MIGRATION & ASYLUM LAB

2023

MEXICO

COUNTRY CONDITIONS BULLETIN

BY ANA MINIAN, ELLIOTT YOUNG, STEPHEN PITTI, AND KATHERINE WACKETT

The Migration and Asylum Lab seeks to inform immigration courts about country conditions in Latin America through the use of the most up-to-date and rigorous research on issues relevant to asylum cases. The scholars involved in the lab are supremely qualified to provide current and dependable information on country conditions in the context of asylum proceedings. They include political scientists, data analysts, historians, and international relations scholars. They have decades of experience in their field and are widely recognized for their work, which includes peer-reviewed books published by university presses and articles in the top academic journals.

The Lab's mission is to provide thorough, dependable country conditions information to help adjudicators to make well informed decisions as to the merit of claims for asylum protection. Our role as expert witnesses is not to act as advocates, but rather to conduct impartial analysis of country conditions based on a wide range of sources, including academic scholarship, government and non-government reports, and media reporting from inside the country and the international press.

MEXICO

2023 Country Conditions Bulletin

Chapter One: Mexico Country Profile

Homicide, Femicide, and Impunity Rates

2022 Official Homicide Rate: 25.2 per 100,000 (Pop. 126,705,138) (Source: Secretary of Security and Civilian Protection (Secretaría de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana)

- Reports from the Secretary of Security and Civilian Protection (SSPC) break down homicide and femicide data by state, month, type of homicide, weapon used, etc.
- Between January and September of 2022, nearly 7 out of 10 homicides took place in only 10 states: Guanajuato, Baja California, Mexico State, Michoacan, Jalisco, Chihuahua, Sonora, Guerrero, Nuevo León and Zacatecas. Half of all killings in 2022 took place in six states: Guanajuato (in which 3,260 murders were reported, the highest of any state in sheer number), Baja California, Chihuahua, Jalisco, Michoacan and the State of Mexico.
- The National Search Commission (CNB) reported 108,521 missing or disappeared persons in Mexico by December 2, 2022. An estimated 90% occurred after January 1, 2006. 2022 contained the highest number of reports filed regarding missing or disappeared persons (9,684) on record, beating out 2021's 9,624 reported cases. As of December 30, the states of Mexico City (2,455), Nuevo Leon (2,441), and Veracruz, (1,557) reported the most disappearances.
- The National Registry of Missing and Unlocated Persons (RNPDNO) reported 10,367 cases of missing or disappeared persons in 2021.

Impunity for Homicides: 91.4% (Source: Impunidad Cero, December 2022)

- According to Impunidad Cero, 8.6% (2,372) of reported intentional homicides in 2021 reached a conviction.

Femicides

- The Secretary of Security and Civilian Protection (Secretaria de Seguridad y Protección Ciudadana) reported 947 femicides in 2022. The same report provides statistics on gender based violence including domestic abuse, sexual abuse and abuse of minors by state and by month.
- The National Citizen Femicide Observatory in Mexico recorded 968 cases of officially classified femicides in 2022, although the year ended with a recorded 3,755 women murdered, an average of 10.3 women daily.

[1] Additional research contributed by Leo Bernstein-Newman

- The 2022 Impunidad Cero report also provides useful statistics and analysis regarding femicide and gender-based violence in recent years.

Impunity for Femicides: 45.8% (Source: Impunidad Cero, December 2022)

- According to Impunidad Cero, 54.2% (454) of reported intentional femicides in 2021 reached a conviction.
- Impunidad Cero asserts that a national average of only 27% of intentional homicides of women were investigated as femicides in 2021. Less than 10% of female homicides were classified as femicides in the states of Tamaulipas, Baja California, Zacatecas and Guanajuato.
- According to the National Registry of Disappeared Persons (RNPDNO), 2,920 women were reported missing in 2021. This record high accounted for 28% of the year's disappearances.

Major Criminal Actors: Further examined in Mexico Cartel Profiles

- Gulf Cartel
    - Grupo Sombra (splinter group)
- Sinaloa Cartel
    - Los Chapitos
- Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG)
- Juarez Cartel
    - La Linea (Armed wing of Juarez Cartel)
- Zetas
- Viagras
- Rojos
- Carteles Unidos

Overall Political and Security Situation

Strong criminal organizations emerged in Mexico during the 1990s after United States policy on drug enforcement forced Colombian cartels to turn to safer routes through Mexico rather than the Caribbean islands. Throughout the 1990s, the Gulf, Sinaloa and Juarez cartels emerged as the most dominant trafficking organizations, using private armies of enforcers in order to protect their growing profits and becoming increasingly more violent throughout the decade. New cartels emerged in the 2000s such as the Zetas, beginning as private mercenaries for the Gulf Cartel and later becoming a drug trafficking organization in its own

right, continuing their enforcement methods of extreme violence and torture. In 2006, Felipe Calderón won the presidential elections as the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) party candidate, implementing an extreme security policy against cartel violence including the deployment of over 50,000 soldiers to communities with strong cartel presence. Calderón's "Drug War" against the cartels represents an increasing militarization of the country, where federal police and the military became the primary agents of security, replacing local law enforcement. Increasing autonomy was granted throughout the Calderón presidency to the army and navy in order to combat cartels, while federal officials were increasingly proven to have ties to cartels themselves.[2]

Inheriting a messy situation from Calderón, Enrique Peña Nieto took over the presidency from 2012 to 2018, representing a period of increasingly apparent corruption and collaboration between cartels and government officials. During his presidency, renowned Sinaloa cartel leader "El Chapo" escaped from maximum security prison with the assistance of prison guards and other government officials, and his 2019 trial revealed that Peña Nieto allegedly accepted a $100 million bribe from Guzmán to call off searches for him.[3] Current president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) took over the presidency in 2018 with a promise to deliver a "Fourth Transformation" in Mexican history by eradicating corruption, poverty and drug violence. Instead, AMLO has removed checks and balances on his administration, weakened autonomous institutions, and seized discretionary control of the federal budget in the name of achieving his agenda. Arguing that the Mexican police were incapable of combating the country's security problems, AMLO has supplanted them with military forces including a newly created National Guard, endowing these forces with unprecedented economic and political power. Promising to change the failed military strategies against cartels supported by his two predecessors (one of his most popular campaign slogans was "abrazos, no balazos" or "hugs, not bullets"), AMLO has instead expanded military functions, placing the National Guard under the direct control of the defense ministry and eliminating civilian oversight.[4]

[2] Adam Waters, "Inside Mexico's Drug Wars," Brown University Library: Center for Digital Scholarship, https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-3-mexico/moments-in-mexican-history/inside-mexicos-drug-wars/#_ftn2.
[3] Alan Feuer, "Former Mexican President Peña Nieto Took $100 Million Bribe, Witness at El Chapo Trial Says," *New York Times*, Jan. 15, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/15/nyregion/el-chapo-trial.html#:~:text=The%20former%20president%20of%20Mexico%2C%20Enrique%20Pe%C3%B1a%20Nieto%2C%20took%20a,Guzman's%20trial.
[4] Denise Dresser, "Mexico's Dying Democracy: AMLO and the Toll of Authoritarian Populism," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 101, Issue 6 (Nov/Dec 2022).

Individual State Security Levels

Estado de México and Ciudad de México

The State of Mexico is a densely populated and violent state surrounding Mexico City. Estado de Mexico continues to be among the most violent places in Mexico, with high rates of robbery, extortion, homicide, and the fame of being the most dangerous place for women in the entire country. The state is also known for its corrupt police force. In 2017, in municipalities like Ecatepec, Chimalhuacán or Chalco, there were on average seven violent deaths, 14 kidnappings and 141 reported cases of theft, with rates of impunity upwards of 95%.[5] In the first five months of 2020, Estado de Mexico was one of three states that saw more than 1,000 individuals murdered, with 1,059 reported homicides. In 2019, Estado de México alone accounted for nearly 30% of all intentional injuries in Mexico with 49,094 of the 164,143 cases nationwide. In terms of kidnapping rates, Veracruz had the highest number of officially reported cases (298) in 2019, followed by Estado de México (206) and Mexico City (175). Estado de México had the highest number of extortion cases in 2019 with 2,487 cases, or 29% of all 8,500 registered nationwide. Mexico City had the second highest with 856 cases. The two municipalities with the most cases of extortion were both in Estado de México: Ecatepec de Morelos with 296 and Toluca with 275.[6]

While the capital city and its suburbs have historically been relatively safe from violence related to organized crime, recent attacks orchestrated by cartels have proven that these groups have made significant inroads. In late June 2020, hitmen wounded the police chief of Mexico City and killed two of his bodyguards in an assassination attempt targeting his car riding through a wealthy neighborhood. The police chief later claimed that the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) was to blame for the attack.[7] Additionally, the three criminal groups most active in Mexico City, La Unión de Tepito, Fuerza Anti Unión Tepito and the Tláhuac Cartel, have grown in presence and power, operating drug and human trafficking rings, extortions and kidnappings in the capital and surrounding areas. Specialists in organized crime have argued that these groups have negotiated with the CJNG since at least 2017, and according to the think tank México Evalúa, the homicide rate in Mexico City grew from 7.23 per 100,000 residents in 2006 to 12.31 by 2017.[8]

---

[5] Jacobo García, "Why are so many women being murdered in Mexico state?" *El País*, May 16, 2017, https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2017/05/16/inenglish/1494927048_572750.html.
[6] University of San Diego, Justice in Mexico, "Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico: 2020 Special Report," July, 2020, https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/OCVM-2020.pdf.
[7] Natalie Kitroeff, "Mexico City Police Chief Is Wounded in Brazen Ambush," *New York Times*, June 26, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/world/americas/mexico-city-police-chief-shot.html.
[8] Marcos González Díaz, "Violencia en México: cómo el narco ganó presencia en Ciudad de México tras años de considerarse "inmune" al crimen organizado," *BBC*, June 30, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-53244017.

Tlaxcala

In 2018, a review of cases concerning human rights abuses in Tlaxcala indicated that all of the complaints were directed at municipal police, for abuses including excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, and violence.[9] Although Tlaxcala has been touted as one of the safest states in Mexico with regards to homicide, other criminal activities are more common such as violent robbery, sexual violence and trafficking. Tlaxcala is among the ten states with the highest rates of violent robbery in the country, more than 134 per 100,000 residents.[10] In 2017, rates of violent crime within the state rose by 40% compared to the year before, and rape was among one of the crimes on the rise.[11]

Most alarming, Tlaxcala is considered to be one of the epicenters for human trafficking worldwide. In the last twenty years, different human rights commissions have discovered the existence of internationally high rates of trafficking in the state, especially along its southernmost highway leading to Puebla, known internationally as the "Tlaxcala-Puebla trafficking corridor."[12] In the United States, five of the ten "most wanted" sex traffickers are from Tenancingo, Tlaxcala, and trafficking networks rooted there are the biggest source of sex slaves in the US, the State Department has said. Some of the most powerful Tlaxcala families involved in the sex trade are believed to collaborate with local cartels. Much like narco-activity in other states, in Tlaxcala "trafficking has become so normalized and rewarding that young people look up to them (the pimps)," said the director of gender violence at the Fray Julián Garces Center. One in five children in Tlaxcala wants to be a pimp when they grow up, according to a 2010 University of Tlaxcala study and two-thirds of adolescents surveyed knew of at least one relative or friend working as a pimp or trafficker.

Puebla

In Puebla specifically, street gangs have proliferated in recent years. In 2016, the municipality of Atlixco, Puebla declared that 57 street gangs were active within the region, and that ten of these were considered highly dangerous, including La Mugre and Los Gaspers.[13] The

[9] Pedro Morales González, "Oleada de Inseguridad y Violencia en Tlaxcala," *Código Tlaxcala*, February 2, 2018, https://www.codigotlaxcala.com/oleada-inseguridad-violencia-en-tlaxcala/.
[10] Emilio Piedras, "Tlaxcala esta entre los estados con mayor robo con violencia," *Organo de Fiscalización Superior Tlaxcala,* Dec. 17, 2018, http://www.e-tlaxcala.mx/nota/2018-12-17/seguridad/tlaxcala-esta-entre-los-estados-con-mayor-robo-con-violencia.
[11] "Aumentan delitos con violencia en Tlaxcala," *NTR Periodismo Crítico*, April 28, 2017, http://ntrzacatecas.com/2017/04/28/aumentan-delitos-con-violencia-en-tlaxcala/.
[12] "Tlaxcala: Epicentro mundial de la trata de personas," *Centro Nacional de Comunicación Social,* July July 30, 2018, http://cencos.com.mx/2018/07/tlaxcala-epicentro-mundial-de-la-trata-de-personas/.
[13] "Detectan a 57 pandillas de jóvenes en territorio de Atlixco," *Municipios*, March 22, 2016, http://www.municipiospuebla.com.mx/nota/2016-03-22/atlixco/detectan-57-pandillas-de-j%C3%B3venes-en-territorio-de-atlixco.

Director of Public Security in Puebla has stated that rural districts have faced the largest amounts of gang violence.[14] Because of the important Minatitlán-Mexico City fuel pipeline, the so-called "red triangle" area of Puebla has been the site of turf wars between gangs and cartels in recent years as criminal organizations have sought to gain control over fuel theft in the region. The Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) and Los Zetas specifically have battled over the state's municipalities, resulting in a particularly brutal shoot-out that left twelve dead in October of 2017. In March 2018, two men were found dead in Amozoc, Puebla with narco-messages allegedly left by the CJNG, and in March 2019 seven people were killed in one night in the city of Puebla during a gang dispute between Los Villegas gang, linked to the CJNG, and a rival cartel.[15] In 2018, almost 70% of Puebla's residents asserted that public insecurity was the largest problem facing the state, and 8 out of every 10 residents said they felt unsafe. Homicides rose 23% between 2017 and 2018, and in 2019 Puebla registered as the state with the sixth highest crime rate in Mexico and fourth highest rate of femicides. Puebla is the state with the highest number of human trafficking cases in the country; between 2012 and 2017 over two thousand individuals were reported as disappeared from the state, with 647 of these being children or adolescents.[16]

Michoacán

Michoacán specifically has been an epicenter of violence throughout Mexico's drug war, with a murder rate of between 35-40 per 100,000 people. In October 2022, the State Department issued a travel advisory warning US citizens not to travel anywhere in Michoacán due to crime.[17] Many violent confrontations are part of a turf war currently being waged in Michoacán against the incursion of the CJNG, which has seen grisly mass killings reminiscent of the peak years of the Mexican Drug War (2006-2012). In May 2019, a convoy of trucks openly marked with the CJNG logo drove through Zamora, Michoacán, shooting police vehicles and killing several officers. In August 2019, nine bodies were found hanging from an overpass in Uruapan, Michoacán, with ten more dismembered corpses discovered down the road, bringing the total to 19. The bodies were found with a banner hanging from the overpass signed by the CJNG and threatening their rival gang Los Viagras. Alejandro Hope, a Mexico security analyst,

---

[14] Paola Aroche, "Detectan a las pandillas más riesgosas en Atlixco," *Periódico Gratuito Puntual,* March 16, 2016, http://ediciones.diariopuntual.com/centro/2016/03/16/16358.

[15] "CJNG winning ground in turf war with Zetas" *Mexico News Daily*, March 31, 2018, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/cjng-winning-ground-in-turf-war-with-zetas/.
"Cartel war leaves 7 dead in one night in Puebla," *Mexico News Daily,* March 12, 2019, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/cartel-war-leaves-7-dead-in-one-night-in-puebla/.

[16] Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla, "Violencia e Inseguridad," 2020, https://repo.iberopuebla.mx/agendaInstitucional/violenciaInseguridad.html.

[17] US Department of State, "Mexico Travel Advisory," Oct. 5, 2022, https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mexico-travel-advisory.html

remarked of the killings, "This kind of public, theatrical violence, where you don't just kill, but you brag about killing, is meant to intimidate rivals and send a message to the authorities."[18]

Currently, Michoacán is contested by two main rivals: Los Viagras, a splinter group of the Caballeros Templarios, and the CJNG, as well as by smaller local groups and *autodefensas* that have unified in their efforts to stop the incursion of the CJNG under the name Carteles Unidos. The groups compete over the illicit drug market as well as extortion opportunities provided by lucrative industries such as mining, avocados, limes and macadamia nuts in the state. These turf wars also involve local authorities on a regular basis, who are frequently accused of supporting the different criminal organizations. On February 3, 2020 turf disputes between the CJNG and Los Viagras led to the massacre of nine people, including three boys, a teenager and five others at an arcade in Uruapan. The day before the arcade shooting, the bodies of 11 people were found in clandestine graves on a hill in Uruapan. Another attack killed a municipal patrol officer and wounded two others a day earlier.[19]

Michoacán has been pummeled by the storm of violence created by the illegal drug trade in Mexico and is now a zone of impunity. For years, La Familia Michoacána and later the Templarios expanded the drug trade, investing heavily in the production of methamphetamines in the state of Michoacán and trafficking them north to the United States. As other organizations began fighting to gain control over this lucrative industry, the death toll began to rise. Many of these groups are at least partially made up of community militia members who have since turned to organized crime, and members of older fragmented cartels. The line between the community defense militias who now wear state-issued uniforms and the cartels has all but been erased in Michoacán.

Michoacán and neighboring Guerrero have long been the center of Mexico's heroin production, but the rise of synthetic opioids such as fentanyl has caused the price of opium to plummet to under a third of its 2017 value, leaving drug cartels scrambling for alternative profits. Currently, competition over Michoacán's booming avocado industry, centered in Uruapan, has contributed to the wave of violence. According to Michoacán's Attorney General, the CJNG, the Nueva Familia, the Tepalcatepec Cartel and the Zicuirán Cartel are all competing over this new economy, with an annual export value of approximately $2.4 billion. The cartels charge a monthly protection payment from avocado producers, calculated

[18] Associated Press, "19 Bodies Hung From Bridge or Dismembered in Mexico Gang Feud," *New York Times*, Aug. 8, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/08/world/americas/mexico-drug-feud-bodies-Michoacán.html.
[19] "Violence Hotspots in Michoacán: Who Is Behind the High Murder Rate in the State," *Intelyse*, March 2, 2020, https://intelyse.com/violence-hotspots-Michoacán-high-murder-rate/.

per hectare cultivated or kilogram exported, and those who fail to pay face retribution. Avocado theft is also rampant, with at least four truckloads daily stolen from producers in the state[20]

The battle for control over the avocado industry has resulted in bloodshed and violence. In February 2019, one avocado distributor in Uruapan, Michoacán was called by cartel members and notified that his son had been shot. He rushed back to work to find his son bleeding out on the steps of their business.[21] According to a researcher from International Crisis Group, "Uruapan is a goldmine for criminals that seek large gains from extortion," referring to ransom payments from kidnapping avocado farmers and distributors, among other incidents of cartels appropriating farmland and stealing distribution trucks.[22] The resurgence of this criminal economy also reflects the weakening of Michoacán's rural self-defense groups that emerged in 2014 in response to such extortion practices and achieved a temporary break for producers in some regions (although urban areas such as Uruapan rarely had organized militias). In subsequent years, however, many of these groups have themselves been infiltrated by criminals, leaving local businesses vulnerable.[23]

Guerrero

Turf wars between various cartels have also made Guerrero state increasingly dangerous. From Chilpancingo, the capital of the state of Guerrero, a hub of poppy cultivation, among other drug production, drug loads move north to Morelos before being transported west via a main highway towards the Pacific coast and Acapulco, home to a major port for drug trafficking. Los Rojos, La Familia Michoacana and Guerreros Unidos cartels especially have used extreme violence throughout the past decade to exert control over this route.[24] The fragmentation of cartels and their struggle for power has greatly increased the violence experienced in Guerrero, with almost 2,000 homicides in 2017 for a population of approximately 3.3 million.[25]

---

[20] Cat Rainsford, "Mexico's Cartels Fighting It Out for Control of Avocado Business," InSight Crime, Sept. 30, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/mexico-cartels-fighting-avocado-business/.
[21] David Marcial Pérez, "La maldición del aguacate," *El Pais,* Feb. 2, 2019, https://elpais.com/internacional/2019/02/01/actualidad/1549049608_676151.html.
[22] Andy Robinson, "El sabor amargo del guacamole," *La Vanguardia*, Aug. 19, 2019, https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20190819/464143616517/guacamole-negocio-mexico-millones-crimen-organizado.html.
[23] Cat Rainsford, "Mexico's Cartels Fighting It Out for Control of Avocado Business," InSight Crime, Sept. 30, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/mexico-cartels-fighting-avocado-business/.
[24] Parker Asmann, "Morelos, Mexico's Latest Hotspot for Fragmented Criminal Showdowns," InSight Crime, June 5, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/morelos-mexico-latest-hotspot-fragmented-criminal-showdowns/.
[25] Ioan Grillo, "Mexico's New, Deadlier Crime Lords," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 8, 2017, https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-12-08/splintering-of-cartels-in-mexico-pushes-deadly-violence-to-record-levels.

