

## Safety in Mexico

People are asking, "Is it really safe to send our youth to Mexico with YUGO Ministries?" It seems as if the TV news shows are doing their best to convince people that they should never cross the border into Mexico. We would like to provide some perspective on what is being communicated. Wayne Freeland, our Director of Partnership Development, wrote the following in response to one who asked that question:

### Perspective:

It is best to remember that the "media" are trying to emphasize the shock value in any story they report. Of four articles which were recently sent to me, three clearly showed this "shock" element. They were totally without facts that would help us to understand the danger or risk that you and I might face, when we go Mexico.

Rather, they used superlatives like "urgent concern", "a major source of violent crime", and "other metropolitan areas have lower, yet still serious, levels of crime."

I have to ask: "Urgent compared to what?" Major crimes (murders, rapes, aggravated assaults, etc.) pose an urgent concern to all of us -- but is the crime rate in Tijuana higher than what we may be exposed to here at home?

### Let's compare some facts:

One article was more helpful, when it gave a comparison to Washington DC, **our nation's capital!** That article reported: *Tijuana, population 1.2 million, saw one slaying a day in 2006 and roughly two kidnappings a week. The murder rate for a city of Tijuana's size is not huge. Some U.S. cities have a larger (sic) murder rate, including Washington, D.C.*

Let's examine this statement a little further to better understand it. The 1.2 million figure is an outdated number. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has made a huge change in the population of Tijuana. If you Google "Tijuana, Mexico statistics", you will see that the 1.2 million number is an estimate of the population from 2003 -- five years ago.

A few years ago, we were being told that 3,000 people per day were moving into Tijuana because of the new jobs which were being created by NAFTA. Certainly, no one knows the exact population of Tijuana today, but we are told that it is now over 3 million people. Because of our ministry at Grace Children's Home, Martin Castro and Charlie Rodriguez, two of our staff members in Tijuana, have regular and ongoing contact with various members of the government in Tijuana. Last month, they had lunch with the Mayor of Tijuana. From what we can tell, we are

very comfortable with the 3 million population number. If you drive around the south and east sides of Tijuana today, you will see tens of thousands of new homes being built there.

Now compare the 300+ murders in Tijuana last year with the statistics for various U.S. cities. For example, Milwaukee, WI with a population of 600,000 had 103 murders last year. Adjusting for the population of Milwaukee, suggests that there would be 400 to 500 murders for an area of 3 million people. In short, the murder rate in Milwaukee is much higher than the one in Tijuana!

Also, many large US cities (New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit and Houston) have murder rates more than 33% higher than Tijuana. The crime rate in Tijuana is also lower than many U.S. vacation cities like Atlanta, Las Vegas, Memphis, Miami, New Orleans, Philadelphia and many others.

The fact that tourism is way down in Tijuana is a positive thing. Many times, a city's crime problems are aggravated by large numbers of people looking for a "good time" and letting their revelry get out of hand. Certainly, the government's response of sending in troops to control the situation should reassure us. The Mexican government is not standing still for the violence that occurred last year.

Knowing where you can and cannot safely go in any city is important. At YUGO, we work in areas away from "troubled hot spots." Teams minister in and around local churches and residential neighborhoods, not in bars or near "crack" houses. Safety has always been a concern, for us as well as for the teams that come to work with us. We do all that we can to work safely and to be a resource to all the people who come to minister with us in Mexico.

Certainly, there are always unknowns and concerns. When we send our children to school, we are concerned about what they might be exposed to, etc. When our children start driving, every parent is on their knees! No one knows what tomorrow brings, but we can and do prepare every team as well as we can. In addition to that, we pray for God's protection and move ahead prayerfully and cautiously.

In 43 years of ministering in Mexico (Mexicali, Tijuana and Ensenada), we have never had anyone seriously injured or killed in Mexico. The only injuries we have experienced are a few broken bones and some sprained ankles from sports ministries. The total number of people who have come to Mexico with us is something around 90,000 people, so this is a great safety record.

To summarize, we are faced with choices every day, and there are risks attached to almost all of our choices. For instance, while we are concerned about our children going to school, we minimize the "risks" by carefully instructing them not to accept rides from strangers, to stay with their classmates (in a group), etc. We do not decide that they should NOT go to school. That would be a poor choice.

Likewise, when they are old enough to drive, they have classroom training before we allow them behind the wheel of a car. Then we start their practical instruction in a deserted parking lot and then progress to quiet residential streets, and we ease them into more complex situations with care and caution.

Our children WILL TRAVEL THE WORLD and we need to help them learn in stages how to do that. Since the world is shrinking every day, we should prepare them in carefully designed stages about how to deal with new situations and new cultures, and how to handle themselves in areas when they do not know the language and customs.

What better way than to start by going into a neighboring country -- just a few miles from the US border, with the help and guidance of an experienced organization, having them stay (and sleep) in a controlled environment, being led by people we trust from our own church, having everyone complete an in-depth training program and doing all of this in a group situation, where they are all looking out for each other?

I know from my own experience, when my three daughters started going to other countries with various ministries or on their own, thousands of miles from home. Frankly, I was very thankful that I had been to Mexico and seen the help which YUGO leadership had provided -- and I was thankful that our daughters had become experienced about how to conduct themselves in new and unknown situations from years of going on YUGO ministry trips to Mexico.

In those years, I was not on staff with YUGO. Today, our youngest daughter is almost 39 years old. I have now been on staff with YUGO for 14 years, so I understand your desire to better understand this "new" experience. That is also why I can so highly recommend YUGO's ministry to you and your church.

God bless you,

Wayne Freeland  
Director of Partnership Development  
YUGO Ministries