

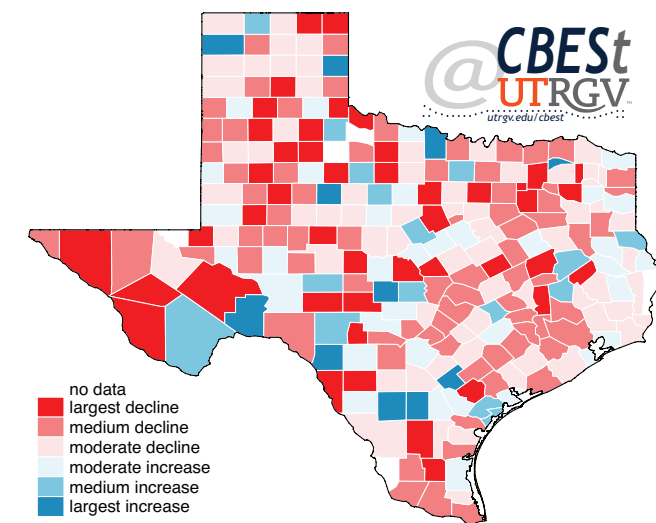
Where have the criminals gone? Negative crime growth in South Texas

By SALVADOR CONTRERAS

THE BORDER REGION HAS BEEN PORTRAYED by the national media as unsafe. This has been in part attributed to immigrants who are depicted as criminals who bring their criminal ways to the border. By extension, the border region must be suffering from abnormal levels of violence and crime. It brings to mind Fox News contributor Lawrence Jones who while reporting from Laredo is seen wearing a green armored vest. It is no surprise that people are asking, “just how unsafe is the Border Region?”

In this piece we bring some perspective to crime trends at the Border/South Texas Region. We use agency level data from the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Program. We report crime (arrests) rates per 1,000 people. We show that crime in the Border Region has seen a steep decline over the past 18 years. This is of no surprise since crime in Texas and the Nation have also witnessed sharp declines. The Border/South Texas crime trends are similar to other parts of the state. It is quite possible that immigrants have had no effect on crime trends in our region.

Total Crime



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Figure 1: Average annual crime growth, 1999-2016

SOURCE: FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING PROGRAM

Let’s start with a map. Figure 1 presents the average annual growth in the crime rate from 1999 to 2016 by county. Darker red represents largest declines while darker blue are largest gains. The map shows that most Texas counties, 187 of 249, experienced declines in crime. South Texas had few cases with positive growth, Aransas, La Salle, McMullen, and Refugio. However, for the exception of Aransas, these are small counties (in terms of population).

County	Percent
TARRANT	-4.4
HAYS	-4.0
FORT BEND	-3.9
TRAVIS	-3.6
DENTON	-3.5
WILLIAMSON	-3.4
MONTGOMERY	-3.3
DALLAS	-3.0
HARRIS	-2.8
MIDLAND	-2.6
EL PASO	-2.5
ELLIS	-2.5
HIDALGO	-2.3
CAMERON	-2.3
BELL	-2.2
GUADALUPE	-2.2
BRAZORIA	-2.0
JEFFERSON	-1.8
ECTOR	-1.5
WEBB	-1.5
TAYLOR	-1.3
COLLIN	-0.9
BRAZOS	-0.7
MCLENNAN	-0.7
JOHNSON	-0.6
SMITH	-0.5
NUECES	-0.4
LUBBOCK	-0.2
BEXAR	0.2
GALVESTON	1.6

Table 1: Texas 30 large counties average annual crime growth, 1999-2016

SOURCE: FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING PROGRAM

Table 1 presents the growth rates of Texas 30 most populous counties. The table is sorted by growth rate. Tarrant County saw average annual declines of 4.4%, followed by Hays and Fort Bend County. At the bottom of the table we see that Lubbock and Bexar County saw

almost no change. While Galveston saw an increase of 1.6%. Notice that all border counties on the list (El Paso, Hidalgo, Cameron, and Webb) saw declines ranging from 2.5% (El Paso) to 1.5% (Webb).

The border counties of Hidalgo, Cameron, El Paso, and Webb saw declines in youth and adult crime. Among these, El Paso had the largest decline in youth crime at 4.4% and Hidalgo in adult crime at 2.3%.