In the past decade, various cartels have expanded the drug trade in Guerrero, investing heavily in the production of methamphetamines and heroin and trafficking them north to the United States. As other newer organizations began fighting to gain control over this lucrative industry, the death tolls began to rise. Politicians, government employees, and local community members became both targets and casualties of the tactics used by groups vying for power hoping to gain control over strategically valuable territory. In August 2019, Familia Michoacana members based in Guerrero released a video via Twitter threatening members of the CJNG, displaying a large group of heavily armed men and announcing, "If you kill 20 [hitmen], I have more to replace them." Fearing violent confrontations between the cartels, civilians declared a curfew in the municipalities of Ciudad Altamirano and Coyuca de Catalán, Guerrero for protection.[26]

The latest US State Department travel advisory from October 2022 warns US citizens not to travel anywhere in Guerrero, and it gives the state a level 4 warning (the most dangerous level, also given to Somalia, Afghanistan and Syria). The advisory reads: "Do not travel due to crime. Armed groups operate independently of the government in many areas of Guerrero. Members of these groups frequently maintain roadblocks and may use violence towards travelers."[27] The municipal elections of July 2021 in Guerrero provoked a shift in criminal alliances with local governments, resulting in violent encounters and disappearances throughout the state, according to security analysts. Members of community defense forces battling narco incursions in the state described in the early months of 2022 how fellow community police officers have disappeared while moving through previously transited territories as a result of the change in local governments. Other instances such as attacks on bus drivers in Acapulco, threats from organized crime groups to the local government in Iguala, and decapitated heads found on the roof of a car in Chilapa, point to the continued presence and threat of organized crime in the state.[28]

Tierra Caliente (Michoacán, Guerrero, Estado de México)

The region of Tierra Caliente, covering parts of the states of Michoacán, Guerrero and the State of Mexico, is one of Mexico's most complex criminal panoramas. A report by the International Crisis Group found at least 20 distinct criminal groups there, vying for control

[26] "La Familia Michoacana" mostró su poderío en Guerrero: "si me matan 20 sicarios, tengo más para reponerlos," *Infobae*, Aug. 28, 2019, https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/08/28/la-familia-michoacana-mostro-su-poderio-en-guerrero-si-me-matan-20-sicarios-tengo-mas-para-reponerlos/.

[27] US State Department Travel Advisory, Oct. 5, 2022, https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mexico-travel-advisory.html

[28] Pablo Ferri, "Alerta mafiosa en el centro de Guerrero," *El País*, Feb. 14, 2022, https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-02-14/alerta-mafiosa-en-el-centro-de-guerrero.html.

of synthetic drug production, drug trafficking routes coming in via the Pacific and for the increasingly lucrative extortion of the avocado industry. InSight Crime has reported that the CJNG is the largest and the most well-funded group in Tierra Caliente, although they are still locked in fierce turf battles with more entrenched local groups with more popular support, such as the Cartel del Abuelo and Los Viagras. In 2019, the CJNG began a series of bloody assaults against the Cartel del Abuelo, with CJNG boss Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, alias "El Mencho," even reportedly issuing a personal statement threatening Farías Álvarez.[29] "El Triángulo de la Brecha," the border area between the three states in Tierra Caliente, has been racked with violence since 2011 as La Familia Michoacana, Los Guerreros Unidos, Los Zetas, and now the CJNG have competed for control over the area. Some consequences of this war have been enormous forced displacements in San Miguel Totolapan, mass kidnappings in Ajuchitlán del Progreso and the extrajudicial executions of 22 civilians in Tlatlaya in 2014. Kidnappings and extortion have become increasingly common in the area as a new tool for exerting control, and one journalist noted that crossing the highway from Toluca to Ixtapa Zihuatanejo without paying an extortionist was a sure way to be kidnapped.[30]

Morelos

In the past two years, Morelos has been repeatedly referred to as a major "focal point" for cartel violence as different cartels compete for territory in the state. According to Mexican security chief José Antonio Ortiz Guarneros, the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Los Rojos, La Familia Michoacana, Los Tlahuicas and Los Mayas are disputing control of Morelos' capital Cuernavaca, as well as in the municipalities of Jiutepec, Emiliano Zapata, Cuautla, Puente de Ixtla, Yautepec, Jojutla and Xochitepec. At least 30 homicides were recorded in May 2019 as a result of battles between these groups, including two local business leaders who were murdered in broad daylight in downtown Cuernavaca by cartel hitmen.[31] In September 2020, nine people were killed and 14 injured as they attended a funeral. The massacre was thought to have been carried out by Los Colombianos, a gang allied with the CJNG. Shortly after the funeral, a revenge attack was carried out by the rival group Los Mayas, allied with the Familia Michoacana. Out of all of Mexico's states, Morelos had the highest rate of high-impact crimes such as homicide, kidnapping and extortion in 2019.[32]

[29] Victoria Dittmar, "Why the Jalisco Cartel Does Not Dominate Mexico's Criminal Landscape," InSight Crime, June 11, 2020, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/jalisco-cartel-dominate-mexico/.
[30] "No importa que los maten: una crónica de Tierra Caliente," *Horizontal*, 28 January, 2016, https://horizontal.mx/no-importa-que-los-maten-una-cronica-de-tierra-caliente/.
[31] Parker Asmann, "Morelos, Mexico's Latest Hotspot for Fragmented Criminal Showdowns," InSight Crime, June 5, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/morelos-mexico-latest-hotspot-fragmented-criminal-showdowns/.
[32] Parker Asmann, Morelos, Mexico's Latest Hotspot for Fragmented Criminal Showdowns," InSight Crime, June 5, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/morelos-mexico-latest-hotspot-fragmented-criminal-showdowns/.

Additionally, investigators from the *Washington Post* found that top officials in more than half of the state's 36 municipalities had ties to cartels in 2019, suggesting that these organized crime groups work with almost complete impunity throughout the state. The evidence included recorded phone conversations between local officials and cartel bosses and videos of mayors being threatened if they didn't cooperate with cartel gunmen. The mayor of Amacuzac, Morelos was arrested in May 2018 on charges of kidnapping and aiding the Los Rojos cartel, only to campaign again from prison and continue to govern the municipality. [33] After the back-to-back shootings in September, the president of the Morelos Bar Association and former state attorney general José Luis Urióstegui Salgado made a statement accusing Morelos' current governor and security commissioner of being incapable and uninterested in fighting crime and suggesting they be removed from office.[34]

Guanajuato

Guanajuato was the most violent state in Mexico for the third consecutive year in 2022 with 3,260 recorded homicides, largely due to rival cartels competing for territory and control of fuel theft in the region.[35] As the *San Miguel Times* put it, "Guanajuato is currently living the worst levels of insecurity and violence during the state's history."[36] The entire region where the state of Guanajuato lies is dominated by overlapping and rival drug cartels, including in the states of Michoacán, Jalisco and Guerrero. The recent spike in violence in Guanajuato has mostly been attributed to the bitter rivalry between the local Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel (CSRL) and the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), the latter of which has been slowly making incursions into the state with interests in taking over valuable drug routes and control of fuel theft. In 2019, Guanajuato tallied 4,494 homicides, the most of any state. Extortions, kidnappings and forced disappearances have also plagued the state.[37]

---

[33] Kevin Sieff, "With its Leader in Jail, This City Cowered to his Will," Nov. 12, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/mexico-losing-control/mexico-morelos-mayor-jail-organized-crime/.

[34] "Cuernavaca has become battlefield between gangs allied with 2 cartels," *Mexico News Daily*, Sept. 4, 2020, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/cuernavaca-has-become-battlefield-between-gangs/.

[35] "'Cartel war map' shows further incursion by Jalisco cartel into Guanajuato," *Mexico News Daily*, June 28, 2022, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/cartel-war-map-jalisco-cartel-guanajuato/.

[36] David Saúl Vela, "Guanajuato entra en el 'top ten' de homicidios en el país," *El Financiero*, 14 March 2017, http://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/nacional/entra-guanajuato-al-top-ten-de-homicidios-a-nivel-nacional.html; "Guanajuato ranked top ten in violence rate nationwide" *San Miguel Times*, 17 March 2017, http://sanmigueltimes.com/2017/03/guanajuato-ranked-top-ten-in-violence-rate-nationwide/.

[37] Victoria Dittmar, "Mexico Facing Predictable Bloody Fallout After El Marro's Arrest," InSight Crime, Nov. 12, 2020, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-facing-predictable-bloody-fallout-after-el-marros-arrest/.

Guanajuato also ranked as the deadliest state in Mexico for police in 2017, 2018 and 2019. According to statistics from the organization Causa en Común, at least 77 officers were killed in 2020 alone. In 2018, municipal police from Irapuato warned that they would no longer be involved in fighting drug trafficking and oil theft due to the risks to their forces.[38] Other corrupt officers however have been found to have collaborated with cartels in Guanajuato state, with over 150 police dismissed in the city of Celaya alone by August 2022 due to alleged cartel ties. An undercover unit embedded in the Celaya police department found the corrupt officers to be collaborating both with the CJNG and CSRL, including by "providing them with information, helping them escape, thwarting operations against them, and even forming part of the security of the cartels fighting for the territory."[39]

Prior to the current rivalry between the CSRL and CJNG, the Cartel Jalisco entered the state's territory in approximately 2012 by displacing the Familia Michoacana cartel. According to sources in the Mexican press, the Familia Michoacana held strongholds in Guanajuato when the CJNG began making inroads, especially in León where La Familia's leaders coordinated many of the cartel's activities in the state. Between 2009 and 2010, security forces arrested various leaders of La Familia Michoacana in Guanajuato, alongside multiple police who were detained due to their connections to the cartel.[40]

Chiapas

This border region between Mexico and Guatemala is an extremely violent place for women and children, especially in recent years due to the influx of criminal networks that prey upon vulnerable migrants from Central America passing through the area. As many as a third of female migrants in the region have become victims of sexual abuse, according to a recent Doctors Without Borders survey, and reported sexual abuse of minors in the state of Chiapas rose by 60% in 2019.[41] In 2011, 30 percent of women in Chiapas aged 15 and older reported being victims of domestic violence, according to Mexico's National Survey on the Dynamics of Relationships in the Household.[42] In Chiapas, there is no streamlined system to coordinate criminal data about disappearances and murders, especially of women and children. While the National Public Safety System's National Information Center recorded

[38] Victoria Dittmar, "Mexico Facing Predictable Bloody Fallout After El Marro's Arrest," InSight Crime, Nov. 12, 2020, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-facing-predictable-bloody-fallout-after-el-marros-arrest/.
[39] Scott Mistler-Ferguson, "Corrupt Police Play Both Sides in Guanajuato, Mexico," InSight Crime, Aug. 29, 2022, https://insightcrime.org/news/corrupt-police-play-both-sides-guanajuato-mexico/.
[40] Hector Rossete, "CJNG: 10 años de terror en Guanajuato," *La Silla Rota Guanajuato*, Aug. 11, 2022, https://lasillarota.com/guanajuato/estado/2022/8/11/cjng-10-anos-de-terror-en-guanajuato-384210.html.
[41] Benjamin Russell, "The Hidden Mental Health Crisis at Mexico's Border," *Americas Quarterly*, April 20, 2020, https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/the-hidden-mental-health-crisis-at-mexicos-border/.
[42] Laurie Liles, "Chiapas women work toward a 'life free of violence'," Cronkite Borderlands Project, Sept. 25, 2014, https://cronkite.asu.edu/buffett/chiapas/chiapas-women-work-toward-a-life-free-of-violence/.

23 cases of femicide in Chiapas between January and November 2018, six of which were minors, civil society organizations say they've tallied significantly higher numbers.[43]

Oaxaca

In Oaxaca, control of natural resources and territory is the principal motivation for increasing violence in the state. A particularly brutal massacre in the town of San Mateo del Mar in June 2020 highlighted these tensions, when 15 Indigenous Oaxacans were stoned, burned and hacked to death by machete, allegedly by a group loyal to the municipal leader Bernardino Ponce Hinojosa. Witnesses said that federal and municipal authorities fled the scene when the attack began, signaling the complete failure of the Mexican state to protect its citizens in the region. There have been ongoing conflicts in the region between Indigenous communities, private investors and State-sponsored projects that would endanger the region's natural resources.[44] According to a report by the University of San Diego, Oaxaca ranked 7th of 32 states in Mexico for organized-crime style homicides in the year 2018. Included in those homicides were the former mayors of Ejutla Crespo and Valerio Trujano, Francisco Genaro Hernández Sánchez and Gualberto Heminio Rosas Lastra.[45] Organized crime groups have also sought to gain control of the area due to its strategic location for the trafficking of undocumented immigrants and the storage of stolen fuel, according to municipal authorities.[46]

Jalisco

Jalisco is known as the home state of Mexico's largest and most powerful cartel currently, the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación. The capital city of Guadalajara and other important cities throughout the state are currently being contested by the CJNG and a splinter group of its rival Sinaloa Cartel, the Nueva Plaza Cartel. In the Guadalajara metropolitan area, which includes eight municipalities besides Guadalajara, 1,553 murders were committed in 2019, amounting to more than four a day. In 2020, at the height of the pandemic, this figure dropped very slightly to 1,369. Just in the two years between 2019

[43] Marissa Revilla, "Data Discrepancies Anger Activists as Cases of Murdered and Missing Girls, Teens Rise," *Global Press Journal,* Sept. 7, 2019, https://globalpressjournal.com/americas/mexico/data-discrepancies-anger-activists-cases-murdered-missing-girls-teens-rise/.

[44] Parker Asmann, "Three Massacres Expose Weakness of Mexico's 'Catch-All' Security Policy," InSight Crime, July 9, 2020, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/massacres-mexico-security-policy/.

[45] Laura Y. Calderón, Kimberly Heinle, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, "Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico," Justice in Mexico, Department of Political Science & International Relations University of San Diego, April 2019, https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Organized-Crime-and-Violence-in-Mexico-2019.pdf.

[46] "Oaxaca massacre: 15 tortured, killed for territorial control," *Mexico News Daily*, June 23, 2020, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/oaxaca-massacre-15-tortured-killed-for-territorial-control/.

and 2021, 406 victims were discovered in clandestine graves in Jalisco.[47] In one of the most dramatic examples of the violence enacted by organized criminal groups in the state, 138 bags stuffed with human remains were dumped in a forest in Zapopan, Jalisco near the state's capital in 2019.[48] The region is home to the Sierra de Ahuisculco, a mountain range to Guadalajara's west where the CJNG is known to run paramilitary-style training camps and drug laboratories. The state's proximity to two important Pacific ports, Manzanillo in Colima state and Lazaro Cardenas in Michoacán, make Jalisco a strategic location for the trafficking of raw materials to produce drugs.

Chihuahua

Chihuahua has been notorious for violent clashes between cartels fighting for control over trafficking routes into the United States. Currently, authorities suspect that turf wars between the Nuevo Cartel de Juárez and the Sinaloa Cartel, as well as their affiliate groups such as La Línea and Gente Nueva, have created a spike in violence throughout the border state. In April 2020, a shootout between cartel hitmen left 19 dead, while in October of the same year, another eight people were presumably killed by cartel soldiers.[49] According to the Secretary of National Security, 1,818 people were murdered in Chihuahua within the first nine months of 2020, indicating a spike in violence throughout the state not seen since the height of the Drug War.[50]

Veracruz

In the first 11 months of 2020, Veracruz was the eighth most violent state in Mexico, with 1,320 homicides recorded. 2021 also began with a violent start when 12 members of an alleged self-defense group were bound, executed, and dumped on a dirt road in the municipality of Las Choapas in January.[51] Previous years have also seen violent massacres in the state, such as the April 2019 cartel killings in Minatitlán at a family party, leaving 14 dead including a one-year-old baby. The CJNG and Zetas Old School (Zetas Vieja Escuela), one of the strongest splinter factions of the once-feared Zetas cartel, have been at war after

[47] Elena Reina, "Mexico's Guadalajara gripped by gang violence and impunity," *El País*, Feb. 23, 2021, https://english.elpais.com/usa/2021-02-23/mexicos-guadalajara-gripped-by-gang-violence-and-impunity.html.
[48] Tom Phillips and Analy Nuño, "'An atmosphere of terror': the bloody rise of Mexico's top cartel," *Guardian*, April 2, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/02/jalisco-cartel-mexico-rise-guadalajara.
[49] "Suspected cartel shootout kills 19 in northern Mexico," *Reuters*, April 4, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-violence-idUSKBN21M0UF.
"Violencia en Chihuahua: hallaron los cuerpos de ocho personas ejecutadas," *Infobae*, Oct. 28, 2020, https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2020/10/28/violencia-en-chihuahua-hallaron-los-cuerpos-de-ocho-personas-ejecutadas/.
[50] "Violencia en Chihuahua: hallaron los cuerpos de ocho personas ejecutadas," *Infobae*, Oct. 28, 2020, https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2020/10/28/violencia-en-chihuahua-hallaron-los-cuerpos-de-ocho-personas-ejecutadas/.
[51] "Police find 12 bodies dumped on road in Mexico's Veracruz state," *Reuters*, Jan. 18, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-violence-idUSKBN29N1TR.

members of the Zetas Old School allegedly executed three suspected CJNG members in Veracruz in 2019. Additionally, a splinter group linked to the Gulf Cartel and known as the Shadow Group (Grupo Sombra) left a dismembered corpse and a narco-banner to warn the CJNG and Zetas of what will happen if they enter territory already controlled by the group, not only in Veracruz, but also in Hidalgo, Tamaulipas and San Luis Potosí.[52] In 2018, Veracruz was rocked by the discovery of mass graves containing over 32 burial pits and the remains from 174 bodies. Among the remains discovered were those of young children, including infants, along with their clothing and multiple toys. Currently, Veracruz has more graveyards than municipalities, with 300 mass grave sites discovered and only 212 municipalities in the state. In 2017 alone, Veracruz registered a total of 1,641 homicides, a rate of 20.7 murdered for every 100,000 inhabitants.[53]

Zacatecas

Zacatecas has become increasingly violent in recent years, especially due to territorial fights between several different cartels for the production and distribution of fentanyl, the two most powerful being the Sinaloa Cartel and the CJNG.[54] The state's director of Public Security has affirmed the presence of at least 5 different cartels within Zacatecas, also including the Gulf Cartel, Los Talibanes, and the Cartel del Noreste (the latter two formerly affiliated with Los Zetas), all of whom are currently battling over important fentanyl trafficking routes given the state's strategic location between the Pacific coast and the U.S. border.[55] In 2020, Zacatecas had reported 821 homicides by October, with 95 violent deaths just in the month of September.[56] 90% of these deaths were estimated to be related to organized crime.[57]

San Luis Potosi

San Luis Potosi faces similar threats of violence due to recent incursions by the CJNG on long-held Zetas territory. The CJNG announced their presence in San Luis in February 2020, circulating a video message on social media that the cartel was overtaking the state from the

[52] Parker Asmann, "Veracruz Massacre Crowns Bloody Start of 2019 in Mexico," InSight Crime, April 24, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/veracruz-massacre-bloody-2019-mexico/.
[53] Elizabeth Melimopoulos, "Violence, impunity and fear in the Mexican state of Veracruz," *Al Jazeera*, Sept. 26, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/violence-impunity-fear-mexican-state-veracruz-180926051629034.html.
[54] Tania Montalvo, "Como es que el cártel Jalisco cobró tanta fuerza en el gobierno de Peña," *Animal Político*, 28 Sept. 2016, http://www.animalpolitico.com/2016/09/cartel-jalisco-nueva-generacion-mas-grande/
[55] Irma Mejía, "Zacatecas. Merodean cárteles por moda de fentanilo," *El Universal*, Feb. 3, 2020, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/zacatecas-en-guerra-5-carteles-se-disputan-por-fentanilo.
[56] Juan Castro, "En Zacatecas se registraron 95 homicidios durante septiembre," *El Sol de Zacatecas*, Oct. 1, 2020, https://www.elsoldezacatecas.com.mx/local/en-zacatecas-se-registraron-95-homicidios-durante-septiembre-inseguridad-violencia-muertes-violentas-secretaria-de-seguridad-publica-5832912.html.
[57] Irma Mejía, "Zacatecas. Merodean cárteles por moda de fentanilo," *El Universal*, Feb. 3, 2020, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/zacatecas-en-guerra-5-carteles-se-disputan-por-fentanilo.

