Bombers, Latin Kings, and Vallucos for smuggling, transportation, and enforcement purposes. Recent incidents, investigations, and arrests—including a drug-related shooting in Palmview, Hidalgo County—reveal that Mexican drug cartels also enlist gang members to perform home invasion robberies and collect drug debts in South Texas HIDTA counties.

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.

3. 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.
4. A Consolidated Priority Organization Target (CPOT) designation is reserved for significant illicit drug traffickers who are believed to be the leaders of DTOs responsible for the importation of large quantities of illicit drugs into the United States.

Table 1. Drug Trafficking Activities in the South Texas HIDTA Region, 2008

Drug	Race/Ethnicity/Nationality and Scope of Organization*	Drug Source Areas	Drug Destinations
Cocaine/crack cocaine	African American (I, MS) Caucasian American (I, L, MS) Colombian (I) Cuban (MS) El Salvadoran (I, MS) Honduran (I) Mexican (I, L, MS) Mexican American (I, L, MS)	Colombia Mexico (Coahuila, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Veracruz) Nicaragua United States (Georgia, Texas)	Texas, Florida, Georgia
Heroin	African American (I) Caucasian American (I) Mexican (I) Mexican American (I)	Mexico	Not Reported
Marijuana	African American (I, MS) Caucasian American (I, L, MS) Colombian (I) El Salvadoran (I, MS) Honduran (I) Mexican (I, L, MS) Mexican American (I, L, MS)	Mexico (Coahuila, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas) United States (Texas)	Texas, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio
Methamphetamine	African American (I) Caucasian American (I) Colombian (I) Mexican (I) Mexican American (I)	Mexico (Coahuila, Nuevo León) United States (Texas)	Not Reported

Source: South Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.

*Scope of organization is designated as International (I), Local (L), or Multistate (MS).

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

Illicit drug production is a lesser law enforcement concern than is cross-border drug smuggling in the South Texas border area. Foreign-produced drugs dominate local drug markets throughout the border area and greatly minimize the need or desire among abusers and local distributors to produce illicit drugs locally. In addition, the cost of producing drugs locally is higher than purchasing the drugs from local distributors. Virtually all methamphetamine production that impacts the South Texas border area takes place in Mexico. Law enforcement officers in the 13 South Texas HIDTA counties that make up the border area have not reported any methamphetamine laboratory seizures since 2005, according to National Seizure System (NSS) statistics. (See Table 4 on page 13.) Bexar County is the primary location for the limited methamphetamine production that takes place in the South Texas HIDTA region. Marijuana production is also considered minimal in border counties. Even if cannabis cultivation and marijuana production were cost effective, local distributors could not compete with Mexican DTOs that distribute low-cost Mexican marijuana in local markets. It is quite likely, however, that a limited number of local distributors and marijuana abusers cultivate cannabis and produce personal use quantities of marijuana in their private residences. Crack cocaine is produced in limited quantities in the South Texas border area, but most local distributors and abusers obtain the drug from sources 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. 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. 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 drug trafficking.

Table 2. Illicit Drugs Seized in South Texas HIDTA Counties Bordering Mexico, in Kilograms, 2006–2008

County	Cocaine			Heroin			Marijuana			Methamphetamine		
	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008	2006	2007	2008
Cameron	930.40	1,320.25	553.35	14.23	19.63	46.98	13,276.60	17,302.89	19,697.15	95.52	4.40	89.44
Dimmit	NR	0.00	0.03	NR	NR	NR	2,093.42	1,670.98	1,282.81	0.02	NR	NR
Hidalgo	6,786.96	6,242.64	2,912.87	22.09	15.69	13.74	85,642.55	109,978.36	100,650.36	122.75	41.19	323.69
Jim Hogg	0.04	81.42	32.34	NR	NR	NR	16,555.64	18,977.24	27,959.58	2.72	0.86	NR
Kinney	NR	44.16	24.07	NR	NR	NR	3,431.10	1,303.71	1,056.52	1.45	NR	NR
La Salle	NR	1.80	72.01	NR	NR	NR	613.39	162.39	1,204.51	NR	NR	NR
Maverick	549.89	482.83	218.15	1.33	3.92	22.95	17,207.35	13,563.73	16,663.22	19.07	NR	14.69
Starr	635.57	548.53	416.85	17.34	10.84	NR	64,460.26	71,321.83	78,886.83	13.88	NR	4.28
Val Verde	97.03	73.71	185.05	2.68	NR	NR	15,338.55	13,931.61	14,580.32	47.20	NR	0.00
Webb	4,192.50	2,805.09	2,820.51	83.64	23.29	26.12	64,106.10	57,284.05	94,673.26	89.59	66.50	134.99
Willacy	54.98	26.82	64.11	NR	NR	NR	2,134.49	1,365.93	1,357.59	1.18	3.72	NR
Zapata	0.00	29.21	NR	0.23	NR	NR	4,440.27	3,497.41	11,885.46	NR	NR	NR
Zavala	0.03	8.80	27.86	NR	NR	NR	994.18	126.19	730.01	NR	NR	NR
Total	13,247.40	11,665.26	7,327.20	141.54	73.37	109.79	290,293.90	310,486.32	370,627.62	393.38	116.67	567.09

Source: El Paso Intelligence Center, February 2, 2009.

