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In late June 2010, I gave a presentation about the homicide numbers in Ciudad Juárez at the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) meeting in Denver. I had just said that the number of people killed in Juárez (as of June 24) was more than fifty-seven hundred, and I had provided documentation of how I got those numbers. Not five minutes later, another speaker on the panel, an editor with a major worldwide news service, said the number was “almost fifty-five hundred.”

As happens over and over in the reporting on the violence in Ciudad Juárez, the most violent city in the world, several hundred people are erased from the count of the dead. We should note that in most of the years before 2007, the total number of people murdered in Juárez in a year generally hovered between two hundred and three hundred, so the number left out of the current count by the editor speaking on the panel was as many or more than the entire annual number of people killed in the city for most of the previous fifteen years or more.

In part, it is this tendency in the press and by many academics, to downplay the violence in Juárez that exploded in January 2008 and continues to spiral upwards, that has inspired me to keep a daily count and to inform as many journalists, academics, and activists as possible about the human rights disaster unfolding in Juárez and that is now spreading to other places in Mexico. What I would like to share with you today are a few more personal accounts of what covering this story is like and to demonstrate how important it is to preserve this record for the future.

The death count begins in Juárez on January 1, 2008. The year 2007 had been the most violent in the recent history of the city—more than three hundred people were murdered. By the end of 2008, the murder toll reached 1,623. In 2009, the newspapers reported 2,660 deaths by homicide in the city, though a later report from the state attorney general’s office said the total number of murder victims was 2,754, and that the Juárez morgue had performed 2,626 autopsies that year—one every 2.5 hours. As of September 14, 2010, more
than 2,180 people have been victims of homicide in the city of Juárez this year—a city of less than 1.2 million people.

This death toll includes fifteen people who attended a birthday party where, just after midnight on January 31, an armed commando blocked off the narrow street in the Villas de Salvárcar neighborhood and entered three adjacent small homes shooting everyone as they ran from the barrage of automatic rifle fire. Early that Sunday morning, stories appeared on the online site of *El Diario de Juárez* reporting that thirteen young people had been slaughtered (an additional two later died in the hospital), and I wrote to a list of email correspondents:

I should label this one: “why I am not a Christian…” These stories were posted this morning at about 10 am, but I was on my way out to play music at a church in Las Cruces. The sermon and scripture today was all about LOVE—St. Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 1–13. Many of you probably know it by heart like I do.

The massacre of the students in Villas de Salvárcar was seen as a turning point in the violent life of Juárez—mainly because government officials from the president on down immediately jumped on the “they were gangsters working for one cartel killed by gangsters working for another cartel” bandwagon, and then had to eat their words. The only reason the officials did not get away with the “dead therefore guilty therefore dead” version of crime-solving this time is that mothers of the dead kids stood up and said, “basta!”

That does not happen often in Juárez. In most of the murder cases, even the mass murders, the explanation is always that those killed were members of gangs working for drug cartels and so only the bad people—los malandros—are dead. The mayor of Juárez made a statement in June 2008 after some five hundred people had already been murdered that “only five innocent civilians” were among the victims. After more than sixty-five hundred murders in the city since January 2008, he still maintains that only some two hundred of them are innocent bystanders. In April, President Felipe Calderón gave a speech to business leaders in the tourism sector and said that “less than 10 percent of murder victims were innocent bystanders or police or soldiers killed in the line of duty” and that more than 90 percent of the dead are criminals killed by other criminals.¹
Even better is Calderón’s exchange with Wolf Blitzer on CNN during his U.S. visit in May 2010:

BLITZER: Because I—I’m wondering, are the drug gangs, the cartels, are they winning this war right now? When I hear a number like twenty-three thousand people killed since you launched your initiative…

CALDERÓN: No. They—they are not winning. Let me clarify that the other part of my answer. Most of that—90 percent of those casualties are of— are casualties of criminals themselves that are fighting each other. It’s very clear for us according—with our records, that it’s possible to understand, for instance, in one particular homicide, what could be the probable reasons for that, and 90 percent of that are criminals linked in one way or another to the gangs. Now, the Mexican gangs are passing through a very unstable process, splitting themselves and fighting each other. That explains most of those casualties. They are not—

BLITZER: These are not innocent civilians among the twenty-three thousand?