Zetas, Northeast and Gulf cartels.[58] In November 2018, San Luis Potosí's state governor, Juan Manuel Carreras, announced a new public consultation process on drug policy in an effort to tackle rising rates of violence in the state. Official data reported 10,045 theft incidents in the state during January–September 2018, or 13.2% higher than during the same period of 2017. Similarly, homicides increased 12.2% during the same period to 423 reported victims.[59]

Aguascalientes

In Aguascalientes, the incursion of cartels from surrounding states has caused a resurgence in violence over the past few years, with the homicide rate nearly doubling in 2017 and 2018 from prior years. State officials have said that the influx of battling cartels from Zacatecas, Jalisco and San Luis Potosí have sparked the increase in violence. Specifically, the CJNG cartel and the Sinaloa cartel have publicly announced their battle over territory by hanging *narcomantras*, or banners with violent phrases, in public spaces and plazas, declaring their presence and control in Aguascalientes.[60]

Durango

In the past decade, Durango became ground zero for a territorial fight between the Sinaloa Cartel and Los Zetas. In 2013 the local government came under fire from both cartels, as Los Zetas sought revenge for the closing of a Zetas-controlled prison in Gomez Palacio, Durango. The prison was shut down after a deadly riot occurred, with numerous state officials being forced to read statements confirming the cartel's infiltration of the prosecutor's office before being murdered by the Sinaloa Cartel.[61] Traditionally a stronghold for the Sinaloa Cartel, Durango became more violent as Los Zetas gained control over the bordering states of Coahuila and Zacatecas, encroaching on Sinaloa territory. In terms of cartel violence, Durango is perhaps most known for the shocking mass graves that were discovered between 2011 and 2012, with a total of 331 bodies found in 14 different grave sites. The first site was found in April of 2011 with 89 bodies inside. Of the victims, only 37 bodies were identified and returned to their family members.[62] Lack of DNA testing has

[58] "Jalisco New Generation Cartel has plans for México state, San Luis Potosí," *Mexico News Daily*, Feb. 4, 2020, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/cartel-has-plans-for-mexico-state-san-luis-potosi/.
[59] "Homicides and theft rising in Mexico's San Luis Potosí; narco-message emergence raises collateral death and injury risks," Nov. 9, 2018, https://ihsmarkit.com/country-industry-forecasting.html?ID=10659123111.
[60] "Cartels battle in Aguascalientes and trigger a resurgence in violence," *Mexico News Daily*, November 6, 2018, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/cartels-battle-in-aguascalientes/.
[61] "Durango becoming ground zero for Zetas-Sinaloa cartel battle," Insight Crime, Jan. 18 2013, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/durango-ground-zero-for-zetas-sinaloa-cartel-battle/
[62] Richard Ibarra, "Hallan 50 restos más en Durango; Suman 331 cuerpos en fosas en 10 meses," *Expansión*, Feb. 27, 2012, https://expansion.mx/nacional/2012/02/27/hallan-50-restos-mas-en-durango-suman-322-cuerpos-en-fosas-en-10-meses

made it difficult to discern which of the victims were cartel members or innocent civilians, but the horrific violence was undeniably a product of the vicious turf wars between Los Zetas and the Sinaloa Cartel in the northern state.

Chapter Two: Organized Crime and Rising Violence in Mexico

Rising Levels of Violence in Mexico

Since 2006, the homicide rate has dramatically increased in Mexico, and since 2020 there has been a slight decline, but the national homicide rate remains high. According to government data, Mexican authorities recorded at least 30,968 homicide victims in 2022, or 85 per day, with 947 femicides reported. Combined, the total number of murders in Mexico topped 31,915, giving the country a homicide rate of 25.2 per 100,000 residents. Although this constitutes a slight drop in homicides from 2021, the total number of murder victims in Mexico topped 30,000 for the fifth consecutive year.[63] Since President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office in December 2018, Mexico's homicide rate has remained at historically high levels of approximately 29 killings per 100,000 inhabitants, according to figures from the Statistics Institute.[64] Almost 50% of homicides in 2022 were concentrated in the same six states as 2021: Guanajuato, which saw the most murders of any state with 3,260, Baja California, Chihuahua, Jalisco, Michoacán, and the State of Mexico.[65]

In 2005, Mexico's murder rate was 9.5 per 100,000 people, but by 2010, that figure had more than doubled to 22 per 100,000, coinciding with the start of President Felipe Calderón's security strategy against cartels in 2006 (commonly known as the start of the Drug War). According to research published in the journal Health Affairs, the life expectancy for Mexican men aged 15 to 50 fell by 0.6 percent from 2005 to 2010. According to analysis from the study, life expectancy seemed to be on the rise from 2000 to 2005, but from 2005 to 2010, many states, especially those at the center of the drug war, saw a drastic reversal.[66] Representing heightened feelings of insecurity during the Drug War, victimization surveys show that the proportion of adults who felt their state of residence was unsafe rose from 49% in 2004 to 61% in 2009, and this increased feeling of insecurity occurred in states that did not become more violent as well as those that did.[67] The Mexican government estimates

[63] "InSight Crime's 2022 Homicide Round-Up," InSight Crime, Feb. 8, 2023, https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2022-homicide-round-up/#Mexico.
[64] "Mexico's homicide rate stayed high in 2020 despite pandemic," *AP News*, Jan. 20, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/homicide-coronavirus-pandemic-latin-america-mexico-a90c2a172f39ab2546de465c73a60543.
[65] "InSight Crime's 2022 Homicide Round-Up," InSight Crime, Feb. 8, 2023, https://insightcrime.org/news/insight-crime-2022-homicide-round-up/#Mexico.
[66] Rachel Nuwer, "Reverberations From a Rise in Mexico's Murder Rate," *New York Times*, Feb. 1, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/02/science/mexico-murder-rate-life-expectancy.html.
[67] Sukanya Basu and Sarah Pearlman, "Violence and migration: evidence from Mexico's drug war," *IZA Journal of Development and Migration* Volume 7, No. 18 (2017), https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40176-017-0102-6.

that during the presidency of Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) more than 60,000 people were killed in drug-related violence. The total number of homicides from 2007-2013 has been estimated at 135,000, with another 25,000 disappearances.[68] Even current President Lopez Obrador has acknowledged that during the presidency of Felipe Calderón, Mexico was a "narco-state because the government had been taken over."[69]

For the first time ever, a federal government institution announced in early 2019 that there were approximately 40,180 disappeared persons in the country and 36,708 dead without identification. More than 90% of these cases were never investigated or reported by authorities.[70] A newer, drastically increased estimate was released by the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances in May 2022, indicating that 100,000 people had been officially registered as disappeared.[71] The vast majority of these disappearances occurred after 2006, the year Calderón began cracking down on cartels. Just in 2019 alone, more than 9,000 people were forcibly disappeared, and more than 500 field searches across Mexico led to the discovery of 800 clandestine graves and the unearthing of 1,124 bodies.[72]

In the first seven months of 2021, researchers estimated around 6,300 people were injured or killed in incidents related to organized crime. September was registered as the most violent month in 2021, with 438 acts of extreme violence registered by the NGO Causa en Común, including the kidnapping of over 300 migrants in Aguascalientes and the murder of an entire family in Chihuahua. In a report prepared by the same organization, researchers accounted for at least 800 cases of torture, in addition to 640 incidents of dismemberment, mutilations and destruction of corpses, the discoveries of 502 clandestine graves, 418 massacres and 341 murders of women that were perpetrated with extreme cruelty during 2021.[73] These

---

[68] Molly Malloy, "Mexico's national crime statistics show no significant decline in homicides and disappearances," *Houston Chronicle*, 24 Oct. 2013, http://blog.chron.com/bakerblog/2013/10/is-drug-related-violence-in-mexico-onthe-decline/.
[69] Tony Richards, "Mexico was a 'narco-state' under former president Calderón, declares AMLO," *Reuters*, Aug. 10, 2020, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/mexico-was-narco-state-under-former-president-calderon-declares-amlo/
[70] "Hay más de 40 mil desaparecidos y 36 mil muertos sin identificar en México, reconoce Gobernación," *Animal Politico*, January 17, 2019, https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/01/40-mil-desaparecidos-mexico-victimas-sin-identificar/. *Cronología y análisis del caso Ayotzinapa*, Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez, Centro Prodh, Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo.
[71] "Mexico: Dark Landmark of 100,000 Disappearances Reflects Pattern of Impunity, UN Experts Warn," United Nations Human Rights, May 17, 2022, https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2022/05/mexico-dark-landmark-100000-disappearances-reflects-pattern-impunity-un-experts.
[72] Paulina Villegas, "A New Toll in Mexico's Drug War: More Than 61,000 Vanished," *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/06/world/americas/mexico-drug-war-death-toll.html.
[73] Albinson Linares, "Violent crimes rise in Mexico; 94.8% go unpunished," *NBC News*, Oct. 11, 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/violent-crimes-rise-mexico-948-go-unpunished-rcna2846.

instances represent only the documented cases, and the true number of torture and mass murders is certainly much higher.

According to the State Department's 2022 Crime and Safety Report, "Organized criminal gangs continue to cause significant levels of violence throughout parts of the country. Mexico continues to experience a combination of conditions that collectively degrade the security environment in certain areas. The government has captured some of its most wanted criminals. Consequently, organized criminal groups are becoming less organized and disciplined. The northern half of Mexico had been a higher-threat area, primarily due to organized criminal conflicts and competition for drug trafficking routes to the U.S. However, recent developments have increased drug-related violence in the southern areas of Mexico as well."[74] This strategy of going after cartel leaders and the subsequent dissolution of the most powerful cartels, known as fragmentation, is generally believed to be the reason for the rising homicide rates in Mexico, as smaller, less organized and generally more violent gangs compete over the power vacuums left behind.

Mexico's criminal landscape has morphed in recent years from one dominated by a handful of powerful cartels into a fragmented web of smaller, warring criminal groups defined by fragile and fast-changing alliances. The larger and most powerful Sinaloa Cartel and Jalisco Cartel New Generation (CJNG) dominate the scene, with newer hyper violent groups carving out a place for themselves through oil theft and other predatory crimes like extortion and kidnapping.[75] While each has its own history, structure, and particular relationship to the state, they generally operate with impunity. In 2020, Mexican federal prosecutors took legal action on fewer than five percent of cases. At the state level, impunity is even higher with only three percent of complaints brought before a judge. In the US, by comparison, federal prosecutors brought charges in 83 percent of cases.[76] The financial resources amassed through their illegal activities have been strategically invested in infiltrating political and policing institutions as well as military-grade weaponry. Drug cartels pose a formidable political and military threat to the federal government in Mexico, and have largely prevented the federal government from enforcing rule of law norms throughout the country. In recent years, the nature of violence has changed as the country's major drug trafficking organizations, or cartels, have become more fragmented, decentralized, and diversified in their activities, this has

[74] OSAC, "Mexico Country Security Report," June 15, 2022, https://www.osac.gov/Country/Mexico/Content/Detail/Report/8f3ac9f0-a827-455f-bf61-1c4142378221.
[75] "Mexico Profile," *InSight Crime*, May 5, 2021, https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/.
[76] Juan Montes, Mexican President's Fight Against Criminal Impunity Stalls," *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 14, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/mexican-presidents-fight-against-criminal-impunity-stalls-11665716869.

contributed to a proliferation of smaller, regional and local criminal organizations and a more complex set of challenges for the Mexican state.

Since the government has been greatly weakened through corruption, the cartels now act as de facto governments and implement their own system of justice as they see fit. Violent attacks are rampant and are encouraged rather than punished by the cartels. Given the extensive control these criminal organizations wield throughout Mexico, it can be expected that they will use whatever tactics necessary to recruit new members, punish their enemies, or extort and harm victims. Because they serve as de facto police in much of the region, people who oppose these desires can expect no protection from local or federal government. Finally, Mexican authorities are often the perpetrators of violence, meaning victims cannot rely on the state or police for any protection. In fact, many people who report such crimes to the police are turned over to cartels by corrupt police officers or are subject to violence by the police themselves.

Drug Cartels Neutralize Those Who Resist Their Authority

Drug cartels in large parts of Mexico operate as quasi-governments, taking taxes from residents or recruiting civilians in exchange for providing the community with protection, a system of justice, jobs and social services. James Kostelnik and David Skarbek have shown in their *Public Choice* journal article that Mexican drug cartels have internal forms of organization that are similar to governments. The quasi-governmental structures of the cartels help them continue to grow in power in spite of a rise in violence. As the authors put it, the "inability of the state to provide governance provides an avenue for criminal organizations to provide such institutions in exchange for cooperation."[77]

Since the drug cartels operate as political entities in the absence of a strong legitimate government, they see opponents as the state would view challengers to its authority: as political opponents who need to be disciplined or neutralized. When a person in Mexico refuses the demands of the cartel, or is viewed as a rival or enemy of the group, these actions are viewed as an act of political dissent. Given the lack of jails and prisons run by drug cartels, although there have been some instances of people being held captive in ranches, the cartels respond to opposition through violence, beatings, torture and killings. So, while the Mexican state might incarcerate people who challenge its authority, drug cartels will resort to killing as a way to exercise their authority and maintain internal discipline. Cartel members

[77] James Kostelnik and David Skarbek, "The governance institutions of a drug trafficking organization," *Public Choice*, Vol. 156, No. 1/2 (July 2013), 101-102, https://www.jstor.org/stable/42003149 .

punish rivals in order to make a lesson out of them, and thus dissuade others from disrespecting their political control and refusing cartel demands. Relocating to another part of Mexico in order to avoid harm is completely ineffective. Criminal organizations have strong ties to other states in Mexico and their authority continues to spread rapidly. These groups have extensive networks that permeate throughout Mexico and are capable of conducting targeted and mass killings even in areas controlled by rival organizations. It is important to the viability of these groups that they maintain complete control over the flow of people in their communities. If an individual is known to have escaped the community without the permission of the cartel and returns, he or she will be targeted as an example as a means of deterrence to others who wish to circumvent the power of these groups. Immigration courts have recognized that cartels "function as *de facto* governments," and view those who have defied them as holding anti-cartel views that render them enemies in the cartels' political struggle for control.[78]

An individual who was targeted in the past by cartels is at extreme risk for future harm if forced to return to Mexico. The cartels have sophisticated intelligence networks and the ability to access government databases through corrupt officials. Government agents share information systems and local, state, and federal officials share information among the different agencies. As a result, corrupt law enforcement officers are able to obtain intelligence on individuals regardless of where they are located in Mexico and share this information with cartels. Individuals have to record their current address in a public registry in order to work legally, making this information easily accessible to cartels. Mexican lawyers specializing in information access have proven that victims are unable to safely relocate to other areas of Mexico because public registries and other information that could be used to track individuals are easily accessible via the Internet.[79]

Cartel usage of social media sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp have only increased the amount of information available for tracking down perceived enemies, even across international borders. Because of the pervasive use of social media accounts, many cartel targets have reported that death threats and extortion requests continued even while seeking asylum in the United States, indicating that it is easy for transnational cartels and gangs to find their "enemies" wherever they go. One Mexican asylum seeker was named on an Internet hit list by criminal gang Los Ardillos in Guerrero before fleeing the country. Over

[78] Daniel Kowalski, "Asylum Victory in Hartford: Matter of R-G- (Death Threats from Gangs in Honduras, El Salvador)," *LexisNexis: Immigration Law,* Dec. 31, 2017, https://www.lexisnexis.com/legalnewsroom/immigration/b/immigration-law-blog/posts/asylum-victory-in-hartford-matter-of-r-g-death-threats-from-gangs-in-honduras-el-salvador.
[79] Julia Preston, "Asylum Granted to Mexican Woman in Case Setting Standard on Domestic Abuse," *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/13/us/politics/13asylum.html.

the next year, he was named on two additional hit lists posted by the same group but in different states throughout Mexico, suggesting that he would not be safe anywhere within the country.[80]

Cartels Target Family Members of Rivals

Family members of cartel targets are increasingly victims of cartel attacks themselves, as innocents caught in the crossfire, shot dead alongside their relatives, or intentionally targeted as revenge killings. According to U.S. and Mexican experts, competing criminal groups appear to be killing children and other relatives of their targets to terrorize the population or prove to rivals that their savagery is boundless. In 2011 for example, assassins killed three young girls in Ciudad Juarez, ages 12, 14 and 15, when they went to the home of an adult male target and he wasn't home, deciding to kill his family members instead.[81] In June 2019, a young boy was killed along with his father in Sonora state. In July 2019, a 10-year-old was killed during a robbery in Puebla state. In August of the same year, gunmen burst into a home in Ciudad Juarez and fired 123 bullets that killed three girls, aged 14, 13 and 4, along with an adult male who apparently was the real target. In 2017, Coatzacoalcos made headlines across Mexico when a man, his wife and three children were gunned down by a drug cartel. According to Mexican security analyst Alejandro Hope, "The risk involved in killing a man, or killing his whole family, is the same." Under that logic, wiping out an entire family "has its advantages. It is more intimidating, it is easier to carry out, and it makes escaping easier."[82] Targeting family members is also a lucrative extortion strategy, as Mexicans in the United States maintain close contact with families in Mexico, making it easier for the cartels' extended networks to single out immigrants who own businesses, and to make extortion threats against their operations and relatives in Mexico.[83]

Thomas Boerman has extensively studied the social construction of family in Central America, specifically in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, and has concluded that non-biological or non-formal romantic relationships are often understood as integral parts

[80] Rebecca Plevin, "'We're Going to Find You.' Mexican Cartels Turn Social Media into Tools for Extortion, Threats, and Violence," Pulitzer Center, February 28, 2019, https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/were-going-find-you-mexican-cartels-turn-social-media-tools-extortion-threats-and-violence.

