

Too close for comfort

By Amanda Brinegar

Just a few miles away, across the Rio Grande, the worries of a student's world, like finishing homework or just getting to class on time, are insignificant.

In Juarez, a city that has suffered more than 900 murders since January 2008, safety is their worry.

For senior Daniel Romero, this double life is all too real. Romero, who has family in Juarez, crosses the border every weekend.

"You can feel this sense of danger. You could just turn a corner and there could be a shooting," Romero said. "It is normal now to hear in the news that at least one person dies a day."

For some Juarenses, the fear has become reality. To the shock of El Pasoan senior Fernanda Vazquez the sight of dead bodies turned into reality for her father.

"My dad told me the other day he was coming out of work and he saw a dead body just lying there, they had just shot him," Vazquez said. "Hearing things like that scare me, because I realize the violence is so close to my dad."

Mayor John Cook, who works closely with Juarez mayor Jose Reyes Ferriz, said he recently took Ferriz to dinner for his birthday and asked him how his day was going.

"He said anytime the number is less than 10 it's a good day," Cook said. "He was talking about the murders."

While the streets of El Paso have remained relatively safe, Romero has seen the difference the drug war has made to the city of Juarez.

"There are a lot of soldiers now," Romero said. "They will stop and check your car for drugs or guns. That is very common."

According to tallies kept by Mexican media, more than 1,200 people have been killed statewide in drug related violence this year; Juarez leads the country with the most killings. Mexican President Felipe Calderon sent thousands of federal troops and police to the state of Chihuahua in an attempt to address the violence.

"We have been fighting the drug war longer than we fought World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq combined," Cook said. "We are no closer to winning it now than we were then."

The drug war in Juarez is the result of two Mexican drug cartels, the Juarez Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel, fighting over territory. According to the National Drug Intelligence Center, every year since 2001 more than two million pounds of Mexican marijuana has been seized by US agents.

"You have to remember that we are the demand side of the equation," Cook said. "They are the supply side, and so we are as much a part of the problem as they are."

Even with its proximity to Juarez, El Paso continues to be one of the safest cities in the nation. Ranking second as the safest city of its size, El Paso's overall crime rate has gone down since last year, along with the rate of violent crimes.

"We probably have more law enforcement personnel in El Paso than almost any other city in the United States," Cook said. "Everything from the FBI to the CIA to border patrol to the sheriff's department and police department. There is such a police presence here that it is a difficult place to commit a crime and get away with it."

Unfortunately, Juarez struggles to achieve strong security and law enforcement.

"They have a very difficult time recruiting police officers in Juarez right now," Cook said. "You can imagine why somebody would be hesitant to want to become a police officer when a lot of the 900 assassinations have been people in law enforcement."

According to Vazquez, efforts to enlist police officers have been stepped up in the last few months.

"One weekend when I went to Juarez, I saw a big ad begging for more police officers," Vazquez said. "I had never seen that before."

As the violence continues to contaminate Juarez, El Paso remains nearly untouched.

"We are the sister cities, but everything is so different," Vazquez said. "People often forget that we play a part in this war. Even though we live in El Paso, it doesn't hide the fact that thousands of people have died right across the border."