CALDERÓN: Some of them.

BLITZER: You’re saying that many of them are gang members themselves?

CALDERÓN: Ninety percent.

BLITZER: Ninety percent?

CALDERÓN: Ninety percent, yes. Ninety percent out of all of the homicides that we are able to understand or explain the causes of that. Two percent of that, less than 2 percent are innocent civilians, yes, more or less killed by the criminals. That’s the worst part of that.²

Yet, the death toll never stops rising, less than 1 percent of the crimes are investigated, and the dead become de facto drug war criminals due to the simple fact that they have been murdered. Academics and government pundits give statements to the press filled with vague interpretations of certain “messages” that they say indicate that the dead are members of organized crime. Perpetrators are seldom caught and when they are caught, their “guilt” is determined by the confessions they give after being beaten by police. Nothing is ever proven with evidence in a court of law that we would recognize. The guilty are dead and they are dead because they are guilty. A foolproof and economical system of justice.

The headline a few days after the massacre at Villas de Salvárcar said one of the killers had asked about separating out the women and children, but the commando leader said, “No, give it to them all the same.” A few days later, a forty-three-year-old mother whose only two sons were murdered in the massacre, faced down the president of Mexico at a public meeting:

“Excuse me, Mr. President, but I will not shake your hand because you are not my friend. I cannot welcome you, because as far as I am concerned, you
are not welcome here….For me, there is no justice. All I have are two dead sons. I want you to put yourself in my place….It is not fair that my boys are at a party and are killed. I want you to apologize for what you have said, that they were gangsters. It is a lie!”

When I first sat down to write this piece, the Villas de Salvárcar massacre and the mother’s passionate speech to the president were to be the emotional center of this essay. But early the very next morning, the headline in El Diario read, “Massacre at Wake: Six Killed.” The Juárez website lapolaka.com called it, “Replica of Villas de Salvárcar.” As it turns out, six people were shot dead as they ran from the house in the Praderas del Sur neighborhood that Thursday night while attending the wake for an eighteen-year-old boy who had been murdered the previous Tuesday. It seems he might have tried to undercut a junkyard syndicate by selling stolen car parts. His family tried to report something to the police and they were threatened and then slaughtered at the wake. Two more people, women of grandmotherly age—the stalwarts of any Mexican velorio—later died in the hospital.

By midday, the massacred mourners of Praderas del Sur had disappeared from the news, perhaps because they were poorer people, perhaps because of fear of being associated with the family, or fear that it would also happen to silenced neighbors and witnesses. Silence ruled that Friday. Then Lapolaka posted another story headlined, “Videogames for the kids.” They line up at a chain-link fence. Others sit on the ground a few feet away from a body lying under a piece of rotten plywood and a white painted door with a brass knob. Beside them, a yellow dog watches and a police photographer dressed in black goes about his work. The man had been assassinated in the act of stealing the door that now lay across his body.

I would ask the government officials who chant the “cartel war” mantra exactly why a drug cartel criminal would steal a door from an abandoned house and get murdered for it. This is how most of the killings go down in Juárez: one small article, or just a line or two in an article in the morning newspaper that sums up the six, eight, ten, or a dozen killings that happened the day before. The majority of the dead by far are the poor people of the city, looking for some way to survive in an economy that gives them few legitimate options.

The next day, a Saturday, I checked the news in the early afternoon and noted that two people were shot to death at point-blank range in their car very close to the downtown office of the mayor of Juárez, almost directly under the Paso del Norte bridge leading to El Paso. This was how Lapolaka told the story:

In the middle of Hell, God is Great…!

