



Boys walk by an armed official in Celaya in the Mexican state of Guanajuato, near the place where two grenades were hurled at a police outpost in November 2009. No one was hurt. Celaya is much more dangerous than Queretaro, which has a reputation for safety and is only 25 minutes away by car. Some say the difference is that drug cartels have agreed to keep Queretaro safe.

# THE CARTEL NEXT DOOR

Mexican drug rings may have  
close ties to your community

BY DANIEL CONNOLLY  
THE (MEMPHIS) COMMERCIAL APPEAL

An estimated 35,000 people have died in Mexico's drug violence since President Felipe Calderon launched a crackdown in 2006, according to Associated Press reports.

The money that drug users spend in your community may be helping Mexican cartels pay their employees, bribe officials, buy weapons, and hire people to torture and kill rivals.

If you live in the United States, you can help shed light on the problem by exploring the impact of the trans-border drug trade where you live. If you don't live in the U.S., you may still be able to apply the concepts.

It makes sense to focus on Mexican trafficking organizations because their influence extends throughout the United States and beyond, and because they are causing tremendous bloodshed in Mexico. An estimated 35,000 people have died in Mexico's drug violence since President Felipe Calderon launched a crackdown in 2006, according to Associated Press reports.

I spent about 15 months part time researching international drug trafficking for the (Memphis) *Commercial Appeal* while I continued to cover the county government beat. I focused on Craig Petties, a man from Memphis who was accused of working as a high-level broker for Mexico's Beltran Leyva cartel to ship hundreds of kilograms of cocaine and more than a ton of marijuana to Tennessee and other states. Prosecutors accused him of making cell phone calls from Mexico to arrange drug shipments and to order killings in Memphis.

Mexican authorities caught him in the city of Queretaro in January 2008 and deported him to the United States. The government revealed in February of this year that Petties had secretly pleaded guilty in December 2009 to various charges, including conspiracy, drug trafficking and participation in four murders.

Our series "Blood Trade: Memphis and the Mexican Drug War," was published in the summer of 2010. ([www.commercialappeal.com/blood-trade](http://www.commercialappeal.com/blood-trade))

## Finding a local focus

One of the best ways to write about the international drug business in your community is to take an in-depth look at a case that's closed or nearly closed. Learn about various cases, select one, then focus on one person within that case.

Big cases usually land in the federal courts, and the online system known as PACER can give you full-text access to filings. You can search for violations of specific drug trafficking statutes, money laundering or any other federal law by using PACER's advanced search functions or by using the nonprofit

Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse, or TRAC. (<http://trac.syr.edu>)

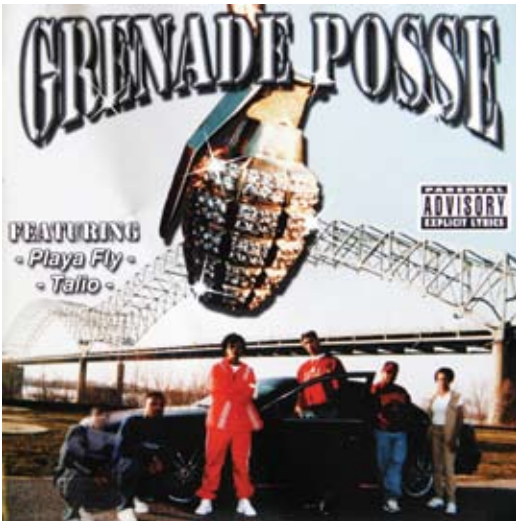
Lise Olsen of the *Houston Chronicle* also suggests requesting interviews with agents at the local offices of the FBI, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and/or DEA. You can ask about closed cases similar to the ones you're working on, even though the agents may only be able to speak on background or point you to documents. Offices on the border often have agents who work with counterparts in Mexico and can suggest contacts there. Olsen also suggests meeting former federal prosecutors who have handled similar cases to learn how the legal system works.

Once you've identified a case and a person as your focus, start by reading all of the federal court documents. Olsen suggests looking for agents' affidavits, which the government uses to support search warrants or seizures of property. These documents often contain colorful nuggets that are great for narratives.

Olsen also suggests that you fully background your subject by checking property records, business licenses, liquor licenses, and state criminal and civil cases. ICE may be able to confirm if the government ever has deported your subject.