[81] Anne-Marie O'Connor and William Booth, "Mexican drug cartels targeting and killing children," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/mexican-drug-cartels-targeting-and-killing-children/2011/04/07/AFwkFb9C_story.html.

[82] Mark Stevenson, "Mexico's new drug war might be worse than the old one," *AP News*, Aug. 30, 2019, https://apnews.com/article/9231894fd9bf451e92a6ba64e3c68dc2.

[83] Meribah Knight, "Families Fear Phone Call From Mexico's Cartels," *New York Times*, July 31, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/01/us/01cnccartel.html.

of the family or kinship group when that person maintains a strong link to the household. For instance, common law marriage is legally recognized in Central America, and is not seen as socially or culturally distinct from formal marriage.[84] Although Boerman's study focuses on the Northern Triangle countries in Central America, a similar construction has been true in Mexico, which shares a colonial and modern history with its neighbors to the south.[85]

The same gangs and transnational cartels operate in the Northern Triangle in Central America and in Mexico, and they use the same tactics to assert their authority. According to Boerman, "the victimization of family members of targeted individuals represents a central element in a strategy of terror through which organized criminal groups establish and maintain control over physical territory, criminal markets, and the population itself and come to exert such an outsized influence over government policy and practice." These threats do not diminish over time, because this would weaken the criminal organization's message that their victims are unable to escape their threats regardless of location or time elapsed. As stated by Boerman, "At times, threats are acted on immediately whereas in other instances, there may be a passage of time—even a significant amount of time—before the targeted individual is subjected to harm."[86] Because most criminal organizations are defined by a group identity and solidarity, members generally will act on behalf of their associates, and are able to carry out threats against enemies even if the individual ordering the attack is imprisoned. This means that targeted individuals and their loved ones and family members are at risk from the entire criminal organization in question, not just the individual that specifically threatened to harm them.

Cartels Target Mexicans Returning from the United States

People who have returned from the U.S. to Mexico are particularly susceptible to drug traffickers and gangs who target them as low-level recruits in the drug trade. If individuals refuse to join the criminal organizations, they are frequently viewed as dissidents who are against the interests of the trafficking organizations and face retributive punishment as a result. It is incredibly important to the viability of these groups that they maintain complete control of the flow of people in their communities.

---

[84] Thomas Boerman, "Family as a Social Construct in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala: Visibility and Vulnerability of Family Members of Individuals Targeted by Organized Criminal Groups," *Immigration Briefings: 19-12*, December 2019.

[85] Soledad González Montes and Julia Tuñón, *Familias y mujeres en México: del modelo a la diversidad* (Mexico City: Colegio de México, 1997).

[86] Thomas Boerman, "Family as a Social Construct in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala: Visibility and Vulnerability of Family Members of Individuals Targeted by Organized Criminal Groups," *Immigration Briefings: 19-12*, December 2019.

Furthermore, Mexicans with links to family members in the U.S. are seen as particularly promising candidates for extortion and kidnappings.

Drug cartels and other criminal organizations in Mexico are engaged increasingly in kidnappings in order to ransom their victims. Failure to pay for the release of those kidnapped often results in death sentences for family members. Amnesty International reported that on March 18, 2014, three recently deported women were kidnapped while standing in line at a Western Union in Matamoros, a border town. The Mexican government's National Migration Institute has compiled data that shows that most deportees to Mexico are being sent to the most dangerous areas of the country and are thus susceptible to homicide and other violent crimes.[87] As director of the Global Migration Project at Columbia University, Sarah Stillman has also been tracking deportees to Mexico and Central America who have been killed upon their return, such as Constantino Morales Roque, who was shot and killed seven months after his asylum claim was denied and he was deported in 2014. He had worked as a police officer in Guerrero until his active work against local drug cartels led him to become a target and he was forced to flee.[88] In January 2019, the *Washington Post* reported on numerous cases of Mexican deportees who were targeted and/or kidnapped by cartels in border states. Criminal groups have been regularly stopping buses leaving border cities and removing deportees demanding that their families pay ransoms.[89] In February 2021, a Guatemalan man deported from the United States was killed by Mexican police a few miles from the US border in Tamaulipas.[90] Jeremy Slack's new book *Deported to Death* is an ethnography that describes the dangers, including murder, facing deportees in northern Mexico who become targets of cartels after they are returned.[91]

Mexico's National Migration Institute has reported that U.S. deportations to Tamaulipas increased five-fold between 2006 and 2012, supplying the Gulf Cartel, Los Zetas and the Sinaloa cartel with an increasing number of kidnapping victims whose family members

[87] Clay Boggs, "What Happens to Migrants After They Are Deported," Washington Office on Latin America, http://www.wola.org/commentary/what_happens_to_migrants_after_they_are_deported .
[88] Sarah Stillman, "When Deportation is a Death Sentence," *New Yorker*, January 8, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/15/when-deportation-is-a-death-sentence.
[89] Kevin Sieff, "The US Sends Thousands of Deportees Each Month to Mexico's Most Dangerous Border Areas," *Washington Post*, 8 Jan. 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/the-us-sends-thousands-of-deportees-each-month-to-mexicos-most-dangerous-border-areas/2019/01/07/bbe4036e-ff45-11e8-a17e-162b712e8fc2_story.html.
[90] David Mora and Emily Green, "Deported to Death," *Vox*, 23 Feb. 2021, https://www.vice.com/en/article/epd9qk/edgar-lopez-murder-trump-zero-tolerance-immigration-policy.
[91] Jeremy Slack, *Deported to Death: How Drug Violence Is Changing Migration on the US-Mexico Border* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2019).

are perceived to have access to dollars.[92] A 2012 documentary produced by the Washington Office on Latin America demonstrates that a large majority of deportees from the United States have had run-ins with cartel members attempting to kidnap or extort them.[93] In August of 2010, 72 migrants were massacred by Los Zetas in San Fernando in Tamaulipas, and the following year 47 mass graves were discovered there, with the remains of nearly 200 migrants who had been kidnapped. In 2011, the Mexican army in Tamaulipas rescued 120 migrants kidnapped while trying to reach the U.S.[94] Jeremy Slack, principal investigator on the Migrant Border Crossing Study, has noted that recently deported migrants are regularly recruited by cartels to watch the Rio Grande to make sure that no one crosses without paying a fee to the cartels. Many of these migrants have disappeared after starting work with the cartels.[95]

The U.S. State Department's travel warning indicates that U.S. citizens and people who have come from the U.S. are especially vulnerable to extortion as well, because they are viewed as having access to money and resources.[96] Americanized Mexicans are also targeted by the criminal organizations for extortions, ransom, kidnappings, and other violence. There is, of course, a clear financial motive. The cartels and other criminal organizations believe that Americanized Mexicans and/or their families have access to money to pay the extortion or the ransom for their release. The targeting of Americanized Mexicans is also a way for criminal organizations to maintain their power. So, as newcomers arrive, the criminal organizations target those individuals to exert control over them. This creates the impression of loyalty and that perceived association becomes very important in the context of the constant infighting and territorial disputes within and among the organizations. As Maureen Meyer, director of the Mexico and Migrant Rights program at the Washington Office on Latin America, has said of recent returnees, "They are easy prey both for local criminal groups and organized criminal groups who recruit them, extort them or kidnap them."[97] Those recently returned to Mexico from the United States are often viewed as American and seen as having connections to businesses and family members in the US that could potentially pay high

[92] Kristel Mucino, "Dangerous Deportations," *The American Prospect*, 26 Aug., 2013, http://prospect.org/article/dangerous-deportations .
[93] "Dangerous Deportation Practices that put Migrants at Risk," WOLA, *Vimeo*, 4:37, 24 July 2013, https://vimeo.com/70957933 .
[94] Kate Kilpatrick, "Into the arms of the cartels: Deported Mexicans sent to city ruled by fear." *Al Jazeera*, Oct. 16, 2014, http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/10/16/deported-mexicanimmigrantspreyforcartels.html .
[95] Kate Kilpatrick, "Into the arms of the cartels: Deported Mexicans sent to city ruled by fear." *Al Jazeera*, Oct. 16, 2014, http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/10/16/deported-mexicanimmigrantspreyforcartels.html .
[96] U.S. Dept. of State, "Mexico Travel Advisory," June 13, 2022, https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/traveladvisories/traveladvisories/mexico-travel-advisory.html.
[97] Emily Green, "Drug Cartels Are Preying on Migrants Stuck in Mexico," *Vice News*, May 16, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/597dxb/drug-cartels-are-preying-on-migrants-stuck-in-mexico.

extortion costs, leading to increased risk of targeting and violence by criminal organizations.

Chapter Three: Government and Police Corruption in Mexico

Overview

The rising number of targeted assassinations of police, politicians, government officials and journalists suggests that Mexico is a country on the brink of ungovernability. It is not an exaggeration to say that Mexico is experiencing a war that reaches every level of society. Finally, the control that Mexican drug cartels and related gangs are able to maintain despite the federal government's regular efforts to dismantle their activities is due in part to their organizational structures and the extensive network of allies they have built within the legitimate government of Mexico. The Mexican government cannot control the actions of these transnational criminal organizations. In fact, the government is actually implicated in many of the transgressions as a result of corruption. Furthermore, all too frequently, the criminal organizations have direct ties to the police, politicians, and other government officials. These relationships allow drug cartels and other groups to operate with impunity while providing protection to government officials who are afraid of the repercussions that might ensue if they refused to cooperate with the demands of the criminal organizations.

According to Carlos Antonio Flores Perez, political scientist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), "the penetration of governmental structures by organized crime is institutional and systemic,…reaches all levels of government, and…helps sustain the illegal operations of organized crime." Flores Perez traces the historical roots of state corruption to the post-revolutionary authoritarian regime (Institutional Revolutionary Party-PRI), characterized by its rampant corruption and poor levels of accountability during the 71 years the party held uninterrupted power in Mexico. He points to the capacity of the executive branch to directly appoint and remove attorneys as well as judges and judicial ministries as directly related to the irregular prosecutions of high ranking public officials and politicians accused of corruption or involvement with drug trafficking, creating a state apparatus that is rife with high-level corruption He concludes that "the characteristics of the Mexican State and its political regime are conducive to the role that politicians and bureaucrats play in organized

criminal activities, a role even more decisive in sustaining organized crime than the role played by the criminals themselves."[98]

This complex political climate in Mexico provides the ideal opportunity for transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) to collaborate with government officials in order to expand their business opportunities. This has created a widespread system of corruption where TCOs work directly with government officials – which often includes government protection for drug traffickers in exchange for lucrative bribes. For example, local police officers make very little money, yet they are placed in grave danger when trying to fight the pervasive violence in Mexico. The police are given a choice: *plata o plomo* (silver or lead). Therefore, it is not uncommon for local police to accept monetary benefits and promises of protection from future harm. In return, they turn a blind eye to the criminal activities of the TCOs and act on their behalf. The type of acts state officials commit and perpetrate at the direction of TCOs include targeted killings, disappearances and torture.

There are also worrying signs of a systemic move toward authoritarianism in Mexico. Former Mexican Foreign Minister expressed these views in a *New York Times* essay in April 2021. Castañeda wrote, "Mexico's president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, is mismanaging every facet of his country's situation, from the pandemic to the economy, the high rates of crime and violence, the deterioration of democratic institutions, and the rule of law and human rights."[99] Despite president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's campaign promise to order the military off the streets, he admitted that the federal police was not ready to replace the army in their war against the cartels.[100] Instead, Lopez Obrador pushed for the creation of a National Guard, to which he assigned a general as director, leading human rights organizations to worry about abuses by this new force.[101] According to the Washington Office on Latin America, "The results of the militarized war on crime have been catastrophic. Homicides increased dramatically from the Calderón presidency onwards. Arrests and killings of kingpins have fostered the fragmentation of criminal groups, leading to increased violence. Shoot-outs with security forces trigger increases in local homicide rates. The overwhelming majority

[98]Carlos Antonio Flores Perez, "Political Protection and the Origins of the Gulf Cartel." *Crime, law, and social change* 61, no. 5 (2014): 517–539.
[99] Jorge G. Castañeda, "Biden Should Not Ignore Mexico's Turn Toward Authoritarianism," *New York Times*, 30 April 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/30/opinion/biden-amlo-mexico-migration.html?smid=url-share.
[100] Elizabeth Melimopoulos, "Violence, impunity and fear in the Mexican state of Veracruz," *Al Jazeera*, Sept. 26, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/violence-impunity-fear-mexican-state-veracruz-180926051629034.html.
[101] Patrick Cocoran, "Is Mexico's New National Guard Just Another Uniform?" *Insight Crime*, 20 Mar. 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/new-mexico-national-guard/.

of the tens of thousands of people the government reports as disappeared were taken in the past 15 years."[102]

AMLO's leanings towards autocratic rule have been increasingly apparent in recent years as he has expanded the role of the military in civilian institutions and stalled collaboration with the U.S. government in security strategies against organized crime. Security collaboration between Mexico and the U.S. began to decline after General Salvador Cienfuegos, Mexico's former minister of defense, was arrested in Los Angeles and later returned and exonerated by Mexican authorities. AMLO has made it difficult for the DEA to operate in Mexico, and joint intelligence operations have essentially come to a halt. According to Mexican political scientist Denise Dresser, "The president has centralized power by removing checks and balances, weakening autonomous institutions and seizing discretionary control of the country's budget."[103] AMLO has also increased military power throughout his presidency by placing economic activities in the hands of generals and expanding the use of the National Guard.

The former Mexican Secretary of Defense under President Peña Nieto (2012-2018) was arrested in Los Angeles on charges of money laundering and drug trafficking on October 16, 2020. If the senior military official in charge of combating drug cartels in Mexico was actually working with these cartels to traffic drugs, as US federal attorneys are asserting, then there is clearly no way that the government can reasonably be expected to protect citizens from these criminal organizations.[104] Even worse, the return of former Secretary of Defense Salvador Cienfuegos to Mexico because of lobbying by the Mexican military shows that there is total impunity in Mexico. As Eduardo Guerrero, a security analyst in Mexico City put it, "if they see that by lobbying President López Obrador, even the Americans give in and ultimately hand over the defense secretary, they will say 'Okay!' There's complete impunity."[105] In January 2021, Mexico exonerated the former general without a trial, despite accusations by the United States that he worked directly with drug trafficking organizations.[106]

---

[102] Stephanie Brewer, "Militarized Mexico: A Lost War that has not Brought Peace," *WOLA*, May 12, 2021, https://www.wola.org/analysis/militarized-mexico-a-lost-war/.
[103] Denise Dresser, "Mexico's Turn to Autocracy Should Worry the U.S.," Wall Street Journal, Jan. 14, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/mexicos-turn-to-autocracy-should-worry-the-u-s-11673672462.
[104] Azam Ahmed and Alan Feuer, "Who was 'El Padrino,' Godfather to Drug Cartel? Mexico's Defense Chief, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, 16 Oct. 2020, https://nyti.ms/3o14JS8.
[105] Mary Beth Sheridan, "As Mexico's Security Deteriorates, the Power of the Military Grows," *Washington Post,* 17 Dec. 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/world/mexico-losing-control/mexico-military-security-drug-war/.
[106] Natalie Kitroeff, Alan Feuer and Oscar Lopez, "In Blow to U.S. Alliance, Mexico Clears General Accused of Drug Trafficking," *New York Times*, Jan 15, 2021,

Given the authority the drug cartels have in Mexico, the government is incapable of protecting individuals from extreme violence and retaliation and there is ample evidence from throughout Mexico that elements from the local, state, and federal police work in collusion with criminal organizations. The escape of "El Chapo" Guzman, the leader of the Sinaloa cartel, from a Mexican prison with the assistance of prison guards and other government officials shows the extent of corruption in the Mexican government, as does his 2019 trial that implicated government corruption up to the former president Enrique Peña Nieto, who allegedly accepted a $100 million bribe from Guzmán to call off a widespread search for him.[107] Alex Cifuentes Villa, a Colombian drug lord who worked closely with Mr. Guzmán from 2007 to 2013, testified in court in New York City in 2019 about this and many other bribes to Mexican officials.[108] Another witness in the Chapo Guzman trial, Jesus Zambada, also said he paid millions of dollars in bribes to former Mexican government official Genaro Garcia Luna on behalf of his brother, drug lord Ismael "El Mayo" Zambada, who remains at large. Garcia Luna was an underling of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador when he was mayor of Mexico City, and Lopez Obrador is currently the president of Mexico. García Luna, who was Mexico's top law man from 2001 to 2005, has been convicted at a Federal District Court in Brooklyn of taking millions of dollars in bribes from the very same drug cartels he was in charge of prosecuting.[109] The high-level corruption in Mexico's Drug War has been proven over-and-over again.

An article in the *Washington Post* published at the end of July 2022 about the capture of drug cartel leader Rafael Caro Quintero makes it clear that the Mexican government continues to obstruct US efforts to capture cartel leaders. The article documents several cases where the US had passed information to Mexican security forces about the whereabouts of Caro Quintero, only to have informants leak the information to the cartel leader before they could capture him. The article also cites a US military assessment that 30-35 percent of Mexican territory is "ungoverned territory, where

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/15/world/americas/mexico-general-drug-charges.html?referringSource=articleShare.

[107] Laura Y. Calderón, Kimberly Heinle, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk, "Organized Crime and Violence in Mexico," *Justice in Mexico, Department of Political Science & International Relations University of San Diego,* April 2019, https://justiceinmexico.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Organized-Crime-and-Violence-in-Mexico-2019.pdf.

[108] Alan Feuer, "El Chapo Trial: What We Know about the Trafficker Who Incriminated a Mexican President," *New York Times*, 16 Jan. 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/16/nyregion/el-chapo-trial.html.