NR—None Reported.

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. For example, law enforcement agents seized more than 7,000 pounds of marijuana being stored in a private residence near Roma in April 2008.

South Texas is one of the busiest and most influential drug smuggling corridors along the U.S.–Mexico border, and law enforcement officers in the region seize large quantities of illicit drugs annually. Available seizure data indicate that the amount of cocaine seized in HIDTA

counties in the South Texas border area in 2008 fell well below totals recorded in 2007, while heroin, marijuana, and methamphetamine surpassed seizure totals from that same year. (See Table 2.) The increase in methamphetamine seizures in the South Texas border area reverses a trend of decreasing seizure amounts that began in 2005 when South Texas ranked behind only California in the amount of methamphetamine seized along the U.S.–Mexico border. Several HIDTA counties, including Cameron, Hidalgo, and Webb, reported significant increases in methamphetamine seizure totals in 2008 compared to 2007. Noteworthy among these is the October 2008 seizure of 19.59 kilograms of methamphetamine along the Rio Grande River near Laredo, Webb County. Seizures of methamphetamine between POEs are rather uncommon and account for approximately 2 percent of all methamphetamine seizures along the Southwest Border.

Heroin seizure amounts for 2008 finished well above seizure amounts from 2007, most likely the result of an uncharacteristically large seizure of 21 kilograms of heroin at the Eagle Pass POE in Maverick County.

Fluctuations in seizure amounts in South Texas are most likely being influenced by changes in smuggling routes implemented by traffickers as the result of widespread counterdrug operations implemented by the United States, the government of Mexico, and violence stemming from these operations. Mexican law enforcement officers and military personnel are attempting to disrupt and dismantle the smuggling networks of Mexico's most powerful drug cartels. In addition, rival cartels are still competing for control of lucrative smuggling routes into the United States, most notably in Baja California, Sonora, and Chihuahua, Mexico. These factors have caused widespread violence in Mexican border states, and DTOs operating there may be attempting to avoid these violence-prone areas by smuggling higher-priced methamphetamine and heroin shipments through the states of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, which border the South Texas HIDTA region. Counterdrug operations also most likely contributed to the decrease in cocaine seizures in the South Texas HIDTA region during 2008. Law enforcement pressure, large cocaine seizures, and arrests of high-level cartel members continue to hamper the ability of Mexican DTOs to acquire large quantities of cocaine from South America, transport them to Mexico, and smuggle the drugs into the South Texas HIDTA region, contributing to the significant decline in cocaine seizures reported in 2008.

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.

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

Drug-related crime and violence are persistent threats in the South Texas HIDTA region, particularly in the border area. The DTOs and gangs operating in the border area often commit assault, automobile theft, burglary, extortion, home invasion robbery, kidnapping, and murder to facilitate smuggling activities, to protect their operations from rival trafficking organizations or gangs, or to collect payments owed to them. Drug-related violence emanating from Mexico also threatens the South Texas HIDTA region, but violence in South Texas HIDTA counties that border Mexico has not risen to levels experienced in Mexico. However, violent attacks perpetrated by drug traffickers do occur in the border area. For example, since January 2008 law enforcement officials from Laredo to Brownsville have reported at least 32 kidnappings and home invasion robberies. Many other similar incidents are not reported because the victims are often involved in drug trafficking activities and seek to avoid exposing themselves to further law enforcement scrutiny. High-ranking Mexican drug traffickers and assassins easily cross the international border into the United States, as evidenced by the arrests of Gulf Cartel gatekeepers in McAllen during the past year. In addition, law enforcement officials in the South Texas border area have also arrested Los Zetas members as well as hit men working for the Gulf Cartel. These hit men and enforcement teams are usually heavily armed and have access to a variety of weapons, including assault rifles and hand grenades. Mexico's drug cartels stockpile weapons along both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border for use against rival traffickers and law enforcement officers. In November 2008 Mexican law enforcement officials seized more than 400 firearms, 500,000 rounds of ammunition, 150 grenades, and other explosives from a Gulf Cartel stash house in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, across the Rio Grande River from McAllen.

