



Crime Violence and State Responses in Mexico

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11 August 2016

In recent years, the Mexican government has been struggling to deal with a dramatic rise in crime and violence, with state responses largely failing to effectively resolve these problems. But there are some grounds for optimism.

Over the course of too many years of elevated crime and violence, the Mexican government has been visibly struggling to identify the best possible course to improve public security and a more effective administration of justice. This article examines the magnitude of Mexico's still ongoing security crisis, as well as the measures that the Mexican government has employed to try to resolve it. Drawing from an ample body of academic and policy research, there are some clear indications of what has not worked, as well as some bright spots for Mexico moving forward.

The State of Play in Mexico

For the past decade, the [Justice in Mexico](#) program based at the University of San Diego has studied the proliferation of crime and violence in Mexico, the country that has seen the greatest increase in homicides among all Latin American countries. Notably, following a marked decline in violent crime from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s, Mexico [experienced a dramatic increase](#) in homicides during the five year period from 2007 to 2011, when homicide rates rose threefold nationally, from 8.1 to 24 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to official homicide statistics. (Based on the author's own elaboration from Mexico's national statistical clearinghouse, the National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Information; see [here](#) also). The net result during that period alone was a total of nearly 100,000 homicides, and the subsequent four years

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through 2015 added roughly 90,000 more. Many of these homicides—an estimated 30-40%—bear characteristics frequently associated with the country's powerful drug cartels and other organized crime groups: use of high caliber weapons, mutilation and dismemberment, execution style killings, publicly displayed bodies, and chilling messages and threats authored by the perpetrators.

While casual observers might assume that Mexico's violence was widespread and pervasive throughout the country, the phenomenon was highly concentrated in certain regions and localities, primarily in the northern border region and in the country's Pacific coastal states. In 2007, a Mexican city with more than 100 homicides could easily make it onto the country's "top ten" list for total homicides; in fact, that same year, only Tijuana—the quintessential Mexican border city—reported more than 200 homicides (206 to be exact). Yet, just two years later, no city among the top ten most violent cities in Mexico had fewer than 200 homicides, and the top five had at least 400 homicides (as illustrated in Figure 1). Indeed, by 2010, arguably the peak of the violence, there were 18 Mexican cities with more than 200 homicides: now Mexico had many "Tijuanas." Indeed, some of Mexico's most violent cities—such as Acapulco, Ciudad Juárez, and Nuevo Laredo—saw rates more than triple the national homicide rate.

 Homicides Mexico data

Figure 1: Number of Homicides in Mexico's Top Ten Most Violent Municipalities by Year. Source INEGI.

Cartels

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In a country unaccustomed to the civil wars and brutal dictatorships that plagued other parts of Latin America in the 20th century, such an explosion of violence was unexpected and previously unfathomable. The Mexican government's apparent inability to resolve the problem triggered an international debate on the problems and limits of the Mexican state. A 2008 worst-case assessment by the U.S. Joint Forces Command named Mexico as one of two countries—along with Pakistan—that could suffer a sudden collapse into a “failed state.” Specifically, the report [asserted](#), “In terms of worst-case scenarios for the Joint Force and indeed the world, two large and important states bear consideration for a rapid and sudden collapse: Pakistan and Mexico...”. Pronouncements by U.S. officials—including [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton](#) in 2010—asserted that Mexico's woes were comparable to Colombia's long-standing problems of domestic insurgency, or even on par with a civil war. Others [sensationalized](#) Mexico's recent violence as a new hybrid threat of “criminal insurgency” or [suggested](#) that the power and infiltration of

such groups had turned Mexico into a “narcostate” overrun by violence, corruption, and “narco- terrorism.”

The merits of such assertions were quite debatable then and have proved false with time, as they tended to exaggerate and misconstrue Mexico’s current security situation. The methods and organizational forms of Mexican organized crime groups are arguably terrifying and sometimes truly mimic those of terrorists and insurgents. Yet, Mexico’s organized crime groups have shown no ambition to govern or supplant the state. They have no record or evident intention of disrupting the state’s capacity to deliver basic services. Moreover, the Mexican state maintains substantial democratic legitimacy, and has successfully deterred would-be insurgents in recent decades. Lastly, by the various measures used by the Fund for Peace to compile the Fragile States Index (formerly known as the Failed State Index), the health of the Mexican state ranks about average for Latin American countries, and its capacity is far greater than in war-torn countries like Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, or Yemen.

The Mexican State Response



Image by Presidencia de la República Mexicana via [Flickr](#).