[109] Alan Feuer and Nate Schweber, "'Mexico's Ex-Top Security Official Is Convicted of Cartel Bribery," *New York Times,* JFeb. 21, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/21/nyregion/genaro-garcia-luna-guilty.html.

criminal organizations operate with impunity."[110] The recent January 4, 2023 capture of Ovidio Guzman, son of drug lord "El Chapo" Guzman, in Sinaloa unleashed violent clashes throughout the state between military personnel and cartel hitmen that left 29 dead. The United States government had offered a U.S. $5 million reward for information leading to Ovidio Guzmán's capture, and the arrest came only a day before U.S. President Joe Biden visited Mexico for the North American Leaders' Summit, triggering speculation that the arrest was made for Biden's benefit or at his request. Thus far, three separate extradition requests from the United States have been blocked by Mexican courts, and security officials have rumored that the extradition process could be lengthy, with the possibility that it might not occur at all.[111]

In some cases threats or attacks are carried out by the Mexican state itself, such as in the case of Tlatlaya in 2014 in which 22 civilians were killed in the state of Mexico by the military.[112] The National Human Rights Commission found that officials of the State of Mexico's Attorney General's Office tortured three of the surviving victims of the massacre in order to alter their testimonies, and significantly tampered with evidence at the scene of the massacre in order to exonerate the soldiers implicated in the murders.[113] A major hack released in October 2022 revealed the military's expanding influence over Mexico's civilian government and its close relationship with the president. The data breach included emails detailing the military's own internal probes and suspicions into links between government officials and organized crime groups. In the hacked emails, Defense Ministry officials accuse the current Interior Minister, Adán Augusto López, of giving top security positions to officials linked to organized crime when he served as the governor of Tabasco state.[114]

The Guacamaya leaks of 2022 also further revealed the Mexican military's involvement in the disappearance of 43 students in Guerrero in 2014, including the military's surveillance of the Ayotzinapa school since at least 2006 and a propaganda campaign directed by the

[110] Kevn Sieff and Mary Beth Sheridan, "Inside the Long, Fraught Quest to Capture Mexican Drug Lord Caro Quintero," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/23/mexico-drug-trafficker-caro-quintero/

[111] "Ovidio Guzmán's extradition process halted by another judge," Mexico News Daily, Jan. 18, 2023, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/ovidio-guzmans-extradition-process-halted-by-another-judge/.

[112] Jo Tuckman, "Mexican Military Ordered to Kill in Tlataya, claim rights activists," *Guardian*, July 2, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/03/mexican-soldiers-ordered-to-kill-in-san-pedro-limon-claim-rights-activists.

[113] "Gobierno Edomex torturó a testigos y manipuló pruebas en caso #Tlatlaya para encubrir al Ejército: CNDH," Aristegui Noticias, Oct. 23, 2014, https://aristeguinoticias.com/2310/mexico/gobierno-edomex-torturo-a-testigos-y-manipulo-pruebas-en-caso-tlatlaya-para-encubrir-al-ejercito-cndh/.

[114] Maria Abi-Habib, "Mexico Military Is Hacked, Exposing Abuse and Efforts to Evade Oversight," *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2022, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1IQOVOlGyBOajQm4Y3dKeBCLhLMO8B2Qx.

military in order to discredit the students' parents and lawyers in their efforts to access information about the students' whereabouts.[115] While it has long been known that the Mexican military used Pegasus spyware to track citizens and journalists, it has recently come to light that they used this same software to spy on the country's undersecretary of human rights, Alejandro Encinas.[116] The proof that the military is spying on top government officials suggests a breakdown in democratic governance in Mexico.

One major example of the lack of government ability to prosecute cartel leaders was the decision by Mexican security forces on October 17, 2019 to release the head of the Sinaloa Cartel Ovidio Guzman Lopez, son of Joaquin "Chapo" Guzman, after his first capture. Guzman Lopez was released in 2019 after the cartel unleashed a massive spree of violence in Culiacan, Sinaloa, which ended with eight people being killed.[117] The fact that the Sinaloa Cartel was able to defeat the National Guard and security forces in Mexico by overpowering them and force the government to release a cartel leader indicates the lack of control that the government has over certain areas in the country. The recent re-capture of Ovidio Guzman on January 5th, 2023 has been generally explained as a Mexican diplomatic strategy to win President Biden's favor ahead of his visit with AMLO in the capital, and not a demonstration of weakness from the Sinaloa Cartel. The violence unleashed by the military and cartel hitmen in January resulted in at least 29 deaths.[118]

During the week of August 8, 2022, vehicles were set on fire in multiple Mexican states, shootouts between security forces and cartel gunmen occurred in Jalisco, and businesses were torched in Ciudad Juarez and the state of Guanajuato. These acts of retaliation are most likely tied to recent arrests of high-ranking cartel members of the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación.[119] In Baja California Norte, a travel advisory was set in place for U.S.

---

[115] "Guacamaya Leaks: Sedena tenía en la mira a la normal de Ayotzinapa previo a desaparición de los 43," *Aristegui Noticias*, March 11, 2023, https://aristeguinoticias.com/1103/mexico/guacamaya-leaks-sedena-tenia-en-la-mira-a-la-normal-de-ayotzinapa-previo-a-desaparicion-de-los-43-documentos/.

[116] Natalie Kotroeff and Ronen Bergman, "He Was Investigating Mexico's Military. Then Spying Began, *New York Times*, May 22, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/22/world/americas/mexico-spying-pegasus-israel.html?searchResultPosition=2.

[117] Kate Linthicum and Cecilia Sanchez, "At Least 8 Killed in Mayhem Surrounding Mexico's Failed Effort to Capture El Chapo's Son," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Oct. 2019, https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-10-17/chaos-in-mexico-as-el-chapos-son-a-leader-of-the-sinaloa-cartel-is-reportedly-captured.

[118] Isabel Woodford and Valentine Hilaire, "At least 29 killed in Mexico capture of Chapo's son," *Reuters*, Jan. 8, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/mexico-says-least-29-killed-during-capture-el-chapos-son-2023-01-06/.

[119] Julian Resendiz, "Arrest of cartel leaders leads to shootouts, burning of vehicles in 2 Mexican states," *Border Report*, Aug. 11, 2022,

Citizens and government employees after over two dozen vehicles were torched and a supposed curfew was announced by the Cartel Jalisco on social media in Tijuana. Although the National Guard was deployed in large numbers and Tijuana's mayor announced that there was no official curfew in place, residents largely stayed indoors throughout the weekend, with everything from schools to public bus lines shut down in response to the threats of organized crime groups.[120] The U.S. Consulate in Guadalajara also issued an alert and instructed its employees to shelter in place, reporting road blockades, burning vehicles and shootouts throughout the metropolitan area.[121] These incidents demonstrate the power of cartels to unleash violence in order to negotiate with the government or even to force the release of captured leaders in the case of El Chapo's son.

Corruption and Violence of the National Guard and Armed Forces

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's much touted National Guard has also proven ineffective at curbing violence and corruption, as demonstrated by the rising homicide rate. According to the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), the National Guard "has fallen far short of becoming a federal body capable of effectively addressing Mexico's security crisis," and "has yet to bring about a measurable reduction in crime or violence." While the DHS has asserted that the National Guard is a civilian force under civilian direction, the reality is that the security force's members, leadership, funding, and equipment come from the armed forces, as found by WOLA researchers. As a result, Mexico's public security forces have only become further militarized, and civilian policing has become nearly obsolete.[122] On September 9, 2022, the Mexican senate approved a proposal by AMLO to further militarize the National Guard by placing it under the military control of the Secretary of National Defense. This implies that National Guardsmen will receive military training, be directed by military commanders and be tried in military rather than civilian courts. The UN, Amnesty International and other civil society organizations have condemned the senate's decision, noting that Mexico's

https://www.borderreport.com/regions/mexico/arrest-of-cartel-leaders-leads-to-shootouts-burning-of-vehicles-in-two-states/.

[120] "Violence erupts in Tijuana, Mexico, following the arrest of a drug cartel leader," *NPR*, Aug. 19, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/08/19/1118365567/violence-erupts-in-tijuana-mexico-following-the-arrest-of-a-drug-cartel-leader.

[121] Julian Resendiz, "Arrest of cartel leaders leads to shootouts, burning of vehicles in 2 Mexican states," *Border Report*, Aug. 11, 2022, https://www.borderreport.com/regions/mexico/arrest-of-cartel-leaders-leads-to-shootouts-burning-of-vehicles-in-two-states/.

[122] Maureen Meyer, "One Year After National Guard's Creation, Mexico is Far from Demilitarizing Public Security," Washington Office on Latin America, May 26, 2020, https://www.wola.org/analysis/one-year-national-guard-mexico/.

military approach to public security has only increased violence and diminished human rights protections in the country.[123]

Furthermore, members of the National Guard have been accused of numerous human rights abuses. Between July and November 2019, Mexico's human rights office reported receiving 32 complaints of human rights violations committed by members of the National Guard, including accusations of migrant abuse, torture, and arbitrary detention. In the first two months of 2020, the human rights office received complaints against the National Guard for accusations of forced disappearance, cruel and inhuman treatment, and arbitrary detention. Members of the National Guard have also been implicated in cases of extortion and have proven ties to organized criminal groups. In 2020, photos circulated on social media of National Guardsmen eating at a restaurant with members of an organized criminal group involved in oil theft and drug trafficking in Puebla. Within the same year, a video surfaced of members of the National Guard extorting a criminal known as "*El Cholo*" in Sonora.[124]

In 2021, members of the National Guard asked victims' relatives to accept monetary compensation for the loss of their family members in exchange for dropping an investigation into the officers involved. The National Human Rights Commission has received roughly the same number of complaints against the National Guard as against the Secretary of National Defense (SEDENA) since 2020, and in the first three months of 2021, the National Guard and SEDENA were the federal institutions driving the most complaints of abuse, with each institution averaging more than one complaint daily.[125] Not only has the National Guard proven to be violent and corrupt, but also less effective at investigating and prosecuting crime. In 2021, despite being nearly three times the size of the disbanded federal police, AMLO's National Guard arrested only 8,258 criminal suspects — just 38% of the 21,702 that the police detained in 2018.[126]

---

[123] "Mexico: Militarization of public security will lead to more human rights violations and perpetuate impunity," *Amnesty International*, Sept. 9, 2022, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/mexico-militarizing-public-security-human-rights-violations-impunity/.

[124] Maureen Meyer, "One Year After National Guard's Creation, Mexico is Far from Demilitarizing Public Security," *Washington Office on Latin America*, May 26, 2020, https://www.wola.org/analysis/one-year-national-guard-mexico/.

[125] Stephanie Brewer, "Militarized Mexico: A Lost War that has not Brought Peace," WOLA, May 12, 2021, https://www.wola.org/analysis/militarized-mexico-a-lost-war/.

[126] Tim Golden, "The Cienfuegos Affair: Inside the Case that Upended America's Drug War," *ProPublica*, Dec. 8, 2022, https://www.propublica.org/article/mexico-drug-cartels-cienfuegos-case-dea.

Police Corruption and Violence

Police in Mexico have a long and deep history of corruption and extrajudicial violence. 75 percent of Mexico's 330,776 active local and federal police officials were found unfit for duty (lacking official certification) in September 2019 after the government agreed on a three-year window to certify all such forces for police work in 2016. Under the country's National Public Security Law, more than 246,000 police officers lacking official certification should not even be working. Of Mexico's 32 states, just five reported that more than half of their police members were certified. The police force in the capital was among those with the lowest certification rates, with around nine percent of officers meeting the required criteria for active duty, while in Guerrero just 8.3 percent of officers are certified.[127]

Police in Mexico have been implicated in countless cases of rape, mistreatment, excessive force, and extrajudicial killings, which academics and other researchers have attributed to rampant police corruption.[128] One Amnesty International Report from 2015 documented several such cases, where torture and rape were used to extract confessions from individuals.[129] Although a more recent study published the Mexican Law Review found that judicial reform had reduced the use of torture in extracting confessions between 2015 and 2017, this remained a common practice in Mexico. As the report concluded, "the existing criminal justice reform may not be enough to address the epidemic of torture."[130] Thus, some police may use a heavy hand in prosecuting suspected drug traffickers while others may be working with the cartels.

According to official investigations, criminal groups offer between $18,000 and $20,000 Mexican pesos per month to those who join their ranks, more than the $15,000 pesos made per month by the average police officer. For the majority of police, this is an additional income, since they collaborate with criminals on working days, during free time and on their days off.[131] Given these financial motivations for collaborating with street gangs and cartels throughout Mexico, and the prevalence of police violence and abuse throughout the country, the police are unable to protect residents in Mexico.

---

[127] Parker Asmann, "Majority of Mexico Police Force Unfit for Service," *InSight Crime*, Sept. 20, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/majority-mexico-police-unfit-service/.
[128] Carlos Silva Forné, "The Excessive Use of Force by Mexico City Law Enforcement Agencies: Corruption, Normal Abuse and Other Motives," *Mexican Law Review*, July-December 2016, https://www.elsevier.es/en-revista-mexican-law-review-123-articulo-the-excessive-use-of-force-S1870057816300427.
[129] "Torture in Mexico is Out of Control," Amnesty International, 2015, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/10/stop-torture-mexico/.
[130] Rita E Kuckertz, "Torture, Mistreatment and Forced Confessions in Mexico's Accusatorial Criminal Justice System," *Mexican Law Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1, July/Dec. 2021, https://doi.org/10.22201/iij.24485306e.2021.1.16091
[131] "Mexico City: Police Officers Work for the Cartels," *El Universal*, May 16, 2019, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/mexico-city-police-officers-work-cartels.

Given these facts, it is clear that the security situation has not improved in recent years, but has actually deteriorated, with no federal institution sufficiently able to offer protection to Mexican citizens. The failure or inability to penalize perpetrators of crime in Mexico can be considered nationally ubiquitous. According to the 2016 Global Impunity Index (GII), the average score for the 32 Mexican states was 67.42 points on a scale of 0-100, where 0 represents a total absence of impunity. It placed Mexico 58th out of a total of 59 countries under study.[132] The legitimate government of Mexico, either at its weakest link at the state and local level, or at the strongest link at the federal level, cannot provide adequate protection. The cartels operate as a pseudo-government in large swaths of Mexico and thus there is no institutional challenge to their exertion of power. No local government in Mexico maintains a sufficiently robust or corruption-free police force that would pose any obstacles. Finally, at the federal level, the cartels have sufficiently infiltrated the law enforcement agencies such that there would be no protection provided to an individual.

[132] Jose Luengo-Cabrera & Tessa Butler, "Impunity in Mexico: A Rising Concern," *Justice in Mexico*, 2016, https://justiceinmexico.org/impunity-mexico-rising-concern/.

Chapter Four: Mexican Drug Cartel and Organized Crime Profiles

Gulf Cartel

One of the oldest and most established of the Transnational Criminal Organizations(TCOs or drug cartels), the Gulf Cartel gained prominence acting as a middleman between the Columbian cartels and the US market during the 1970s and 80s.[133] The Cartel Del Golfo is known for the violence it enacts on the U.S.-Mexico border, utilizing weapons more sophisticated than those of local law enforcement. The Gulf cartel is also known for the high level of police complicity in their affairs. Municipal police in Nuevo Laredo have supposedly been involved in many of the kidnappings orchestrated by the Gulf cartel, later handing over the captors to cartel members.[134] Local law enforcement has even taken up arms against federal security forces on several occasions, acting on behalf of the cartel in their areas of control.

The Gulf Cartel's sphere of influence extends from northeastern Mexico through a substantial portion of eastern coastal Mexico, including the Yucatán Peninsula. The cartel also controls numerous outposts in foreign cities.[135] The northeastern states where the cartel exercises considerable control are known for their high kidnapping rates. Out of these states, Tamaulipas has the highest kidnapping rate- in 2013 there were more than 6 reported kidnappings per 100,000 residents.[136] Both the Gulf Cartel and Los Zetas are known for human smuggling, kidnapping for ransom, and contract killing.[137]

Special Forces officers of the Mexican military who initially served the Gulf Cartel defected to form their own private paramilitary force, Los Zetas. Since Los Zetas split from the Gulf Cartel in 2010, the two criminal organizations began waging violent turf battles, mostly in their home state of Tamaulipas. Armed conflicts between the two cartels have only increased with time, and January 2020 saw a huge spike in violence within the border state. On January 8, state officials found the charred remains of 21 bodies, seventeen of which had been

[133] Stephanie Brophy, "Mexico: Cartels, corruption and cocaine: A profile of the Gulf cartel," *Global Crime* 9, no. 3 (August 2008), 248-49.
[134] Brophy, 253.
[135] Dennis M.P. McCarthy, *An Economic History of Organized Crime: a National and Transnational Approach* (London: Routledge, 2011), 127.
[136]Marguerite Cawley, "Mexico's Kidnapping Hotspots: The High-Risk States," InSight Crime, 11 Sept., 2014, accessed 12 Nov., 2016. http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/mexicos-kidnapping-hotspots.
[137] McCarthy, 127.

burned, in Ciudad Miguel Aleman, Tamaulipas. Multiple victims were wearing clothing with insignia of the Gulf Cartel, indicating the attack was probably carried out by a rival organization. Another violent shootout between an armed group and military forces left five dead and one military officer injured on January 9th in nearby Nueva Ciudad Guerrero, Tamaulipas. Irving Barrios, the state's attorney general, has said Tamaulipas continues to be "greatly fought over" by traffickers of arms and drugs as well as those who help undocumented migrants to cross to the United States.[138]

In and around Reynosa, Tamaulipas, there have been numerous violent clashes between factions of the Gulf Cartel in recent years. In 2017, Reynosa saw 144 homicides before September, according to government data. This marked a 167% increase over the 54 homicides the city had in 2016, and a 92% increase over the 75 homicides between January and September 2015. Nearly 60 of Reynosa's homicides in 2017 came in May and June, within the weeks following the April 22 killing of Gulf Cartel leader Juan Manuel Loisa Salinas in a clash with Mexican authorities. According to Mike Vigil, former chief of international operations for the US Drug Enforcement Administration, the continued splintering of the Gulf Cartel is the driving factor behind the incessant violence in Tamaulipas. Furthermore, the Gulf Cartel and other competing groups have been able to move throughout the state with relative impunity. On multiple occasions, the Cartel has posted videos on social media telling residents to stay in their homes while they attack rivals. Bystanders have reportedly been wounded by stray bullets, and shootouts between gunmen and Mexican soldiers have shut down parts of Reynosa on multiple occasions.[139]

Los Zetas

Special Forces officers of the Mexican military who initially served the Gulf Cartel defected to form their own private paramilitary force, Los Zetas. In 2010, Los Zetas split from the Gulf Cartel and have been waging a war against their competitors and the legitimate Mexican government. They are known for using military-like discipline to obtain their objectives and run well-planned missions. Los Zetas are infamous in Mexico and Guatemala for their unprecedented brutality and they are frequently charged with the escalation of disturbingly violent tactics implemented to instill fear as a means of controlling large swaths of Mexico. Of the cartels in Mexico, Los Zetas were historically one of the most organizationally

[138] Delphine Schrank, "Grisly Mexican Gang Battle Near U.S. Border Leaves 21 Dead," *Reuters*, Jan. 10, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-violence/grisly-mexican-gang-battle-near-u-s-border-leaves-21-dead-idUSKCN1P40KK.