Here are some other story ideas and tips:

- **Understand immigration patterns.** This tip comes from Sam Quinones of the *Los Angeles Times*, who wrote a 2010 series called "The Heroin Road" about Mexican heroin traffickers active in towns such as Charlotte, N.C., and Indianapolis. Quinones says Mexican cartels have spread throughout the country as they follow patterns of Mexican immigration. "All mafias hide among the immigrant groups in which they are a part," he says. The village-based social networks that help immigrants find jobs and housing also can help traffickers. Quinones identified Xalisco, a small town in Mexico's Nayarit state, as the hometown for many heroin entrepreneurs.
- **Talk to prisoners.** Quinones has written dozens of letters asking prisoners for interviews. Most refuse, but some say yes.



Marcus Turner, center, poses for album art for a recording by Memphis-area rap group Grenade Posse. He was later kidnapped and killed by the Craig Petties drug organization, according to law enforcement. Some of the group's lyrics make apparent references to drug trafficking. "Loose lips, they sink ships / especially when you're state to state."

Alan Spearman | The Commemorial Appeal



A hand grenade punched this softball-size hole in the sidewalk outside a police outpost in Celaya in the Mexican state of Guanajuato. The November 2009 attack was blamed on criminals trying to terrorize authorities in this town, just a 25-minute drive from Queretaro, a city known for a low crime rate. Mexico's drug gangs pressure authorities through a combination of violence and bribery.

## GOING FOR A GRANT

We were grateful to receive a grant from the Washington-based Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting that offset expenses for our 10-day trip to Mexico in December 2009. The Pulitzer Center is a nonpartisan organization that supports international reporting. Significantly, the grant allowed me to bring photographer and videographer Alan Spearman, who has strong international experience.

Some tips on getting grants:

- The Pulitzer Center isn't the only grant-making institution that supports international journalism. The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists lists several others on its website: the Dick Goldensohn Fund for International Investigative Reporting, the International Center for Journalists, The International Reporting Project, and SCOOP, an independent Denmark-based network of investigative reporters (<http://i-scoop.org/>). Some other grant-making organizations are the Alicia Patterson Foundation, the Fund for Investigative Journalism and the Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute.
- Your grant proposal should tell the story with precision; don't just say you want to write about a broad topic. In our case, the decision to focus on one drug trafficker made it easier to write a tight proposal.
- You must show how you'll give the grant-making organization what it needs. For instance, the Pulitzer Center wanted a lot of people to see the work it sponsors. So we put together a very detailed plan of how we would distribute our work through various outlets, and we were able to deliver.





Neighbors walk by the house in the upscale Milenio III neighborhood in Queretaro, Mexico, where Craig Petties of Memphis was arrested in January 2008. It's unclear how long Petties and his family stayed in this house.

By digging through archives, I learned that Memphis has been a hub for the illegal narcotics business since at least the 1930s. Today, it remains a poor city with low education levels, factors that prompt many to join the drug trade.

- **Talk to drug users.** Remember, demand drives the drug business. Marijuana users in particular may be open to interviews and photos because the drug is winning mainstream acceptance. You may be able to demonstrate that money from local marijuana sales is flowing to Mexican cartels. White people represent the biggest group of drug users in the United States, according to federal data – a good fact to mention when the traffickers you're writing about come from minority groups.
- **Research your area's drug history.** By digging through archives, I learned that Memphis has been a hub for the illegal narcotics business since at least the 1930s. Today, it remains a poor city with low education levels, factors that prompt many to join the drug trade.
- **Don't exaggerate spillover violence.** Generally, it's still rare for Mexican cartels to commit violent crime inside the United States. A big reason is that the United States has a functioning justice system and harsh federal prison sentences. Mexico, by contrast, has weak institutions, and the guilty often escape serious punishment.

### Venturing into Mexico

You can do great reporting on Mexico's drug war from the United States. But you may want to find out what's happening in Mexico. I did this, and found myself in a much scarier situation than I had expected.

Before I arrived in Queretaro in December 2009, I believed it was a normal town and that I would have the relatively straightforward job of learning how authorities caught Craig Petties and how city leaders were trying to keep out traffickers.

The region had a lower murder rate than Memphis. But soon after I arrived, many people told me that the main reason the area was calm was that drug traffickers had decided to make Queretaro a safe haven for themselves and their families. One person alleged on the record that the government was part of the pact.

There's no way to prove this is true, and we were never overtly threatened, but I believe drug traffickers were indeed present in the area. There were times when this knowledge filled me with fear. I also made some security blunders that could have been disastrous in a rougher place, such as accepting rides under less-than-ideal circumstances.