There is no doubt that Mexico’s recent security crisis presented—and continues to present—a major challenge for the Mexican state, and raises serious questions about its limits and failings. It is true that, like any other individuals who violate the law, the goal of organized crime groups is to minimize the state’s ability to detect, prevent, and/or punish their illicit activities. Yet, unlike other criminal actors, organized crime groups—and particularly drug trafficking

organizations—in Mexico have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to secure protection from the state to support and sustain their criminal activities, with corrupt officials on their payrolls at all levels of government. Also, to varying degrees, such groups have at least temporarily attained a stronger presence and degree of control than the government in some limited geographic areas. Moreover, in some places, organized crime groups have capitalized on anti-government sentiments to achieve a degree of popularity or even legitimacy that seriously undermines state capacity. What, then are the sources of Mexico's recent violence, and why have state responses failed to resolve the problem in a timely manner?

The rise of Mexico's most powerful organized crime groups—commonly referred to as drug trafficking organizations, or “cartels”—came amid a severe economic crisis in the 1980s. While other industries faltered, illicit drug production and trafficking enjoyed a major boom and substantial impunity, thanks in part to the complicity of government and law enforcement personnel. By the late 1990s, growing problems of crime and violence contributed to a crisis of “public insecurity,” characterized also by a feeling of widespread fear and frustration on the part of the general public due to the inability of the Mexican government to maintain order. Following a major political transition in 2000—the ouster of the PRI, Mexico's long-time ruling party, from the presidency—the administration of Vicente Fox (2000-06) disrupted the leadership of two of the country's four main organized crime groups.

This tactic of arresting, extraditing, or otherwise eliminating the top leaders of major criminal organizations has been commonly referred to as the “kingpin” strategy. Fox's successor, President Felipe Calderón (2006-12), deployed the kingpin strategy vigorously. Calderón and other proponents of the kingpin

strategy argued that taking out the top leadership would help to disrupt their operations and convert a national security threat into a more localized public security problem. In some cases, at least, the government succeeded in reducing the functional capacity of some of the country's major criminal organizations, but the unintended result was the creation of internal power vacuums and incentives for regionally based drug trafficking organizations to clash over turf and expand into rival territories. The subsequent conflicts within and among these groups were responsible for tens of thousands of organized crime-style killings that made up nearly the entire increase in homicides noted above, especially in major drug trafficking production and transit zones.

In December 2012, a new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, took office and restored the PRI to power. His government continued to deploy the kingpin strategy, arresting high-ranking members of the [Zeta](#) and [Sinaloa](#) cartels. Remarkably, these arrests did not produce the same kind of violent aftershock that occurred under previous administrations, perhaps because of a new equilibrium among organized crime groups (there were few large cartels left standing) or perhaps more effective accommodation strategies (such as negotiations with the leaders next in line to take control of criminal operations). Whatever the reason, during 2013 and 2014, Peña Nieto's first two full years in office, levels of homicide actually declined by around 8 and 12%, respectively (author's own calculations from INEGI data. <http://www.inegi.org.mx>). However, statistics on homicide investigations for 2015 suggest that there was slight increase—about 10%—in the number of homicides nationwide, reversing the modest downward trend and provoking concerns that Mexico's violence would ramp up again in the coming years. Final figures for 2015 likely to be released by Mexico's national statistics agency sometime in late summer 2016, but as of mid-2016 there are troubling signs

that [violence is on the rise](#). (As this article went to press, INEGI statistics were unavailable for 2015, so the figures referenced here are Mexican law enforcement investigations into homicides tabulated by the Mexican National Public Security System – Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública, SNSP).

Conclusion

Looking toward the future, Mexico's security situation will likely be affected by a number of important international and domestic factors. International factors could also significantly shape Mexico's prospects. As a growing number of leaders and civic organizations push for the legally regulated production, distribution, and consumption of drugs (including the legalization of marijuana in two U.S. states in November 2012), this shift in discourse and policy could have major implications for Mexican organized crime groups. A loss of illicit revenues will likely reduce the capacity of these organizations to challenge the state, but it will also result in a painful restructuring of black market industries, pushing drug traffickers to increase exports of other drugs (like [heroin](#)) and further diversify into other violent criminal activities (e.g., kidnapping, extortion, robbery, etc.). This has already caused an abrupt increase in violence in some states, like [Guerrero](#). In terms of drug policy, there are no quick and easy fixes to the problem of organized crime and violence in Mexico.

However, there are some reasons for optimism in Mexico. Changing demographic trends (including a declining population of under-educated, underpaid, and underemployed young males) and an improvement of the country's overall economic situation could facilitate a reduction of various societal ills, including both violent crime and large-scale external migration. At the same time, with the right mix of fiscal and political reforms, Mexico's rising economic fortunes could also bolster the state's capacity to respond more

effectively to these problems, thanks to investments and reforms in the criminal justice system, as well as public education and social programs to strengthen the social fabric. Fortunately, in recent years, the Mexican government has begun to implement major economic, social and judicial sector reforms that could greatly strengthen both state and societal capacity to reduce the power of violent organized crime groups. The main question is whether these reforms will be rapid and adequate enough to substantially reduce the number of violent deaths in Mexico over the next decade.

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