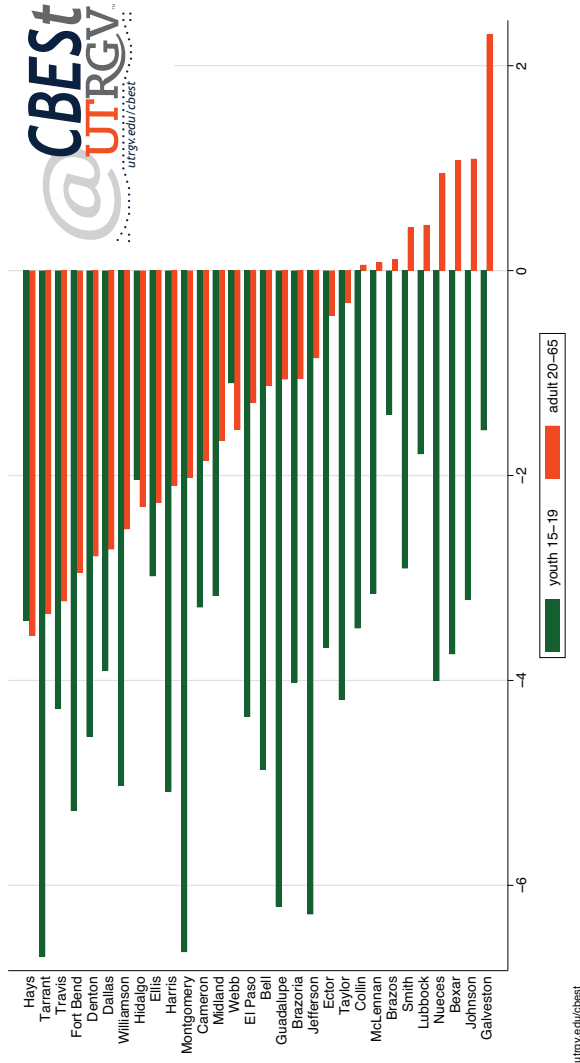


Figure 2: Average annual growth in crime by age group, 1999-2016

SOURCE: FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING PROGRAM

Figure 2 shows youth and adult annual crime growth for the 30 most populous counties. Youth are defined as 15-19 years of age and adults are 20 years of age or older. Data is sorted by adult rates. For example, Hays County had the largest decline, 3.6%, in adult crime. Tarrant and Montgomery County had the biggest decline in youth crime at 6.7%. Notice that all sampled counties saw a decline in youth crime. However, 9 of 30 counties had positive growth in adult crime.

Crime by Category

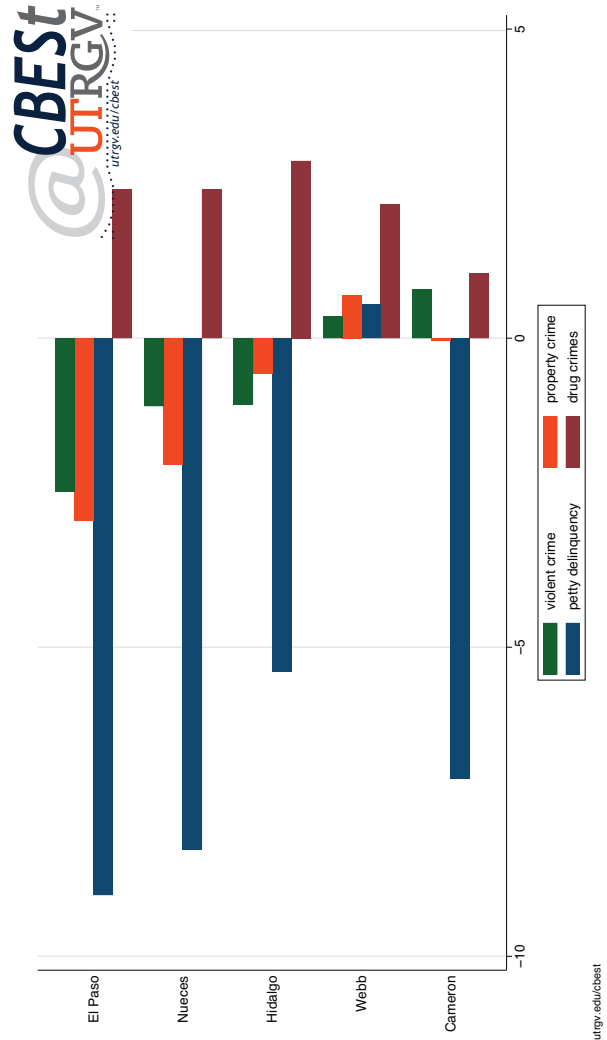


Figure 3: Average annual growth by crime category, 1999-2016

SOURCE: FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING PROGRAM

Next, we present four broad categories of crime. These are violent crime, property crime, petty delinquency, and drug crimes. Violent crime encompasses murder, manslaughter, robbery, and aggravated assault. Property crime is defined as burglary-breaking or entering, larceny-theft (includes motor vehicles), and arson. Petty

delinquency captures vandalism, disorderly conduct, and curfew and loitering violations. Drug crimes encompassing sale, manufacturing, and possession.

Figure 3 presents average growth in crime of selected Border/South Texas Counties by crime category. The figure is sorted by violent crime. Among these counties, El Paso saw the largest decline in violent crime and petty delinquency. Webb County saw small increase in all four categories. Drug arrests were up in all five counties. The largest gains being in Hidalgo County at 2.9%.