Fortunately, I wasn't by myself. The intrepid photographer/videographer Alan Spearman had accompanied me from the *Commercial Appeal* and helped get me through some anxious moments. And I had worked through contacts at IRE and Mexico's Centro de Periodismo y Etica Publica to link up with Rafael Pinzon, an independent reporter living in Queretaro. Pinzon would later introduce me to several other reporters, including Alejandro Hervert of the local newspaper *Noticias*.



Suspected members of the Zetas, an armed group, lie dead following a June 2009 shootout with police in Guanajuato state in central Mexico, near where Craig Petties of Memphis was arrested in January 2008. This image was one of many provided to *The Commercial Appeal* by *Noticias* newspaper in Queretaro.

The Mexican reporters brought us to interviews and guided us around the area, and we couldn't have completed the project without them.

We got through our visit OK, but there are no guarantees. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Sam Quinones has reported on drug trafficking in Mexico in the past, but now believes that a visit to the most dangerous areas, such as Ciudad Juarez, is not worth the risk. He says other parts of Mexico also could be hazardous.

"You have no idea who the enemy is in this war," he said. "You have no idea what the next hot spot is. You have no idea what the rules are."

Dudley Althaus, a longtime Mexico correspondent for the *Houston Chronicle*, says he doubts there's a magic formula for security. He says he never used to worry about safety when traveling. "Now I think about it a lot before and during any visit. Times have definitely changed."

*Daniel Connolly is a staff reporter for The Commercial Appeal newspaper in Memphis, covering county government and Mexican immigration. He thanks editors Chris Peck, Louis Graham, Tom Charlier and Peggy Burch for supporting the project and giving him time for research, including a visit to central Mexico.*



The January 2008 arrest of Craig Petties in the Mexican city of Queretaro made headlines there. The staff of *Noticias* newspaper gave journalists from *The Commercial Appeal* access to this page from their archives as well as many other images that had never been published outside the region.

## Staying safe in Mexico

Three reporters with extensive experience in Mexico provided useful safety tips: Dudley Althaus and Lise Olsen of the *Houston Chronicle*, and Olga R. Rodriguez of *The Associated Press*. Here's a summary of their advice:

- Don't go alone. Go with a photographer or other trusted partner.
- Mexico has many brave and capable journalists, and you should find a good local reporter to guide you. Work through IRE to find reliable people. Even some reporters have cartel links. That's why finding helpers through trusted networks is important. Althaus says Mexican journalists are in far more danger than foreign ones because they are always in the towns and cities they cover, and Rodriguez warns that you shouldn't push local reporters to go somewhere that they don't want to go.
- Tell your editor where you'll be every day and check in frequently. Let editors know whom to contact if you go missing.
- Take a cell phone that works in Mexico, and bring local and national numbers to call for back-up.
- Check the U.S. State Department travel warnings for Mexico and read recent news reports from the area you're visiting.
- Remember that in the most dangerous areas, even taxi drivers, waiters or people walking in the plaza may be lookouts or members of cartels. Althaus says you have to be careful about officials at any level, especially police officers. "Assume that your presence is known to the bad guys once you start reporting," he says. "That goes triple in smaller towns versus big cities like Juarez and Monterrey."
- Althaus says you don't have to tell everyone you meet that you're a journalist. But don't invent another profession or reason for being in town. "Be as open as you think wise when talking to people about the story you're working on, but don't provide too much detail that would get you crosswise with any gangster band." (I should note that some argue that it's sometimes safer not to say you're a reporter.)
- If you plan to spend a long time on a story in Mexico, request a journalist visa. Government officials in zones of conflict in Mexico may demand that you have one.
- Organizations such as DART offer training for working in war zones or danger zones. Get training if you can.
- Avoid illegal or unethical behavior. Remember, you can go to jail in Mexico, too.
- Interviews can put people in danger, so if you're interviewing crime victims or other sources whom you need to protect, talk with them in a private place so gangsters can't see them.
- If sources are unknown or dodgy, interview them in a public place, preferably of your choosing.
- Don't tell people your specific travel plans, when you're leaving town, etc. Keep your hotel information private, if possible.
- Violent places often seem normal, so stay alert.
- Leave town as soon as you're done reporting the story.
- Think about what you publish or broadcast and the possibility that it will put innocent people in danger.