A baby survived the bullets of organized crime during a brutal execution with AK-47s in the heart of the city. The little girl was uninjured in the rain of lead, but not so her young parents who died at her side, riddled with bullets at the hands of the killers. The events took place during a spectacular
chase...the family drove a Toyota SUV with Texas plates along the Heroico Colegio Militar highway. At the intersection of Cinco de Mayo, a comando pulled up to them and began to fire at them as they tried to escape. The driver of the Toyota lost control of the vehicle which then hit three other cars until finally crashing to a stop just behind the municipal government building. There, the man and woman were finished off by the gunmen who then fled. The baby was crying in her car seat without knowing what had happened, but uninjured despite the rain of bullets.\textsuperscript{6}

It was not until around noon the next day that the national and world media reported that these victims were Americans, a man and his wife, who was an employee of the largest U.S. Consulate in the world in Ciudad Juárez. Almost the same moment, the Mexican husband of another consular worker was gunned down in another part of the city. His two children were injured, but survived. The picture of the two young American parents, shot through the head in the front seat of their car with the international bridge looming in the background, appeared in newspapers all over the world. These were not the first Americans killed in the border violence, but because of their connections to the government, these killings were noticed by presidents, cabinet secretaries, and most Americans who until this point had perhaps never heard of Ciudad Juárez, the most violent city in the world, just across the river from El Paso, Texas, one of the least violent cities in the United States.

Back in August 2008, I visited the site of what at that time was the largest mass murder in the recent history of Ciudad Juárez—nine people were killed in a drug rehab center during a church service. I was there some forty hours after the killings while the people who ran the center were trying to leave Juárez. They had been warned and they were preparing to close the place down and flee, but they did not get out in time. One of their first acts on the morning after the massacre was to whitewash the emblem of their group that had adorned the front of the small stucco building in the poor barrio. They could hardly work fast enough as they feared the gunmen could return—though this was a crime scene, there were no police, no soldiers standing guard, not even a shred of yellow crime scene tape. The blood was mostly mopped up, leaving only a few smeared handprints on the tile wall of the room where it happened. Flies were buzzing and clustering where blood had soaked into the cracks between the tiles. A red candle burned in the corner where the bodies had piled up. Taped to the wall, above the candle, was a piece of paper printed with the faded words of “The Serenity Prayer,” a simple message that has inspired generations of addicts all over the world as they seek recovery. In the kitchen of the small house next door, a wake was being held for one of the victims, a nineteen-year-old gang member who had gone to the rehab center to try to break his glue-sniffing habit.\textsuperscript{7}

The nine people who died that day in August 2008 were added to the total of 228 people killed that month—the highest monthly toll that year. A year
later in August 2009, 316 people were murdered, a record broken in August 2010 when 336 people were killed in a single month. On September 2, 2009, the Casa Aliviane rehabilitation center was attacked and eighteen people were murdered. Then on September 15, the eve of Mexican Independence Day, ten more people were shot to death at the center called Anexo La Vida (Life Annex). Government officials have said that drug sellers and gang members were using the centers as hiding places. The killers used military gear and tactics. Most of the victims were young men from very poor families. Another rehab center in Chihuahua City was attacked in early June 2010 and at least nineteen people were killed in that massacre. Six more people were killed outside of a rehab clinic in Juárez on June 16, 2010.

People ask why I pay so much attention to counting the dead. What about the reasons for so much slaughter? What about social programs? My simple answer is that there are many reasons and I do not know them all, nor do I know of any short- or medium-term social programs that could stem the extreme violence that has become normal daily life for the people of the city. I can look at the victims though, the large majority of them ordinary and poor people with no obvious connections to the high-level cartels that are supposed to be at war, and know that the explanations given by the powerful and their mouthpieces do not fit with the evidence before my eyes. I tend to fall back on the answer given by one of the men cleaning up the first rehab center in August 2008. I asked him what was happening in Ciudad Juárez. His answer was simple: “Something evil. Something very, very evil.”