[139] Christopher Woody, "The breakdown of one of Mexico's most powerful cartels is driving violence in a valuable border city," *Business Insider*, Nov. 10, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/breakdown-of-gulf-cartel-is-driving-violence-in-reynosa-mexico-2017-11.

sophisticated (along with the Sinaloa Cartel). However, Los Zetas prey on local populations rather than wooing them with jobs, charity and public services — tactics used by its primary rival, the Sinaloa Cartel. By 2010, the Zetas had established a presence in 405 Mexican municipalities, over twice as many as their nearest rivals. They had also moved into Guatemala, seizing strategic drug trafficking territories with their trademark violence.[140]

In 2012, the prominent Mexican magazine *Proceso* ran a special edition (No. 38), which focused on the violence and the transnational reach of the Zetas. *Proceso* demonstrated how the Zetas had infiltrated Mexican security forces, were engaged in a brutal war against other cartels and the Mexican state, and had a network that extended from Central America into the United States. According to *Proceso*, the Zetas were tied to the assassination of journalists, kidnappings and mass executions of migrants. In one of the most graphic displays of their power, the Zetas dumped the tortured corpses of 35 people onto a highway in Veracruz in September 2011. The state prosecutor declared that the 35 people were linked to criminal organizations, suggesting that the killings were done as an act of revenge.[141]

Since 2015, Los Zetas have lost control over significant amounts of territory, mainly along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico and in Yucatan due to government operatives. They maintain control over regions of Coahuila, Tamaulipas, Campeche, Tabasco and Cancun.[142] According to the last National Security Commission of the Peña Nieto administration, the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación, Sinaloa and Los Zetas cartels were the criminal groups that participated in the largest number of armed conflicts during 2018, indicating the continued presence of Los Zetas despite significant setbacks. In the case of Los Zetas, these conflicts centered around control of territory in Chihuahua, Tamaulipas and Coahuila mainly.[143] The breakup of the organization's national cohesion, in addition to a huge loss of influence in Central America, has made transnational drug trafficking increasingly difficult, and local factions often rely more on profiting from crime in territories they hold than from international drug trafficking. Still, smaller, more localized cells continue to operate throughout much of the Zetas' former territory.[144]

---

[140] "Zetas," InSight Crime, April 6, 2018, https://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/zetas-profile/.
[141] "Con Z de Muerte," *Proceso* no. 37 & 38, CISA / Comunicación e Información, México, 2012.
[142] Alberto Najar, "Los mapas que muestran los radicales cambios de influencia territorial de los carteles del narcotráfico en México," *BBC*, July 11, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-40576103.
[143] Peniley Ramirez, "Guerra por territorios y la batalla por el fentanilo: así cambió el mapa del narco en México tras la detención de 'El Chapo' Guzmán," *Univision*, July 29, 2019, https://www.univision.com/noticias/especiales/guerra-por-territorios-y-la-batalla-por-el-fentanilo-asi-cambio-el-mapa-del-narco-en-mexico-tras-la-detencion-del-chapo-guzman.
[144] "Zetas," InSight Crime, April 6, 2018, https://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/zetas-profile/.

Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG)

The CJNG is currently the fastest growing cartel in Mexico, and has become especially powerful in the last decades, expanding its reach into 14 states and roughly half the territory of Mexico. Previously under the control of "El Chapo" Guzmán's Sinaloa cartel, the CJNG has outgrown its previous ally under the leadership of ex-policeman Nemesio Oseguera, or "El Mencho" and now looks to overtake the Sinaloa cartel along the Pacific coast, according to researcher Benítez Manaut at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.[145] The CJNG is known for its brutal tactics utilized to spread its control over the drug trafficking trade. One of their hitmen filmed the explosion of victims that had been covered with dynamite in 2010. They are also well known for their online recruitment videos that attempt to justify their actions as patriotic.[146] The CJNG changed the nature of the drug war between the Mexican state and the cartels when in May of 2015, cartel members shot down an army helicopter, killing 8 military officials. In the span of just a few years, the CJNG has become one of the largest transporters of methamphetamine and fentanyl in the world. Its roots stem from the state of Jalisco and later grew to envelope a vast expanse of territory by collaborating with or taking over smaller local groups.

CJNG is quickly becoming one of Mexico's most powerful cartels, with criminal ties stretching around the globe. The cartel makes money through narcotics trafficking as well as by selling guns, stealing gasoline, extortion, and kidnapping. Part of the tactics implemented by CJNG includes infiltrating many of the local self-defense militias, recruiting them, and providing them with weapons and money in order to fight against rivals. In late June 2020, CJNG hitmen wounded the police chief of Mexico City and killed two of his bodyguards in an assassination attempt targeting his car riding through a wealthy neighborhood, indicating the cartels inroads into the capital city as well. According to Alejandro Hope, a security analyst in Mexico City, "If the group involved is in fact the Jalisco cartel, it is a sign that they are willing to enter into a direct confrontation with the state."[147] In January 2019, *InSight Crime* named the CJNG one of its "Criminal Winners" for 2018, based on its territorial

[145] Tania Montalvo, "Como es que el cártel Jalisco cobró tanta fuerza en el gobierno de Peña," *Animal Político*, 28 Sept. 2016, http://www.animalpolitico.com/2016/09/cartel-jalisco-nueva-generacion-mas-grande/
[146] Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación, YouTube, 7:35, Aug. 5, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbBqXybjkaM.
Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación Sicarios Interrogate Kidnappers, YouTube, 4:26, June 21, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKDGeyv8Yc8.
[147] Natalie Kitroeff, "Mexico City Police Chief Is Wounded in Brazen Ambush," *New York Times*, June 26, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/26/world/americas/mexico-city-police-chief-shot.html.

presence, its income from cocaine and synthetic drug trafficking, its control of port infrastructure and its ability to launder money.[148]

Familia Michoacana (Nueva Familia) and Caballeros Templarios

While the Familia Michoacana has declined in power in its home state of Michoacán and elsewhere, the cartel is still active. Fragmented cells of the Familia Michoacana still partake in drug trafficking, kidnapping and extortion activities in parts of Guerrero state, while a group known locally as the Nueva Familia Michoacana is also active in parts of Guerrero and Michoacán, according to InSight Crime.[149] Historically, la Familia formed as a vigilante-style group to combat the rise of Zetas influence in Michoacán state, later expanding their territorial control into other states including Guerrero, Morelos, Guanajuato, Queretaro, Jalisco and Mexico City. Like the Zetas, the Familia and their newer splinter groups make frequent use of narcomantas, billboard-style messages to communicate with the public, and dramatic violence, such as the dumping of five heads on a dance floor in 2006 as an official announcement of the Familia's existence. In 2020, *InSight Crime* researchers declared the Familia cartel to be most active in Guerrero and Michoacán states, where the group is currently battling the CJNG and other local cartels for power.[150]

After La Familia Michoacana essentially broke apart in the last decade, The Caballeros Templarios (Knights Templar) was founded by former members of La Familia who defected to form their own organization, filling the power vacuum in the state of Michoacán. The Knights Templar was made famous for its wide scale implementation of kidnappings and extortions to obtain power and control over the communities they terrorize. The cartel charges extortion taxes from businesses and appropriates land from farmers in order to maintain control in the state. The fact that a business owner pays "cuotas" (taxes) to the cartel does not imply complicity but rather it is seen as the cost of doing business and the only way not to face violent retaliation by the cartel. In 2010 it was estimated that 85 percent of "legitimate" businesses were somehow involved with La Familia and the Templarios in Michoacán state.[151] The group also took control of the methamphetamine trade in Michoacán and profited from illegal ore mining. The Templarios work in cooperation with local businesses and government officials, especially in their home turf of Michoacán, but

[148] Jeremy McDermott, Mimi Yagoub, Victoria Dittmar and Mike LaSusa, "GameChangers 2018: The Criminal 'Winners' in Latin America," InSight Crime, Jan. 10, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/gamechangers-2018-the-criminal-winners-of-2018-in-latam/.
[149] "La Familia Michoacana," InSight Crime, May 5, 2020, https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/familia-michoacana-mexico-profile/.
[150] "La Familia Michoacana," InSight Crime, May 5, 2020, https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/familia-michoacana-mexico-profile/.
[151] William Finnegan, "Silver or Lead," *The New Yorker,* May 31, 2010, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/31/silver-or-lead.

also across central Mexico, especially in Guerrero, Guanajuato and Morelos.[152] The government capture of the cartel's main leaders in 2014 and 2015, and increasing challenges from community vigilante groups (*comunitarios*) in recent years have impeded the cartel's growth, but the group has managed to survive these obstacles and continues to maintain a presence in southern Mexico. By 2020, the Knights Templar and other sub-factions of the group, such as Los Viagras, were still active across southern Mexico in parts of Michoacán and Guerrero, battling against the attempted territorial expansion of groups like the CJNG.[153]

Los Viagra

Los Viagra consists of a smaller fringe cartel formerly allied with La Familia and the Templarios, currently battling the CJNG for control of the methamphetamine trade in Tierra Caliente. Under the control of the Sierra Santana brothers, Los Viagra transformed from acting as the Templarios paramilitary unit, to an ally of the *comunitarios* battling cartels in Michoacán, to being its own cartel seeking to secure control of territory within the state. Los Viagra broke alliances with the Templarios when local cartel boss Miguel Angel Gallegas Godoy and his group Migueladas switched alliances from backing the Templarios to the CJNG, causing the current violent turf battle between Los Viagra and CJNG in Tierra Caliente and other parts of Michoacán. By October 2017, armed conflicts between these two groups specifically had already resulted in over 800 homicides in Tierra Caliente.[154]

Autodefensas or Community Police (Michoacán and Guerrero)

As a response to cartel violence, community police or self-defense forces (*policía comunitaria* or *autodefensas*) began to emerge in Guerrero and Michoacán around 2013 out of a need for citizens to provide security the state could not provide. Originally made up of community members targeting crimes such as extortion and kidnapping, some of these groups have been known to be infiltrated with members of drug-trafficking organizations. By 2015, the Mexican government began arresting leaders of self-defense groups and using federal police and the military to disband them. According to Mike Vigil, a former chief of international operations for the US Drug Enforcement Administration, "All of a sudden, the self-defense forces started to conduct or engage in criminal activities very much like the paramilitaries in Colombia, and they started to see that there was a lot of profit to be made if they started to

[152] "Knights Templar," InsightCrime, March 7, 2017, http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/knights-templar-profile .
[153] "Knights Templar," InsightCrime, May 5, 2020, http://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/knights-templar-profile .
[154] Manuel Espino Bucio, "Los Viagra y CJNG se disputan Michoacán," *El Universal*, October 4, 2017, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/los-viagras-y-cjng-se-disputan-michoacan.

engage in criminal acts... criminal groups started to penetrate them because they looked at them as being a force multiplier that they could use to expand their territory and push rival drug cartels out of the area."[155] According to a report prepared for the Wilson International Center's Mexico Institute, in many cases the line between the independence of community police forces or possible sponsorship by various cartels is blurred. Villagers in narcotics production areas along the territorial boundaries of rival cartels have formed groups to defend against extortion and kidnapping by these groups, but in many cases the *policía comunitaria* are also funded or otherwise supported by the local cartel.[156]

Adding to the corruption of the community police forces, Peña Nieto's presidency aimed to collaborate with the rural self-defense forces to fight cartels in the area by providing arms and uniforms. Vigil and others have criticized the government response: "All of a sudden you have criminals now working under the auspices of the Mexican government." Other former members of these forces have received payment for later joining official state forces.[157] The ties between various cartels, government forces and community police forces means that their members enjoy a degree of impunity when committing violent acts in the name of public security. Human Rights Watch has also criticized the corruption of community police forces in different states throughout the country, citing two possible reasons. For one, the lack of government support has forced the self-defense groups to turn to narcotrafficking groups for arms and funds. Another explanation is the groups' marginality, as they act independently with very little oversight or control. According to the director of the Americas division of Human Rights Watch José Miguel Vivanco, "The large majority of these groups are tied to organized crime. Even those that emerge as volunteer neighborhood associations that are forced to take up arms, after a short amount of time they end up corrupted… The phenomenon of self-defense groups is a clear demonstration of the failure of the State to guarantee security in various communities throughout the nation."[158]

[155] Christopher Woody, "In Mexico's 'Hot Land,' citizen self-defense forces and criminal groups may be gearing up for more violence," *Business Insider*, Dec. 11, 2016, https://www.businessinsider.com/autodefensas-causing-violence-in-guerrero-and-michoacan-in-mexico-2016-12.
[156] Chris Kyle, "Violence and Insecurity in Guerrero," *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, Jan. 2015, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Violence%20and%20Insecurity%20in%20Guerrero.pdf.
[157] Christopher Woody, "In Mexico's 'Hot Land,' citizen self-defense forces and criminal groups may be gearing up for more violence," *Business Insider*, Dec. 11, 2016, https://www.businessinsider.com/autodefensas-causing-violence-in-guerrero-and-michoacan-in-mexico-2016-12.
[158] Alejandro Santos Cid, "Grupos de autodefensa: la delgada línea entre defenderse del narco o convertirse en él," *El País,* Oct. 22, 2021, https://elpais.com/mexico/2021-10-23/grupos-de-autodefensa-la-delgada-linea-entre-defenderse-del-narco-o-convertirse-en-el.html

Sinaloa Cartel

The Sinaloa Cartel began in the state of Sinaloa in the 1980s as a fairly small operation. It has since expanded its territory from New York City to Buenos Aires and almost every major city in between, now operating in 17 Mexican states, and by some estimates, in as many as 50 countries.[159] In February 2014, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, the head of the Sinaloa Cartel, was captured by Mexican authorities. Unfortunately, decapitating the cartel has resulted in more violence in the region as junior lieutenants fight for control over the organization. Since that time, Guzman escaped from prison, was captured again, and escaped a second time from prison. He was arrested in 2016, and extradited to the US in 2017. Although Guzman is no longer in Mexico, the Sinaloa Cartel continues to exert power and engage in violent confrontations. In July 2017, 19 Sinaloa Cartel members were killed in a firefight with state authorities, a battle that resulted from the splintering of the cartel.[160] Although the Sinaloa Cartel has a reputation of being more of a business organization than a bloodthirsty violent gang like the Zetas, videos depict gory executions of Zeta members by the Sinaloa Cartel.[161] Like other cartels, the Sinaloa Cartel enforces loyalty through extreme violence. The Sinaloa Cartel has been particularly adept at co-opting municipal and state government institutions and, in many cases, has provided traditional governmental services in its territory such as humanitarian aid and dispute adjudication.

Los Juniors (Narcojuniors)

Los Narcojuniors or Los Juniors consist of a generation of cartel leaders that are descendants of past leaders such as "El Chapo," "El Mayo" Zambada, and Juan Jose Esparragoza Moreno alias "El Azul," primarily from the Sinaloa Cartel. This generation is defined by their extreme wealth, university-level education, and presence on social media. Their presence extends throughout Guadalajara, Baja California, Sonora and Sinaloa, as well as in the United States and several European countries. Although their studies in business have led them to other criminal pursuits such as money laundering and embezzlement, they are also known as being more violent than their parents' generation. In addition, their presence on social media and lack of anonymity evidence their direct connections to law enforcement and ability to work with impunity.[162]

---

[159] "Sinaloa Cartel," InSight Crime, April 5, 2021, https://insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/sinaloa-cartel-profile/.
[160] Parker Asmann, "Bloody Battle in Sinaloa, Mexico Reflects Splintering Underworld," 3 July 2017, Insight Crime, http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/bloody-battle-sinaloa-reflects-pressure-splintering-underworld
[161] "Execution of Los Zetas Member by Sinaloa Cartel in a Cornfield," http://www.miscopy.com/3979/bestgore/execution-los-zetas-member-sinaloa-cartel-front-cornfield-mexico/
[162] J. Jesus Lemus, "El Imperio de los Narcojuniors," *Reporte Indigo*, Oct. 27, 2017, https://www.reporteindigo.com/reporte/imperio-los-narcojuniors/.

Cartel Santa Rosa de Lima (CSRL)

The Santa Rosa de Lima Cartel is a local cartel based in Guanajuato that is almost exclusively dedicated to the control of fuel theft ("huachicoleo") in the area. The cartel is thought to have been operating since at least 2009 throughout the state, with bases primarily in the municipalities of Villagrán and Juventino Rosas. The cartel also works throughout the municipalities of Cortázar, Jerécuaro, Comonfort, Coroneo and Tarimoro. The cartel's strategic bases and those of greatest conflict with rival cartels share the locations of the fuel ducts belonging to the state gas company Pemex, or of oil refineries such as in Salamanca.[163] This area is famously referred to as the "Bermuda Triangle" of gas theft in Mexico, the illegal sale of which accounts for 90% of the Santa Rosa Cartel's profits. At a much smaller scale, the group also gains revenue from extorting local vendors, kidnappings and low-level drug sales.[164]

Fuel theft or "huachicoleo" in Mexico dates back as far as the early 2000s, but has increased significantly since around 2010. This is related both to the removal of fuel subsidies in Mexico that increased profits from the illegal sale of fuel, and the militarized war on drugs causing fragmented criminal groups to seek more stable income, thus turning to products within the legal economy. Fuel thieves employ various methods to tap pipelines, including by collaborating with Pemex employees to find out when fuel shipments are released. According to Pemex data, an average of 271 robberies took place each year between 2004 and 2009; between 2018 and 2020, there were an average of 12,873 per year. Pemex estimated that at its height in 2018, fuel theft cost the Mexican state $3 billion. By 2018, according to a member of the Zetas cartel as quoted in a local media report, fuel theft was "approximately as profitable as drugs."[165]

Before 2010, small groups and individual families dominated the fuel racket, but as the practice has become more common and profitable in the last decade, cartels have taken over control of the business and violence related to fuel theft has soared. Data analyzed by the

---

"Narcojuniors: los heredores del poder criminal que muestran con orgullo su riqueza en la Red,"*RT*, Oct. 6, 2017, https://actualidad.rt.com/actualidad/252167-narcojuniors-mexico-hijos-narcotraficantes-cartel-sinaloa.
"Narcojuniors, la nueva dinastía que maneja los cárteles en México," *VanguardiaMX*, August 3, 2018, https://vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/nueva-dinastia-conoce-los-narcojuniors-que-manejan-los-carteles-en-mexico

[163] "Cártel de Santa Rosa de Lima, amo del 'huachicoleo' en Guanajuato," *Milenio*, Jan. 31, 2019, https://www.milenio.com/policia/guanajuato-cartel-santa-rosa-lima-experto-huachicoleo.

[164] Marcos González Díaz, "El Marro: la peligrosa lucha que se libra en el "triángulo de las Bermudas" de Guanajuato, el dominio del cartel de "huachicoleo" de Santa Rosa de Lima," *BBC News*, June 25, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-53174707.

[165] "Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket," International Crisis Group, March 25, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/keeping-oil-fire-tackling-mexicos-fuel-theft-racket.