Abuse

Illicit drug abuse is a serious concern for law enforcement and public health officials in the South Texas HIDTA region. The highest levels of illicit drug abuse in the South Texas border area are 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 are in Bexar County.) Drug abuse among adolescents is of particular concern. 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. However, according to 2007 data, more adolescents in border counties sought treatment for marijuana than for any other illicit drug. Most adolescents receiving treatment for marijuana abuse reported first using the drug at 12 or 13 years of age. Heroin abuse among adolescents is also a concern, particularly in Webb County, which reported the highest number of youth treatment admissions for heroin abuse. Methamphetamine abuse remains low throughout the South Texas border area. According to DSHS treatment data, no counties in the South Texas border area reported more than 10 admissions to publicly funded treatment facilities for methamphetamine abuse in 2007. (See [Table 3 on page 12.](#))

Figure 2. South Texas HIDTA region transportation infrastructure.



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.

Table 3. Number of Substance Abuse Treatment Admissions to Publicly Funded Facilities by HIDTA Counties Bordering Mexico and by Drug, 2005–2007**

County	Cocaine			Heroin			Marijuana			Methamphetamine		
	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007
Cameron	238	195	174	89	49	37	207	178	135	*	*	*
Dimmit	*	*	*	0	*	*	57	17	32	0	0	0
Hidalgo	281	311	253	59	52	39	131	195	98	*	0	*
Jim Hogg	*	0	*	0	0	0	*	0	0	*	0	0
Kinney	0	*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
La Salle	*	*	*	*	0	0	14	0	25	0	0	0
Maverick	*	12	*	*	*	12	55	47	63	0	0	0
Starr	165	133	109	*	0	*	82	74	57	*	*	0
Val Verde	0	*	*	23	27	39	*	*	*	0	0	0
Webb	304	242	164	229	247	246	181	177	112	*	*	*
Willacy	20	*	*	0	*	0	*	14	*	0	0	0
Zapata	26	15	10	*	*	*	34	33	20	0	0	*
Zavala	12	*	*	18	19	*	28	27	20	0	0	0

Source: Texas Department of State Health Services.

*Represents fewer than 10 treatment admissions as a result of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act confidentiality requirements.

**The latest year for which treatment data are available.

Note: Actual treatment admissions may be higher than those depicted as a result of reporting treatment admissions for specific drugs or age groups in which fewer than 10 persons received treatment. For example, the chart above indicates that there were 32 treatment admissions for marijuana abuse in Dimmit County in 2007; however, this number does not reflect the fewer than 10 adult treatment admissions reported.

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 in any other locale in South Texas.

Bexar County is the primary location for the limited methamphetamine production that takes place in the South Texas HIDTA region. Through the first 10 months of 2008, only three methamphetamine laboratories were seized in Bexar County, according to NSS data, compared with six laboratory seizures in 2007 and 15 in 2006.⁵ (See Table 4.) Small-scale methamphetamine laboratories remain a persistent problem in Bexar County and are sources for most of the methamphetamine production taking place in the area. The laboratories and their operators cater to a small portion of the local methamphetamine market that prefers locally produced methamphetamine. Despite the continued small-scale production of methamphetamine in Bexar County and San Antonio, law enforcement officials have not noted any incidents or evidence of large-scale, organized pseudoephedrine smurfing⁶ activity in

5. Data provided by the South Texas High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA) indicate that 16 methamphetamine laboratories were seized through the first 10 months of 2008.

6. Pseudoephedrine and ephedrine smurfing is a method used by some methamphetamine traffickers to acquire large quantities of precursor chemicals. This method involves making numerous small-quantity purchases from multiple retail locations.

Table 4. Number of Methamphetamine Laboratory Seizures in the South Texas HIDTA 2006–2008

County/Region	2006	2007	2008	Total
Bexar	15	6	7	28
Remainder of South Texas HIDTA region	0	0	0	0
Remainder of Texas	57	41	59	157
Total	72	47	66	185

Source: National Seizure System, run date February 2, 2009.

Note: National Seizure System is a voluntary reporting system. Its data may not reflect all laboratory seizures.

the area, a practice common elsewhere in Texas and the Southwest region, that supports local methamphetamine production or production in other areas of the state.

Cannabis cultivation and marijuana production occur infrequently in the San Antonio area. Cannabis grow sites encountered by law enforcement officers are usually operated by individuals who are not associated with large trafficking organizations. These sites generally incorporate unsophisticated equipment and growing methods. Occasionally law enforcement officers encounter a grow site with more sophisticated lighting, watering, or cultivation techniques, but these incidents are not commonplace in San Antonio. As such, most San Antonio grow sites are capable of producing only personal use quantities of the drug and do not contribute significant amounts to the local drug market, which is dominated by low-cost Mexican marijuana.

