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I first traveled to Tijuana last June with the St. John Vianney (Kirkland, WA) youth group for two weeks to work with Esperanza. The majority of trekkers on that trip, and some new members, have been planning to return to Tijuana again this summer, just as the parish has done annually for nearly 20 years. As a high school senior, this would be my last time going to Mexico with the youth group. I originally wrote this letter to the Archdiocese of Seattle to express my concerns after the Archbishop had decided that high school groups should not go to Mexico due to the drug-related violence. This had been a concern that our group had discussed both amongst ourselves and with parents who were concerned with the safety of their children. After that dialogue, some parents remained unconvinced because they had plenty of news that it was unsafe and no proof that it was safe. This is not a local problem, as many groups around the country have cancelled their trips as well. However, I firmly believe that it is still safe to travel to Mexico for the mission trek based on a variety of objective data I have received from first-hand witnesses and researched using media articles. Although the media as a whole may paint a horrific picture of Mexico for us, they cannot alter the hard facts and data. I don't think that that any group should cancel their mission trip at this time, because the current levels of violence, measured with statistics and first-hand experience, do not warrant it, and because canceling would send the message of abandoning important missionary work that could be accomplished without being in excessive danger.

I went on the Mexico mission trip last year for the first time, and it has been a life-changing experience and has greatly strengthened my faith. It is the single best experience I have ever had in connection with my Church. All of the participants were able to experience first-hand the incredible poverty in Tijuana, and I believe that we performed a great deal of meaningful work in helping to build homes and bring social justice to our neighbors south of the border. Upon returning home from Mexico, the majority of the group members decided that they definitely wanted to go back to Mexico in 2009, and we began the long journey of planning and fundraising. Just as the families we plan to serve in Mexico must work hard in preparation for the construction of their house, we spend many hours making all of the money ourselves to pay for this trip. The promise of an amazing two weeks in Mexico motivates us throughout the year to reach our financial goals. As a senior, this is my last chance to go to Mexico with the high school group, and I sincerely hope that we will be able to go.

Since President Felipe Calderón took office in late 2006, he has vowed to end the drug trafficking from Mexico to the United States. He has had to use federal troops to combat both the drug cartels and the widespread corruption in police and local government. In the past six months, the American media has reported more and more on the violence in Mexico. However, like many stories, the sensationalist viewpoint that the media uses has taken the facts out of context. Their anthem of "stay away from Mexico" has caused a 50 percent drop in tourism in the country. Experts and first-hand witnesses will attest that the violence is targeted at people related to the drug war, not foreigners.

- The Homeland Security Department's attaché to Mexico, Alonzo Pena says the drug cartel activity in Mexico is not as dangerous to tourists as has been portrayed. He said

“the violence is in isolated areas of the country and only affects the people involved in criminal activity. The violence is not affecting U.S. citizens visiting Mexico.”<sup>1</sup>

- Juan Saldana, of the Tijuana Convention & Visitors Bureau says, “I can also assure you that visitors and tourists are not targets of this,” and that the violence is “among drug cartels, and all three levels of government” as opposed to the tourist.<sup>2</sup>
- Charles Pope, of the University of San Diego Trans-border Institute, said 90 percent of those killed had direct ties to the drug trade or were cops trying to do their job. “For the average day tourist, it’s not a problem,” he said. “If you are not in the drug trade or law enforcement, you are not a target.”<sup>3</sup>
- “In reality, the violence isn’t targeting tourists. It’s between drug traffickers, criminals and police. But the tourist doesn’t know the difference,” said Victor Clark Alfaro, director of Tijuana’s Bi-National Center for Human Rights.<sup>4</sup>
- None of Esperanza’s 1,500 volunteers in their 6,000 days with Esperanza in 2008 reported any incidents of violence or even times where they felt threatened or in danger<sup>5</sup>

My parish has been working with the Esperanza International organization for 18 years, and we have built trust-based relationships with members of the organization in Tijuana. They are still recommending that we come, and safety is necessarily their primary concern, because an incident could mean the end of the organization as a whole. The Posada neighborhoods where we work continue to be safe. Esperanza is also struggling financially this year because many groups have canceled, and it is important that St. John Vianney, one of their biggest supporters, continue to help them survive through these tough economic times. (I highly recommend reading the few articles on their website – see end of letter for the web address).

I have compiled some statistics about the violence in Mexico and specifically Tijuana, as objective data can show actual trends occurring. Although personal sentiments may be biased by personal viewpoints, the statistics show empirical measurements of the condition.