International Crisis Group shows that areas with pipelines have seen criminal groups increasing their presence as the price of gas has risen. Data also shows that the number of criminal groups in municipalities with pipelines climbed sharply after 2017, when fuel prices spiked dramatically after the removal of government subsidies. The CJNG expanded fuel theft operations into Puebla and Veracruz that year, sparking violence and murdering dozens of gas thieves, often brutally disfiguring the bodies or dumping them in town squares. That same year, the CSRL declared war against the CJNG in Guanajuato.[166]

The CSRL has an entrenched base of civilian supporters in Guanajuato, as the group is known for distributing gifts and financing local projects, but also counts with institutional support, as was demonstrated in a leaked phone call between leaders of the CSRL and the former mayor of the municipality of Cortazar, Hugo Estefanía Monroy. In the audio, the former mayor discusses the distribution of municipal funds to the cartel, in order to "fully secure" the municipalities of Cortazar, Juventino Rosas, Villagrán, Celaya, and Valle de Santiago. For his part, Estefanía Monroy discussed his desire to collaborate with the cartel in order to secure votes for state governorship in 2024.[167] While the cartel has collaborated with local officials and at the state level, the federal administration of President López Obrador has made it a priority to target the CSRL and fuel theft in Guanajuato state. Shortly after taking office in December 2019, President López Obrador declared victory in the fight over fuel theft, but many analysts were dubious that such triumph would hold for long.[168] In response, the cartel left a message for the president a few months later demanding the removal of federal troops and the National Guard from Guanajuato. The message read: "If you don't, we're going to start killing innocent people so that you see that this is not a game." A pick-up truck filled with explosives was later found outside the oil refinery in nearby Salamanca.[169]

The federal government has stepped up its attack on the CSRL but violence has only increased as a result. In July 2020, the leader of the CSRL (alias "El Marro") was arrested in Guanajuato, leading to increasing violence as the cartel's leadership was fragmented. The power vacuum left by El Marro's arrest led to a greater presence of the CJNG in the state, with reports of entire communities fleeing the new cartel's threats and young gunmen being recruited and trained by the CJNG along the border region of Jalisco and Guanajuato.

[166] "Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket," International Crisis Group, March 25, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/keeping-oil-fire-tackling-mexicos-fuel-theft-racket.
[167] "Ligan a exalcalde con huachicoleros; Cártel de Santa Rosa de Lima," *Excelsior*, March 13, 2019, https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/ligan-a-exalcalde-con-huachicoleros-cartel-de-santa-rosa-de-lima/1301563.
[168] Kirk Semple, "Mexico Declares Victory Over Fuel Thieves, But Is It Lasting?" *New York Times*, May 5, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/05/world/americas/mexico-fuel-theft.html
[169] "Keeping Oil from the Fire: Tackling Mexico's Fuel Theft Racket," International Crisis Group, March 25, 2022, https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/keeping-oil-fire-tackling-mexicos-fuel-theft-racket.

Meanwhile, the Sinaloa Cartel has also entered the local drug market in Guanajuato, searching for alliances with what is left of the CSRL and other local gangs. The resulting violence has been brutal for Guanajuato residents. On October 18, 2020 authorities found an unmarked mass grave with the remains of at least 66 people in the municipality of Salvatierra. The remains of another 20 people were also found in the municipality of Cortázar. On September 27, 2020 a shootout in a bar in Jaral del Progreso left 11 people dead. Months before, gunmen killed 28 patients at a clandestine drug rehabilitation center in Irapuato.[170]

Two years after "El Marro's" arrest, the CSRL is still active in Guanajuato, and violence continues to rise due to conflicts between new factions of the cartel, their allies from the Sinaloa cartel and the CJNG. A video circulated on social media in the early hours of September 11, 2022 showing nine heavily armed men affiliated with the Santa Rosa Cartel surrounding a vehicle with two boxes in front; one painted with the letter "M" for el Marro, the other containing a human head. In the video, the speaker declares that the state of Guanajuato belongs to the CSRL and threatens to go after members of the CJNG.[171] On September 12, seven people were killed and a municipal police officer injured in cartel attacks in Guanajuato. In Celaya, two decapitated bodies appeared on September 17 with messages left by the CSRL. On September 21, hitmen from the Santa Rosa cartel shot ten individuals in a bar in Tarimoro, Guanajuato that allegedly sold meth trafficked by the CJNG. The hitmen left messages throughout the bar warning that the same would happen to anyone who chose alliances with the CJNG.[172]

Juarez Cartel and La Linea

The Juárez Cartel is one of the oldest criminal organizations in Mexico, with its roots dating back to the 1980s. Since its beginnings, the cartel has focused on drug trafficking, but has expanded into other criminal activities such as human trafficking, kidnapping, local drug distribution and extortion. Given its border location, the cartel has maintained control of one of the most important trafficking corridors into the United States – Ciudad Juárez and the Valle de Juárez. Although not every person trafficking drugs or people through Juárez may be a member of the cartel, they must all obey the cartel's orders and pay a portion of

[170] Victoria Dittmar, "Mexico Facing Predictable Bloody Fallout After El Marro's Arrest," InSight Crime, Nov. 12, 2020, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-facing-predictable-bloody-fallout-after-el-marros-arrest/.
[171] "'Guanajuato es del señor Marro': la amenaza del Cártel Santa Rosa de Lima al CJNG," *Infobae*, Sept. 11, 2022, https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2022/09/11/guanajuato-es-del-senor-marro-la-amenaza-del-cartel-santa-rosa-de-lima-al-cjng/
[172] "Masacre en Tarimoro: Cártel Santa Rosa de Lima ejecutó a 10 en bar de Guanajuato," *Infobae*, Sept. 21, 2022, https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2022/09/22/masacre-en-tarimoro-cartel-santa-rosa-de-lima-ejecuto-a-10-en-bar-de-guanajuato/.

their proceeds or a "tax" to the cartel. As such, anyone trafficking through Juárez is linked to this cartel. In this way, the cartel extends its influence and controls the territory. Although La Linea and the Juárez Cartel are based in Ciudad Juárez, because so much drug and human trafficking passes through this area, their power extends through much of the country. The Juárez Cartel has some measure of control over the local and state police, as well as some politicians. It has turned to local gangs, such as La Línea, to be its enforcers, changing the dynamic in the area and increasing violent confrontation with its rivals. Rivalry and turf wars between the Cartel Juárez, local gang affiliates and the Sinaloa Cartel turned Ciudad Juárez into one of the most violent places in the world.[173]

One of the most visible leaders of Cartel Juárez since 2009 has been Arturo Quintana Quintana, nicknamed "El 80," who also controls La Línea. Originally formed by former and active-duty police officers, resulting in direct links between this group and the police, La Línea is a more than 100-member strong gang that controls Ciudad Juárez and the border between the city and Texas.[174] Quintana is reported to have paid off police in over seven municipalities in Chihuahua in order to carry out his drug and human trafficking operations across the border.[175] La Línea has been linked to some of the city's most notorious crimes in the past decade, including the massacre of more than a dozen partying teenagers in January 2010, a car-bomb attack against the Federal Police in July 2010, and the murder of 19 people in the rehabilitation center "Faith and Life" in June of the same year.[176] Because of the group's extensive control of the Juárez-Texas border, migrants passing through this corridor are subject to La Línea's violent drug and human trafficking operations.

[173] Juarez Cartel, InSight Crime, November 17, 2015, https://www.insightcrime.org/mexico-organized-crime-news/juarez-cartel-profile/.

[174] Liliana Fregosa, "La Línea: el nuevo grupo criminal que se perfila como el modelo de los cárteles mexicanos del futuro," *Infobae*, 6 July 2017, https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2017/07/06/la-linea-el-nuevo-grupo-criminal-que-se-perfila-como-el-modelo-de-los-carteles-mexicanos-del-futuro/.

[175] José Ernesto Topete, "Él es 'El 80,' líder del cártel de Juárez que se enfrentó eternamente con el de Sinaloa," May 17, 2018, https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/republica/justicia/quien-es-el-80-arturo-quintana-quintana-lider-de-la-linea-cartel-de-juarez-1694551.html.

[176] Patrick Corcoran, "Arrests Herald Juarez Drug Gang's Decline," InSight Crime, June 23, 2011, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/arrests-herald-juarez-drug-gangs-decline/.

Chapter Five: Transnational Street Gangs in Mexico

Overview

Communication between Mexican gangs in the United States and their associates in Mexico is facilitated when their members are deported to Mexico, and through telecommunications and social media which allow gangs to maintain transnational connections. Given the power of transnational criminal organizations such as street gangs in Mexico, people who have been targeted by such organizations as enemies face social isolation from community members who fear being associated with gang or cartel resisters. People who have been members of gangs and then turned against that gang by dropping out or informing on gang activities to law enforcement, are even more vulnerable to revenge violence, including death, because the very authority of the gang is at stake.

The two leading Latino prison gangs in California, the Mexican Mafia (La Eme) and Nuestra Familia, maintain structures where incarcerated members direct members on the street while facilitating the movement of drugs between Mexican cartels and street gangs within the United States.[177] Los Norteños is primarily a prison gang formed by inmates from Northern California who respond to the leadership of the Nuestra Familia gang. Los Sureños, responding to the Mexican Mafia, are a group of notoriously violent transnational gangs that began in Southern California prisons and now operate in Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and beyond. These gangs traditionally recruit young, impoverished, and marginalized members of society. Founded by Mexican prisoners in Southern California, the Sureños encompass a vast and complicated network of local gang branches, including both MS13 and Barrio 18.[178] The FBI's National Gang Report from 2015 describes the Sureños gang as one of the three most "criminally active" gangs along the U.S.-Mexico border out of 96 street gangs identified by the U.S. government that work in both countries and along the border.[179]

[177] "2015 National Gang Report," National Gang Intelligence Center, https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stats-services-publications-national-gang-report-2015.pdf/view.
[178] Juan Jose Martinez, "El Salvador's other gang from California: the Sureños," InSight Crime, Dec. 23, 2014, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/surenos-california-gang-deportation-el-salvador/
[179] "2015 National Gang Report," National Gang Intelligence Center, https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stats-services-publications-national-gang-report-2015.pdf/view.

The Mara Salvatrucha (one of the Sureños gangs) began in Southern California in the 1980s. Largely a predatory criminal organization, MS-13 lives mostly from extortion and the gang's resilience owes to its strong social bonds, which are created and strengthened via acts of violence against their rivals and one another. According to a report prepared for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, "In Mexico, MS-13 serves as foot soldiers (contractors or tactical allies) for cartels (including the Zetas) and facilitators for the human trafficking trade (a skill they learned when moving their own deported members back to the United States). MS-13's neo-feudal structure helps it adapt to shifting alliances and rivalries while leaving it free to exploit local opportunities. MS-13 is involved in drug distribution, robbery, prostitution, theft, human trafficking, and provides assassins for hire to other transnational drug cartels."[180] In October 2019, witnesses in a large-scale trial against MS-13 members in El Salvador said that the gang has actively sought alliances with cartels in Mexico and Guatemala in order to delve into drug and arms trafficking. According to one key witness, MS-13 sent gang members into Mexico and Guatemala in order to "grow the gang" and establish ties to narco-trafficking organizations, especially Los Zetas.[181] Inside prisons in the United States, the MS was forced to bow to a larger criminal gang, the Mexican Mafia, or "la eMe" for short, whose power extends from jails to the streets. The MS13's subservience has afforded the gang more protection in the streets and in prison. In return, the MS provides hitmen and pays the Mafia regular quotas from their criminal proceeds.[182]

The Mexican Mafia is at the top in the Hispanic organized crime hierarchy, including both prison and street gangs, and requires frequent tax payments from its gang affiliates in exchange for protection. Although police crackdowns throughout the 1990s diminished the mafia's power, evidence suggests that the group continues to coordinate criminal activities both inside and out of prisons in California and beyond.[183] The Mexican Mafia is known as the "gang of gangs" organizing drug trafficking operations between Sureño gangs (including MS-13 and Barrio 18), who use girlfriends, wives and other gang members outside prison to facilitate their drug trafficking. A 2018 indictment of La Eme stated, "These Mexican Mafia members and associates, working together to control criminal activity within LA County jails, have become their own entity or enterprise and effectively function as an illegal

[180] Adam Elkus and John P. Sullivan, "Los Zetas and MS-13: Nontraditional Alliances," Combating Terrorism Center, June 2012, https://ctc.usma.edu/los-zetas-and-ms-13-nontraditional-alliances/.
[181] "Pandilla salvadoreña MS-13 buscó alianzas con carteles de México y Guatemala," *La Tribuna*, Oct. 11, 2019, https://www.latribuna.hn/2019/10/11/pandilla-salvadorena-ms-13-busco-alianzas-con-carteles-de-mexico-y-guatemala
[182] "MS-13," InSight Crime, March 11, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/el-salvador-organized-crime-news/mara-salvatrucha-ms-13-profile/.
[183] Suzanne Pekow, "Brutal Control: A Brief History of the Mexican Mafia," *American Public Media*, http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/gangster/g1.html.

government."[184] The FBI's National Gang Report from 2015 reports drug trafficking to be the most prominent criminal activity of cross-border prison gangs such as the Norteños, with the Sinaloa and Juarez Cartels identified as the Mexican criminal organizations with the strongest ties to these U.S.-based street and prison gangs. FBI survey respondents most frequently linked prison gangs to the Sinaloa Cartel, functioning as brokers in the transfer of drugs from cartels to U.S.-based street gangs. The report also noted that "membership is for life in most prison gangs; dropping out is punishable by death."[185]

While drug cartels are more prevalent, gang violence remains a concern throughout Mexico. According to the Secretary of Public Security, 60% of violent crimes in Mexico City in 2019 were related to street gangs.[186] While government authorities have no consistent figures on the number of active gang members in the country, the Minister for Public Security stated in 2005 that there were 5,000 MS-13 members in Mexico, and the Secretaria de Seguridad Publica claimed there were up to 15,000 members of Barrio 18, acting in 24 Mexican States. While these figures vary, they do confirm the presence of transnational gangs in Mexico.[187] The state of exception targeting street gangs in El Salvador has also caused a recent expansion of MS-13 and Barrio 18 into Southern Mexico specifically, "swelling the ranks of formerly small Mexican branches and potentially helping them step up their criminal activities," according to InSight Crime researchers.[188]

InSight Crime analysts have also found that US gangs and Mexico's organized crime groups have forged closer ties since the start of Calderon's drug war in 2006, as fragmenting cartels in Mexico have turned to transnational criminal outsourcing model to protect their interests north of the border. In 2012, US federal forces identified Mexican drug trafficking organizations operating in at least 22 cities and nearly all counties in California They also found 18 street and prison gangs in the state had ties to these group.[189] For example, La Familia Michocána has ties to numerous types of gangs with

[184] Brian Melley, "Mexican Mafia run jail crime like an 'illegal government'," *AP News*, May 24, 2018, https://www.apnews.com/2a58f04bc9084a1e84770391c4a0cb21.
[185] "2015 National Gang Report," National Gang Intelligence Center, https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/stats-services-publications-national-gang-report-2015.pdf/view.
[186] "En la Ciudad de México operan 7 pandillas que se podrían convertir en cárteles como La Unión Tepito," *Infobae*, March 24, 2019, https://www.infobae.com/america/mexico/2019/03/24/en-la-ciudad-de-mexico-operan-7-pandillas-que-se-podrian-convertir-en-carteles-como-la-union-tepito/.
[187] USAID, "Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment," April 2006, https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Security/citizensecurity/mexico/evaluaciones/usaid.pdf.
[188] Sean Doherty, "Southern Mexico Extortion Suggests Migration of Central American Gangs," InSight Crime, Jan. 30, 2023, https://insightcrime.org/news/mexico-first-evidence-el-salvador-gangs-regrouping-abroad/.
[189] Marguerite Cawley, "Mexico Cartel-US Gang Ties Deepening as Criminal Landscape Fragments," InSight Crime, April 18, 2014, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-cartel-us-gang-ties-criminal-groups-fragments/.

diverse ethnic backgrounds including criminal street gangs (Bloods, Crips, Avenues, Norteños, and Sureños), prison gangs (Aryan Brotherhood, the Mexican Mafia, and La Nuestra Familia), and traditionally-white motorcycle gangs like the Hells Angels and Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs.[190] One particular case in Texas has demonstrated the depth of collaboration between U.S. originated street gangs and Mexican drug cartels. The Barrio Azteca gang was born in the Texas prison system, but later expanded across the border into Mexico and developed a relationship with the Juarez Cartel, providing manpower for the group's armed wing "La Linea". The gang has since grown to control local drug distribution in its own right. It is not just Mexico's biggest transnational organizations that are following this model, as smaller, more territorially based Mexican groups are also trying to secure their spot in the drug trade by seeking out the help of US gangs.[191]

Risk of Violence to Mexicans Deported from the United States

Deported gang members or perceived gang members are often re-targeted upon return to their countries of origin precisely because of the intensity and duration of gang rivalries. According to Human Rights Watch, "Accounts of killings of deportees by gangs in court filings and press accounts indicate that a deportee might be killed by his own gang for not 're-activating' with the gang…, battling for power within the gang, committing crimes like robbery, or calling attention to the gang through flamboyant behavior. Gangs reportedly kill members of rival gangs, or those assumed to be members, for living in or transiting their area, including one who was evangelizing after leaving behind gang life and one who was recently deported."[192]

If individuals have dropped out, rejected a gang, or reported gang activity to police, they are frequently viewed as dissidents who are against the interests of the gang and face retributive punishment as a result. Perhaps the most famous example of a Mexican Mafia defect is Rene "Boxer" Enriquez, who after acting as a key figure with the organization in and out of prison decided to quit and inform on the gang's structure to law enforcement in 2002. His attorney has described this decision as coming at "great personal risk," putting both him and his family in grave danger of retaliation.[193] Immigration courts have

[190]Kamala Harris, "Gangs Beyond Borders: California and the Fight Against Transnational Organized Crime," California Attorney General's Office, March 2014, https://oag.ca.gov/sites/all/files/agweb/pdfs/toc/report_2014.pdf.
[191] Marguerite Cawley, "Mexico Cartel-US Gang Ties Deepening as Criminal Landscape Fragments," InSight Crime, April 18, 2014, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-cartel-us-gang-ties-criminal-groups-fragments/.
[192] Human Rights Watch, "Deported to Danger," Feb. 5, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/02/05/deported-danger/united-states-deportation-policies-expose-salvadorans-death-and.
[193] Kate Mather and Victoria Kim, "How a Mexican Mafia killer became a law enforcement darling," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 15, 2015, https://www.latimes.com/local/crime/la-me-mexican-mafia-killer-20150215-story.html.

recognized that gangs "function as *de facto* governments," and view those who cooperate with the authorities or defect from the gang lifestyle as holding anti-gang views that render them enemies in the gangs' political struggle for control.[194] It is incredibly important to the viability of these groups that they maintain complete control of the flow of people in their communities. If an individual has defied the cartel or gang, they will be targeted as an example as a means of deterrence to others who wish to circumvent the power of these groups.

As is true with other countries in Central America, gang members and tattooed individuals are often targets of police harassment and violence in Mexico. Suspected gang members are frequently stopped or searched on the streets by police, and these stops often include threats or other forms of abuse. Many of those stopped are targeted based on their appearance, such as clothing from the U.S. or English language tattoos.[195] In Central America and Mexico, the police often target people with what are perceived to be gang tattoos for harassment, torture or extrajudicial killing.[196] In 2015, police executed nearly two dozen suspected gang members in an ambush near the western town of Tanhuato, and again in 2017, 17 suspected gang members were murdered in cold blood by police in Mazatlan. Not a single police officer was killed in these "gun battles," and a university study found that police killed 17 people for every officer lost in armed skirmishes during the year 2014.[197] Based on interviews with justice sector personnel, Amnesty International reports that police tend to arrest young men based on "suspicious" appearance, which essentially means they appear to be poor, migrants, and from marginalized communities. Those with gang tattoos are precisely the kinds of people who the police regularly arrest preemptively in Mexico.[198]

A 2014 study in the *International Journal of Drug Policy* conducted in Tijuana, Mexico about the role of visual markers in police harassment among HIV patients found that those most likely to experience victimization by the army or police were tattooed men. The

---

[194] Daniel Kowalski, "Asylum Victory in Hartford: Matter of R-G- (Death Threats from Gangs in Honduras, El Salvador)," *LexisNexis: Immigration Law,* Dec. 31, 2017, https://www.lexisnexis.com/legalnewsroom/immigration/b/immigration-law-blog/posts/asylum-victory-in-hartford-matter-of-r-g-death-threats-from-gangs-in-honduras-el-salvador.