It is evil that the several hundred thousand people still lucky enough to have a job in a foreign-owned factory in Juárez earn perhaps fifty dollars per week in a city where the cost of living is nearly as high as in the United States. It is evil that on the west side of the city, home to half a million people, there is only one public high school and that education beyond the ninth grade is not free. It is evil that in the past two years more than ten thousand orphans have been created by the official War on Drugs. It is evil that a young mother who fled across the border in April with her four children says, “all the children, the only thing they know how to play is sicarios,” which is the Spanish word for hired killers.8

Since January 2008, more than sixty-five hundred people have been killed in Juárez—an average of more than six murders per day. Juárez is now the most violent city in the world with a murder rate approaching 250 per 100,000 inhabitants. El Paso is one of the safest cities in the United States, with less than twenty murders per year.

Some people insist that my focus on the numbers denies the humanity of the victims and of those working for social change in Juárez. I disagree. The actual victims of the slaughter happening in Juárez disappear in the pages of commentary and policy analysis from government, academic, and law enforcement experts in both the United States and Mexico. Poets and critics say that perhaps
“Juárez has become a metaphor, an emblem of the future of the U.S.-Mexico border.” But Juárez is not a metaphor. It is a real place of great neglect and great suffering. It is a place where gangs of killers—organized and otherwise—commit murder with no fear of punishment. It is a place where the citizens can expect no protection from their government leaders or from their institutions.

On April 13, 2010, a confidential report compiled by the security ministers of the Mexican government was presented to the Mexican Senate and leaked to the Associated Press. The report said that nearly twenty-three thousand people had been killed across Mexico since December 2006 when President Calderón deployed the army in his bid to do away with drug cartels. This added more than four thousand dead to the previously published estimates in the national and international press. In mid-July, the government’s official estimate was 25,500 and still climbing. A few weeks later, on August 3, 2010, the head of the Center for Investigation and National Security (CISEN) announced at a meeting hosted by President Calderón that the war against organized crime had actually killed more than twenty-eight thousand people. Juárez is ground zero in this war: more than one fourth of the more than 28,000 dead that the Mexican government admits to since December 2006 (as of September 2010) have occurred in this one border city of slightly over one million people—more than 6,560 as of September 14, 2010.

I am often asked why I am keeping a daily tally to report the murders in Ciudad Juárez, and what I hope to accomplish with the Frontera-List. I get many inquiries from journalists and academic researchers who tell me how difficult it is to get reliable numbers from the government offices that have the responsibility for reporting them. I think about the statement at the NAHJ panel earlier this summer where two hundred of the dead disappeared from the accounting in the space of a minute. I spend hours online trying to find accounts of violent incidents that can be used to document cases for political asylum, and I realize that the documentation of what happened could disappear from the public record forever, or it may never have been reported at all due to the ever-present and growing danger faced by Mexican journalists who can be killed for doing their jobs.

As I was revising this paper today, a friend who is a Mexican reporter seeking political asylum in the United States came to my office. He said that he had heard from friends in his hometown in northwestern Chihuahua that there had been twenty killings in the last few days in a town of about ten thousand people and that many dead bodies had been left on the town plaza. Not a single notice had appeared in the newspaper or on local TV news. This reporter covered events in several small towns in this region of Chihuahua until June 2008 when he fled to the United States after receiving a direct threat from the Mexican Army for reporting soldiers’ involvement in criminal activity. He has not been replaced. Mexico is now one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists.
I also look at the record that is available and see how certain facts and deaths can become more important than others and obscure the harsher but more ordinary reality. The case of the Juárez “femicides” is a good one to consider. During the years that the killings of women began to be noticed outside of the city in the 1990s and beyond, nearly ten times as many men as women were murdered in Juárez. The killings of these men were treated with the same impunity as the killings of women. Those in the press and academia who have written extensively about the murders of women, those who coined the term “femicide” to define the killing of women as a product of their gender, seldom acknowledge the actual numbers of victims of violence in Juárez and the fact that the killings of women are a small percentage of the total. Perhaps the focus on the murders of women enables people to feel that the situation in Juárez is containable, that it is a crime drama to be solved with good police work, with activism, consciousness-raising, protests, and a variety of artistic productions (novels, movies, art exhibitions, etc.). It seems more manageable perhaps to deal with a phenomenon in which all the victims are so obviously innocent and sympathetic. It is much more difficult and challenging to look at the huge cauldron of social pathology that Juárez has become—that Juárez has been becoming for a long time.