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, 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 on page 11.) 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. 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 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 sizable street gang and prison gang populations. 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 invasion robberies linked to drug trafficking in San Antonio. Such incidents often target residents known or suspected to be involved in the illicit drug business; drugs and 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 any other area in the South Texas HIDTA region. As a result, significantly higher drug abuse and drug treatment rates are recorded in San Antonio than in 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. Heroin abuse rates have historically been high in San Antonio, owing partially to the involvement of the Mexicanemi prison gang in heroin distribution in the city. The high levels of cocaine trafficking and the wide

Table 5. Number of Substance Abuse-Related Admissions to Publicly Funded Treatment Facilities, Bexar County, 2005–2007*

Cocaine			Heroin			Marijuana			Methamphetamine		
2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007
1,409	1,242	1,390	1,437	1,557	1,710	1,315	1,433	1,299	318	322	284

Source: Texas Department of State Health Services.

*The latest year for which data are available.

Note: Actual treatment admissions may be higher than those depicted above as a result of reporting treatment admissions for specific drugs or age groups in which fewer than 10 persons received treatment.

availability of the drug also result in high levels of cocaine abuse in the city. Admissions to publicly funded treatment facilities for heroin and cocaine abuse increased from 2006 through 2007 in Bexar County. (See Table 5.) Methamphetamine abuse and treatment rates in San Antonio, mirroring abuse trends in the South Texas border area, appear to be well below abuse and treatment rates for cocaine, heroin, and marijuana.

Illicit Finance

Bulk cash smuggling is the primary method used by drug traffickers in San Antonio to move illicit drug proceeds. San Antonio is situated at the juncture of several key transportation routes that extend to POEs throughout the South Texas border area—one of the major bulk cash smuggling areas along the U.S.–Mexico border. Illicit drug proceeds generated from drug transactions in San Antonio and in drug markets throughout the Great Lakes, New England, and Southeast regions of the United States transit the San Antonio area en route to Mexico. The steady flow of traffic between San Antonio and the South Texas border area makes detecting the southbound movement of bulk quantities of illicit cash a significant challenge for law enforcement officers in the South Texas area.

San Antonio-based drug traffickers and distributors use other methods in addition to bulk cash smuggling to launder drug proceeds. The commercial and consumer business infrastructures that support San Antonio's large population also

provide alternative methods for drug traffickers to launder drug proceeds. Drug traffickers often commingle illicit drug proceeds with money generated at a variety of cash-intensive businesses or use illicit drug proceeds to establish and operate these types of businesses. In addition, drug traffickers in San Antonio also use money generated from illicit drug sales to purchase real estate and other luxury items, including cars, boats, and jewelry.

Outlook

A shift in smuggling routes appears to be steering some methamphetamine smuggling activity towards South Texas from areas of Arizona and California. Fighting and violence occurring in Tijuana, Baja California, and elsewhere throughout northern Mexico will likely redirect some methamphetamine shipments through Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, states that have experienced a reduction in drug-related violence during the past year. Such a development would most likely increase the flow of methamphetamine through the South Texas HIDTA region and could result in an upward trend in methamphetamine seizure amounts in the near term.

South Texas-based prison gangs and street gangs will most likely increase their involvement in drug trafficking, thereby intensifying the threat that they pose to the South Texas HIDTA region. Recent law enforcement reporting indicates that ties among these gangs and Mexican DTOs are strengthening and that gang

members are becoming more involved in Mexican DTO activities, including acting as enforcers, in the South Texas border area. This poses a direct threat to the South Texas HIDTA, because gangs may gain greater access to DTO-controlled firearms caches along the border in order to carry out their duties. Moreover, the gangs may use these weapons against rival gangs or law enforcement officers in South Texas.

Sources

Local, State, and Regional

Bexar County Sheriff's Department
 Castle Hills Police Department
 City of San Antonio
 San Antonio Police Department
 Hidalgo County Sheriff's Department
 Raymondville Police Department
 State of Texas
 Texas Department of Criminal Justice
 Parole Division
 Texas Department of Public Safety
 Texas Department of State Health Services
 University of Texas
 Center for Social Work Research
 Terrell Hills Police Department
 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 Defense
 Department of the Army
 Foreign Military Studies Office
 Joint Reserve Intelligence 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 Justice
 Drug Enforcement Administration
 El Paso Intelligence Center
 National Seizure System
 Houston Field Division
 Executive Office for U.S. Attorneys
 U.S. Attorneys Office
 Southern District of Texas
 Federal Bureau of Investigation
 McAllen Intelligence Center

U.S. Department of the Interior
 National Park System
 Amistad National Recreation Area
 Padre Island National Seashore
 U.S. Department of the Treasury
 Financial Crimes Enforcement Network

Other

University of San Diego
 Trans-Border Institute

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**Questions and comments may be directed to
Southwest Unit, Regional Threat Analysis Branch.**

National Drug Intelligence Center

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