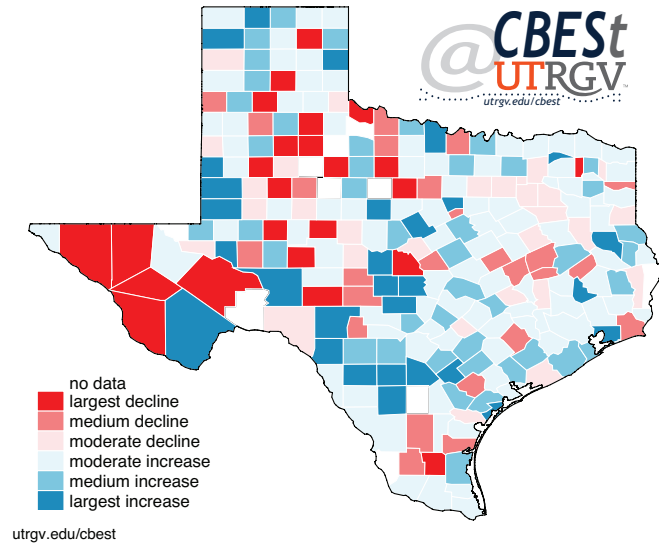


Figure 4: Average annual growth in drug crimes, 1999-2016

SOURCE: FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING PROGRAM

Figure 4 shows the average annual growth in drug arrests. Again, red represents a decline and blue an increase. Notice that drug arrest rates are up in most Texas counties. Border counties experience moderate increases. Among Texas largest counties: Collin, Galveston, and Lubbock saw the highest increase in drug crimes ranging from 4.9% to 6.6%.

The Border Region

So, is there more crime in the Border Region? Figure 5 shows the 2016 crime rate of Texas 30 most populous counties. The figure shows that Fort Bend, Denton, and Collin County have the lowest crime rates. At the other extreme, Galveston, Nueces, and Ector County have the highest. In 2016, Nueces County had 96 crimes per 1,000 people.

Figure 5 shows that the Border Region is quite average. Among border counties, El Paso has the lowest rate at 37 and Cameron the largest at 46 crimes per 1,000 people. By this measure, the Border Region is no more “dangerous” than the average large county in Texas.

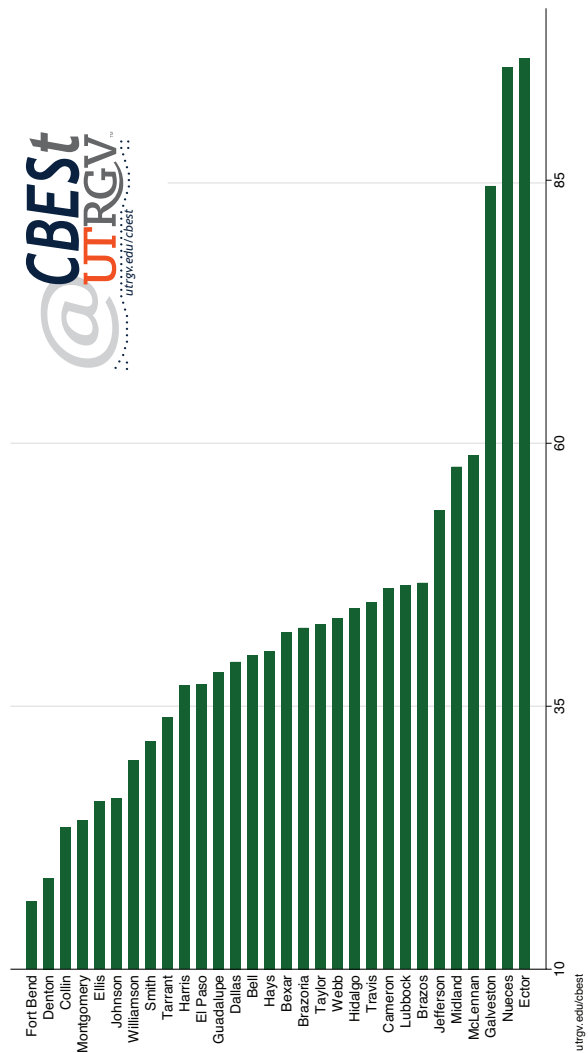


Figure 5: Total crime per 1,000 people, 2016

SOURCE: FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTING PROGRAM

Crime is driven by many factors. None of which are explored here. However, it is safe to say that the Border itself does not appear to attract more or less crime than other parts of Texas.

Author

Dr. Salvador Contreras is Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Endnotes

Horton, A. (2019, April 5). Fox News contributor mocked for wearing 'totally ridiculous' body armor at the border. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

Center for Border Economic Studies
Robert C. Vackar College of Business & Entrepreneurship
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
1201 W. University Drive, Edinburg, TX 78539
cbest@utrgv.edu
utrgv.edu/cbest
follow us on Twitter @bordereconomy