The products of some artists, film producers, and fiction writers about the Juárez femicides have often hijacked the sincere efforts of victims’ relatives and activists in the border region and turned real stories into sensational accounts. Sex and violence always sell. The focus on gender-based homicides (femicides) has obscured the terrible reality of generalized violence in Juárez and its multiple causes that cannot be resolved nor explained by sensational theories. This is the thesis of a pioneering study by Yale researcher Erin Frey, who did in-depth research in Juárez, interviewing activists, journalists, and academics. She also analyzed statistics from government and academic sources and compiled a comprehensive bibliography of published sources about the Juárez femicides.13

The murders of women began to be noticed and written about in Juárez in the early 1990s and in the U.S. press a few years later. For about fifteen years, women made up about 10 to 12 percent of murder victims in the city. When the murder numbers exploded in 2008, the percentage of female victims dropped to about 5 percent while the actual numbers of all people killed increased by more than five times, and those numbers of both male and female victims continue to increase. The death toll in Juárez, as of mid-September 2010, was more than 2,180 and about 210 of those victims were women. The percentage of female victims is climbing again and this is attributed to the fact that increasing numbers of women are working in the drug business and so face the same risks as men involved in these criminal activities.

Based on the available information from police and newspaper reports, most of the women are killed in the same circumstances as the men—shot
to death on the street or in their homes or in other public places like bars and shopping malls. Many women are also victimized by spouses or other male relatives or acquaintances, and in fact, during the years when the Juárez femicides became the dominant focus of activists and academics outside of Mexico, it is estimated that at least three-fourths of those cases were domestic violence.

However, much of the scholarship and activism surrounding the femicides in Juárez has focused so exclusively on the women that it has obscured the knowledge of the fate of many other victims. Since January 2008, my research has focused on documenting through media sources the unprecedented wave of violence that has engulfed the city of Juárez. When I have the opportunity to speak or write about the more than sixty-five hundred people murdered in Juárez since 2008, a common question is often: “What about the femicides?” I then explain that the number of women victimized since 1993 has ranged from a high of 18 percent to a low of 5 percent of the total, and that women account for about 9 percent of all the murder victims from 1993 to the present. From 1993 through September 10, 2010, about 878 women were murdered in Juárez and more than 9,000 men. It does not mean that the smaller percentage of female victims do not matter, but rather that all of the lives—of women, men, boys, and girls—matter. In the current explosion of crime and violence, all of the people of Juárez are victims, not only the women. What is happening in Juárez is much more than femicide. It is a human rights disaster.

The Frontera-List is a way to raise awareness of the day-to-day reality of the violence in Juárez. When you learn even the most basic details of the murder victims, it makes it much more difficult to believe the rhetoric of both Mexican and U.S. government officials when they say that 90 percent of the victims are criminals being killed by other criminals. President Calderón has said this explicitly and it has been echoed by his security officials, by both the U.S. and Mexican ambassadors, and by various members of the U.S. administration, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

I also use the list as a proto-archive, a place to store thousands of original articles that document this time period in Juárez and in other places in Mexico and the border region. I am working on a plan to develop these archived articles into something that will be a real database that will allow us to find out more about the characteristics of the victims (ages, genders, circumstances of the murders, etc.). This information will be an important piece of the record of what happened.¹⁴

NOTES


14. As of the end of August 2012, about eleven thousand people have been victims of homicide in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico—an average of 6.5 murders per day since January 2008. Though the murder rate seems to be decreasing in Juarez in 2012, the violence continues to rage across Mexico. Official data releases from government agencies and media reports produce estimates of the national homicide death toll for President Calderon’s sexenio (December 2006–December 2012) ranging from one hundred to one hundred fifty thousand victims.