Abstract

This article examines the evolution of the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC), a key intelligence component of the Drug Enforcement Administration, to shed light on fusion efforts in drug enforcement. Since 1974, EPIC has strived to fuse the resources and capabilities of multiple government agencies to counter drug trafficking and related threats along the Southwest US border. While undergoing a steady growth, the Center has confronted a host of challenges that illuminate the uses and limits of multi-agency endeavors in drug enforcement. An evaluative study of the Center shows that it is well aligned with the federal government priorities in the realm of drug enforcement; however the extent to which the Center's activities support the government's efforts in this domain is not so clear. The Center needs to improve the way it reviews its own performance to better adapt and serve its customers.

SUMMARY

In the last decade, there has been much public discussion fusion centers and their ability to improve security at the national, state and local levels. Fusion centers are often described as the key components of a more networked approach to manage security, more effectively and efficiently, and confront transnational phenomena like terrorism.

Most of this literature has focused on counter-terrorism for obvious reasons related to the global war on terrorism. However, fusion efforts have long existed in other contexts. The El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC), one of the key intelligence components of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is a case in point.

EPIC was established in 1974 in the early days of the War on Drugs and, according to the DEA, it was "the first major attempt at a permanent interagency operation in law enforcement." Some practitioners note that the Center was one of the models that inspired the more modern fusion centers that have multiplied in the last decade in the U.S. EPIC is also worthy of interest because of its strategic position halfway along the U.S.-Mexico border, a region with a long history of trans-border and trans-jurisdictional challenge.

Since its establishment in 1974, the center has experienced a steady growth, today employees from some 28 agencies at all levels of government staff the center. The center offers his services to thousands of consumers and receives over 200,000 requests for information or intelligence each year.

This article examines the evolution of the center and assesses its performance, based on the limited resources that are available to an outsider. The literature on EPIC has mostly been written in professional magazines by staff, and unsurprisingly tends to emphasize EPIC's tactical successes. Much of this literature uses specific examples to present the Center as an effective organization able to coordinate the intelligence collection and analytical capabilities of a variety of government agencies to locate and apprehend criminals. These success stories are informative but they do not provide a systematic assessment of EPIC's activities based on the Center's mission.

To assess the performance of the El Paso Intelligence Center, the author focuses on three core components - processes, enablers and outcomes - and examines the extent to which they are aligned with EPIC's main goal: supporting drug enforcement efforts along the Southwest border. He finds that the Center's performance reviews have been limited by the absence of systematic mechanism to gather more qualitative feedback from its customers and employees. A more comprehensive and continuous internal review system would allow the center to adapt more proactively and better serve its customers.

SECTIONS

- *Fusion centers: more than a trend*
- *The origins of EPIC*
- *A steady growth*
- *Processes, services and products*
- *Enablers*
- *Outcomes and outputs*
- *Conclusion*