- Rubido Garcia, of the National Security Service [of Mexico] revealed at a press conference that there has been a drop in drug related executions and murders re by 26% in the first quarter of 2009 nationwide. The city of Tijuana has shown a substantial drop: In Tijuana the last quarter of 2008 recorded 421 homicides linked to organized crime and during the first quarter of 2009 there were 90 cases reported. That is a decrease of **79%**.<sup>6</sup>

Although the news reports that Mexico is a very dangerous place for US citizens, they fail to put this in context. The State Department reports that 651 US citizens have died in Mexico in 2006 - 2008, but only 2.9 percent of deaths have been drug related. Considering that over 20 million Americans visit Mexico every year, it is indeed statistically more likely to be killed by lightning

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2009-03-12-borderviolence\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2009-03-12-borderviolence_N.htm)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.santafenewmexican.com/National%20News/Report--Arrests-of-Americans--up-in-Tijuana>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.venturacountystar.com/news/2009/mar/29/palpable-tension-pockets-of-danger-lurk-in-parts/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.courant.com/topic/la-trw-tijuana17feb17,0,6342004.story>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.esperanzainternational.org/volunteer/safety/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.seattlepi.com/national/1102ap\\_lt\\_drug\\_war\\_mexico\\_violence.html](http://www.seattlepi.com/national/1102ap_lt_drug_war_mexico_violence.html)

<http://el-mexicano.info/noticias/estatal/2009/04/13/disminuyen-en-bc-79-las-ejecuciones.aspx>

than drug-violence in Mexico<sup>7</sup>. One study claims that “based on these numbers, the survival rate for Americans in Mexico would appear to be 99.9986%,” and that count includes many other causes of death including accidents and suicides.<sup>8</sup>

- According to recent statistics, the homicide rate in Mexico is approximately 13 for every 100,000 individuals. FBI numbers list the murder rate for Baltimore as 43.3 to 100,000, Washington D.C. as 29.1 to 100,000, and Detroit as 47.3 for every 100,000 citizens.<sup>9</sup>
- In 2008, according to MSNBC, the murder rate in New Orleans was much higher than that of Tijuana. ...As in New Orleans – as in gang wars in Los Angeles – the tourist is not the target.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, there are much more dangerous destinations in the US that should be avoided more than Tijuana due to violence.

The State Department issued a travel Alert on February 20<sup>11</sup> which has been misunderstood as a warning to stay out of Mexico. This alert replaces one that has been in effect since 2006 relatively unchanged. The US Government creates alerts and warnings as a courtesy to travelers informing about a potentially dangerous situation. According to the State Department, natural disasters, demonstrations or violence, international conferences, and regional sports are examples of conditions that might generate a Travel Alert.<sup>12</sup> “The alert notes that millions of U.S. citizens safely visit Mexico each year, but that it is critical for travelers to understand the risk of travel there.”<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that the alert is different than a warning. “A Travel Alert is used to disseminate information about short-term conditions, NOT to discourage U.S. citizens from traveling to Mexican destinations. Travel does not need to be hindered. On the other hand, a Travel Warning is issued to describe long-term, protracted conditions that make a country dangerous or unstable.”<sup>14</sup>

We must not let fearful voices turn us from the goal of mission work and social justice. Not only does the possibility of a life-changing experience for trek members stand in jeopardy, but also the survival of Esperanza International, an organization which has done so much good for the community of Tijuana. This mission trip to Mexico represents so much of how Christians should live, and every willing trekker deserves the chance to experience it. I cannot stress enough that my experience in Tijuana last year has been the single biggest faith-forming event in my life, and has motivated me to continue my lifelong commitment to mission work. And so I ask anyone concerned with the safety of US citizens in Mexico to please review the real data and threat level and hopefully come to the same conclusion that other trekkers, adult leaders, the college trek members at St. John Vianney, and Esperanza International staff have reached regarding the future of this mission.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://travel.state.gov/pdf/StatisticalSummary\\_20081231.pdf](http://travel.state.gov/pdf/StatisticalSummary_20081231.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.thetruthaboutmexico.com/2009/03/spring-break-in-mexico-do-the-math-kids/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.opednews.com/articles/2/Regarding-Mexico-Biased-N-by-Jan-Baumgartner-090325-548.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://mexidata.info/id2197.html>

<sup>11</sup> [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/pa/pa\\_3028.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/pa/pa_3028.html)

<sup>12</sup> [http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis\\_pa\\_tw/pa/pa\\_1766.html](http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/pa/pa_1766.html)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.udel.edu/udaily/2009/mar/travel030409.html>

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.mexico-update.com/wb/mexupdate/mexu\\_Mexico\\_Tourism\\_Boards\\_CEO\\_Letter](http://www.mexico-update.com/wb/mexupdate/mexu_Mexico_Tourism_Boards_CEO_Letter)

Sincerely,  
Christopher Dubé

**See also:**

Esperanza International:: Safety Concerns in the Tijuana Area of Mexico  
<http://www.esperanzainternational.org/volunteer/safety/>