[195] "No Place to Hide: Gang, State and Clandestine Violence in El Salvador," The International Human Rights Clinic, Human Rights Program Harvard Law School, February 2007, p. 86-87.

[196] Clare Ribando Silke, "Gangs in Central America," Congressional Research Service, 29 Aug. 2016, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34112.pdf.

[197] Lizeth Diaz, "Relatives of Mexican gang members say they were executed by police," *Reuters*, July 4, 2017,https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-violence/relatives-of-mexican-gang-members-say-they-were-executed-by-police-idUSKBN19P26G.

[198] "False Suspicions: Arbitrary Detentions by Police in Mexico," Amnesty International, 2017, p. 21-23, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr41/5340/2017/en/.

study of 601 patients goes on to explain that tattoos in Mexico are associated with deviant behavior like delinquency, drug use and gangs. Among deportees, tattoos may be associated with a person's migrant status, thus leading to further stigmatization and discrimination.[199] A University of California-Irvine professor studying men who have struggled to assimilate after deportation found that, "Those who had visible tattoos sometimes were mistaken for gang members, or they had tried to leave behind the gang life, so there was suspicion that they were criminals."[200]

Former gang members or perceived gang members thus may be perceived as active members in Mexico, or recognized as gang drop-outs, putting their life at significant risk. US federal forces have found that Mexican drug trafficking cartels are active throughout the United States, with different street and prison gangs having connections to these groups. Because of the tight collaboration between California street gangs and Mexican cartels, individuals with former US gang affiliations are at risk of violence in Mexico, by rival gangs or by their former gang if they have dropped out.[201] There is also the imminent threat that they will be singled out by the police or other security forces, who utilize the 'war on drugs' to target any person that is perceived to be somewhat connected with organized crime.[202]

If a deported gang member were to be incarcerated in Mexico, they would face a significant risk of harm due to horrendous prison conditions within Mexico. Amnesty International issued a lengthy report about arbitrary detentions in Mexico, concluding that the police target men from marginalized socio-economic groups for arrest.[203] The prolonged crisis in Mexico's severely overcrowded penitentiaries has only been heightened throughout the last decade with the penetration of organized crime into prisons. 58% of the prison population in Mexico lives in overcrowded conditions, according to a 2017 study, and more than one third of the 375 prisons in the country are filled beyond capacity. Gangs have effective control of cell blocks and often clash for control, triggering riots, murders, and escapes. In 2016, a notorious riot in a Monterrey

[199] Miguel Pinedo, Jose Luis Burgos, Adriana Vargas Ojeda, David Fitzgerald, and Victoria Ojeda, "The role of visual markers in police victimization among structurally vulnerable persons in Tijuana, Mexico," *International Journal Drug Policy*, 2015 May; 26 (5): 501-508, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4362968/.
[200] Peter O'Dowd, "Fear of Landing: Deportation Can Lead to Stigma at Home," *KJZZ*, August 19, 2011, https://kjzz.org/content/fear-landing-deportation-can-lead-stigma-home.
[201] Marguerite Cawley, "Mexico Cartel-US Gang Ties Deepening as Criminal Landscape Fragments," InSight Crime, April 18, 2014, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-cartel-us-gang-ties-criminal-groups-fragments/.
[202] Geneva Academy, "Gang Violence in Colombia, Mexico and El Salvador," December 2017, https://www.geneva-academy.ch/joomlatools-files/docman files/Gang%20violence%20in%20Colombia,%20Mexico%20and%20El%20Salvador.pdf.
[203] Amnesty International, *False Suspicions: Arbitrary Detentions by Police in Mexico* (London: Amnesty International, 2017), p. 21-23, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/amr41/5340/2017/en/.

prison left 49 dead, and the following year 29 inmates escaped from a prison in Tamaulipas after continuous fires and shoot-outs.[204] The National Human Rights Commission has reiterated its concern in recent years over what it calls the worsening state of gangs running prisons "in the face of a growing number of inmates linked to organized crime."[205] If an individual has past gang affiliations, they would also likely be targeted in prison by rival gangs and cartel factions. Prison guards often turn a blind-eye to violence among inmates or are being paid by cartels thereby rendering them ineffective as a means of protection.

[204] "Overcrowding, corruption and crime: the hell of Mexican prisons," *Times Live*, 31 May 2017, https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/world/2017-05-31-overcrowding-corruption-and-crime-the-hell-of-mexican-prisons/
[205]"Murders, corruption and crime: The hell of Mexican prisons," *The Journal*, 5 June 2017, https://www.thejournal.ie/mexican-prisons-3418092-Jun2017/.

Chapter Six: Dangers to Politicians, Activists, Journalists, Attorneys and Migrants in Mexico

Political Violence

The violence against political candidates that Mexico has experienced in the last decade is in part due to the Partido Revolucionario Institucional's (PRI) increasing loss of political power, and the competition to fill the vacuum left by the PRI. The PRI was founded in 1929 (first named the National Revolutionary Party and later the Party of the Mexican Revolution) and ruled in Mexico almost unilaterally until the party lost the presidency in 2000. From 2012-2018, the PRI regained the presidency under Enrique Peña Nieto, but the power of the PRI's extensive patronage network still extends from the highest levels of federal government down to the most local municipal level. The fact that the PRI now must compete on a more even-footing with rival political parties, the National Action Party (PAN), Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), Morena, etc., has created an unprecedented number of political assassinations in the country. In the 2017 electoral campaign, more than 136 candidates were killed in the space of less than a year, and there were more than 400 other cases of threats, intimidation and kidnappings.[206]

Levels of political corruption and collaboration with narco-activity have made politicians targets for violence as well, with over 80 politicians murdered at the hands of organized crime networks between 2017 and 2018. The Spanish newspaper *El País* found the 2018 election cycle the most dangerous thus far for candidates and the general population with over 10,395 murders throughout the campaign season.[207] The Mexican newspaper *Vanguardia* reported that as of May 2018, 93 politicians had been murdered during the election season, with Guerrero, the state immediately neighboring Morelos, leading as the most violent state.[208] A National Public Radio (NPR) report from June raised the number to 130 candidates and campaign workers murdered since the beginning of the election season in the

[206] Paulina Villegas and Kirk Semple, "Criminal Groups Seek to Decide Outcome in Many Mexican Races, *New York Times*, 1 July 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/01/world/americas/mexico-election-assassinations.html .
[207] "Asesinado un cadidato del PRI a regidor en Guerrero," *El País*, June 1, 2018, https://elpais.com/internacional/2018/06/01/america/1527820387_591756.html
[208] "Asesinan a Rodrigo Salado, candidato a regidor por el PRI en Acapulco," *Vanguardia MX*, May 31, 2018, https://vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/asesinan-rodrigo-salado-candidato-regidor-por-el-pri-en-acapulco.

fall, with only 48 of those officially registered in their races.[209] The same report detailed that many of these murders occurred in rural areas and small towns, and were carried out by criminal organizations, political rivals and even local police forces in the case of Ocampo, Michoacán. In Taretan, Michoacán, a candidate was murdered for missing an extortion payment to a well-connected cartel.[210]

According to a recent report on political violence in Mexico, 72% of the violence targeted candidates who opposed the party that was in power in the locality where the attacks occurred. While the media often blames this violence on drug cartels and criminal organizations, the reality is more complex given that cartels are often made up of former or present military personnel or police officers, and their presence often represents the will of the state and political officials.[211] Members of organized crime often represent the extrajudicial arm of the political party in power, and are utilized to execute and silence both political opponents and journalists who oppose them or expose corruption.

The state of Morelos is one example, as political candidates and activists have increasingly been targeted. Local elections in the state of Morelos in 2021 brought a wave of violent threats and attacks against candidates. In April 2021, one candidate for the municipal presidency of Xochitepec dropped out of the race after receiving threats forcing her to remain in her home for safety. Campaign employees of two candidates in Temoac and Yautepec were shot with firearms in May 2021, and later in the month a *narcomanta* (narco banner) appeared threatening the PRI mayoral candidate for Xochitepec and the Morelos State president of the Green Party (Partido Verde). On May 15, the brother of a mayoral candidate in Cuautla was murdered in his car. Many of these candidates reported requesting protection orders from the state's Attorney General office, but had not received help or were provided with only minimal protection.[212]

Political Activists

Political activists have been targets of violence and intimidation in Morelos state and throughout Mexico. In March 2022, activists interrupted a meeting with representatives of

[209] Carrie Kahn, "Mexico faces unprecedented wave of political violence ahead of elections," *NPR,* June 26, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/06/26/623646494/mexico-faces-unprecedented-wave-of-political-violence-ahead-of-elections.
[210] Carrie Kahn, "Mexico faces unprecedented wave of political violence ahead of elections," *NPR,* June 26, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/06/26/623646494/mexico-faces-unprecedented-wave-of-political-violence-ahead-of-elections.
[211] Alice Driver, "Unprecedented wave of political violence rocks Mexico," *Public Radio International,* June 13, 2018, https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-06-13/unprecedented-wave-political-violence-rocks-mexico.
[212] Susana Paredes, "Morelos no se salva de casos de violencia electoral," *El Sol de Cuernavaca*, May 21, 2021, https://www.elsoldecuernavaca.com.mx/local/morelos-no-se-salva-de-casos-de-violencia-electoral-6746723.html.

President López Obrador's government in Morelos demanding a response to the assassinations of their colleagues, including many journalists, in the state in recent years.[213] Perhaps the most famous of these assassinations was of Samir Flores, who was murdered on February 20, 2019 as retribution for his organized resistance to the construction of a thermoelectric plant and fuel pipeline through indigenous territory in Morelos. In September 2021, community leader Alejandro García "El Chepe" was shot in the door of his home after months of organized resistance demanding potable water in his neighborhood of Cuernavaca, Morelos. Other neighborhood leaders organizing with "El Chepe" spoke to the press in December about how they were forced to stop their fight for clean water after threats against them escalated.[214] During López Obrador's administration since 2018, at least seven high-profile political activists have been murdered in Morelos, including two union leaders who were shot in broad daylight outside of government buildings in downtown Cuernavaca.[215]

In the famous case of forty-three students from Iguala, Guerrero who were disappeared and murdered by the Mexican military in collusion with local cartels, family members and activists have suffered constant death threats, received bribes to stop their protests and search for their missing relatives, and been subject to abuse and violence at demonstrations.[216] Amnesty International has reported about death threats to activists involved in the search of missing persons such as those affiliated with the organization TADECO, also located in Guerrero.[217] The relatives of individuals disappeared or murdered by cartels face grave risk when seeking out information about their loved ones or denouncing the crimes. On May 10, 2017, Miriam Rodríguez was shot and killed in front of her home in San Fernando, Tamaulipas. Rodríguez had been searching for the people responsible for the murder of her daughter who was kidnapped in 2014. In 2011, Nepomuceno Moreno was murdered after denouncing the illegal detention and forced disappearance of his son by state police, including to former president Felipe Calderón.[218]

---

[213] "Morelos. Exigen justica por asesinato de activistas y periodistas en el estado de Morelos," *La Izquierda Diario*, March 25, 2022, https://www.laizquierdadiario.com/Exigen-justica-por-asesinato-de-activistas-y-periodistas-en-el-estado-de-Morelos.

[214] Xavier Omaña, "Por amenazas y difamaciones, activistas de Morelos terminan su lucha por el agua potable," *El Grafico*, Dec. 22, 2021, https://www.elgrafico.mx/al-dia/por-amenazas-y-difamaciones-activistas-de-morelos-terminan-su-lucha-por-el-agua-potable?fbclid=IwAR3_Lv8vTr5Ot4gwa9DHeYBhV4qxRlTRalnYFXgCXC6vWOi4mfWvVl8OgZc

[215] Israel Mariano, "Activistas viven en peligro en Morelos," *El Sol de Cuernavaca*, Sept. 18, 2021, https://www.elsoldecuernavaca.com.mx/policiaca/activistas-viven-en-peligro-en-morelos-7226077.html

[216] "Denuncian amenazas contra familiares y estudiantes de Ayotzinapa," *Lindero Norte Noticias*, Feb. 1, 2015, https://linderonorte.com/2015/02/01/denuncian-amenazas-contra-familiares-y-estudiantes-de-ayotzinapa/.

[217] "Threats Against Activists in Mexico," Amnesty International, Jan. 21, 2010, https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/amr410102010en.pdf.

[218] Chantal Flores, "The High Risks of Documenting Mexico's Disappeared," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, Aug. 30, 2022, https://iwpr.net/global-voices/high-risks-documenting-mexicos-disappeared.

These relatives rarely find support from the police, or even receive threats from state authorities themselves. As one activist told journalists in 2022, "Of all the times that I have asked for the support of the police, they have never given it to me… I have had to rely on the groups of relatives of disappeared persons."[219] In some cases these threats or attacks are carried out by the Mexican state itself, such as in the case of Tlatlaya, where the National Human Rights Commission found that officials of the State of Mexico's Attorney General's Office tortured three of the surviving victims of a massacre committed by the Mexican armed forces in order to alter their testimonies, and significantly tampered with evidence at the scene of the crime in order to exonerate the soldiers implicated in the murders.[220]

Indigenous Activists as Targets of Cartel and State Violence

Violence against indigenous people in Mexico is rampant, and indigenous activists specifically face violence and intimidation from illegally operating companies, drug cartels, and government and police officials, including community police from their own communities. These crimes are committed with impunity, and with limited government support to the affected communities. While all of Mexico faces a current security crisis, these issues disproportionately affect poor, Indigenous communities.[221] Indigenous leaders and activists protecting their land over mining, logging and water-protection issues have been targeted and murdered both by state officials and drug cartels fighting over control of the territory. 15 Indigenous environmental activists were murdered in 2017 alone, with none of the cases solved or resulting in convictions. Drug cartels are aggressively moving into deforestation and trafficking in endangered species, where environmental protectors and Indigenous groups often resist their activities.[222] As of 2016, 71.9% of the Indigenous population in Mexico was living in poverty, making them more susceptible to gang recruitment and violence.[223]

---

[219] Chantal Flores, "The High Risks of Documenting Mexico's Disappeared," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, Aug. 30, 2022, https://iwpr.net/global-voices/high-risks-documenting-mexicos-disappeared.
[220] "Gobierno Edomex torturó a testigos y manipuló pruebas en caso #Tlatlaya para encubrir al Ejército: CNDH," *Aristegui Noticias*, Oct. 23, 2014, https://aristeguinoticias.com/2310/mexico/gobierno-edomex-torturo-a-testigos-y-manipulo-pruebas-en-caso-tlatlaya-para-encubrir-al-ejercito-cndh/.
[221] "Observations of the State of Indigenous Human Rights in Mexico," Cultural Survival, March 2018, https://www.culturalsurvival.org/sites/default/files/Mexico%20UPR%202018.pdf.
[222] "Crossing Cartels Leads to Death for Mexican Environmentalists," *Bloomberg Environment*, December 7, 2018, https://news.bloombergenvironment.com/environment-and-energy/crossing-cartels-leads-to-death-for-mexican-environmentalists
[223] Mariluz Roldán, "Over 70% of indigenous people in Mexico live in poverty," *El Universal*, September 8, 2018, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/over-70-indigenous-people-mexico-live-poverty.

Indigenous educators have been targeted by criminal groups in Mexico due to their level of education and political activity. In the case of Ayotzinapa, student teachers from the indigenous rural college were intercepted by state authorities tied to criminal organizations in the state in 2014. Six students were killed in the clash and 43 students disappeared in the aftermath. Official investigations to find the students and those responsible have been corrupt and widely discredited.[224] Other schools throughout the state of Guerrero have also closed for weeks at a time due to threats towards teachers and school directors from criminal organizations. In 2017, over one hundred schools were closed due to threats from narcotrafficking organizations in the municipality of Chilapa, Guerrero.[225]

Indigenous leaders and activists in general are frequent targets of criminal groups in Guerrero, especially those that denounce cartel activity in their community. In May 2022, indigenous leaders Lorena Chantzin Paxacuasingo and Marcos Campos Ahuejote were murdered, allegedly by members of the Los Ardillos cartel that had previously threatened their community. Paxacuasingo and Ahuejote were members of the the Guerrero-Emiliano Zapata Indigenous and Popular Council (Cipog-EZ), a group that had organized protests and roadblocks in March 2022 in response to attacks against members of local self-defense groups and the disappearance of several Nahua indigenous community members. In January 2020, ten indigenous musicians in Chilapa were murdered by members of Los Ardillos cartel. According to InSight Crime researchers, cartels such as Los Ardillos in Guerrero have become increasingly reliant on local communities for income, coinciding with the decline in demand for heroin. Local cartels instead have turned to extortion and kidnapping of indigenous residents and illegal mining in their communities for revenue.[226]

Risks to Journalists

Those who document and report cartel activities, such as journalists or even relatives seeking justice for their family members, are systematically punished by the cartels. Witnesses to cartel crimes are not protected by the Mexican government's practically defunct witness protection program, or by local authorities who routinely collude with the cartels in criminal activities. Mexico is one of the most deadly countries in the world for journalists, especially those who report on cartels, with 52 journalists murdered as a direct consequence of their work between 1992 and 2019. 2019 was a particularly violent year, with at least 12 journalists

[224] "Mexico missing students: Parents angry at military's obstruction," *BBC*, March 30, 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-60928062.
[225] Laura Reyes, "El crimen organizado ocasiona el cierre de decenas de escuelas en Guerrero," *Expansion*, Nov. 13, 2017, https://expansion.mx/nacional/2017/11/13/las-escuelas-en-guerrero-estan-cerradas-por-las-amenazas-del-narco.
[226] Henry Shuldiner, "Indigenous communities get no help against constant criminal threats," *Mexico News Daily*, May 17, 2022, https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/analysis/indigenous-communities-get-no-help-from-criminals/

killed. Victims range from well-known reporters like Miroslava Breach, whose body was left outside her home in Chihuahua with a note reading, "for being a loud-mouth" and signed by local cartel leader "El 80," to reporters in small towns who are often the only reporters around.[227]

These repercussions extend to concerned local residents or family members who share videos or information about cartel activities with neighbors, sometimes on local Facebook groups. In August 2019, 42-year-old Nevith Condés Jaramillo was found stabbed to death in Mexico state. Condés ran a news website there and posted stories on Facebook and YouTube. A month earlier, in just one week, three journalists were killed, two in the southern state of Guerrero and the other in Veracruz. Among these four reporters killed, two had reportedly sought help under Mexico's journalist protection program, which was created in 2012 to aid threatened reporters. Sara Lidia Mendiola, who runs a legal advocacy organization for journalists called Propuesta Cívica, says the protection program is insufficient: "In the current climate of violence taking over the country, it isn't enough."[228]

Similar criticism extends to the federal government's witness protection program, which has been drastically scaled back since 2012, leading to discontinued protection and sometimes the death of witnesses. In 2017, the Attorney General's Office revealed it had spent 210 million pesos ($10.7 million) on its protected witness program over 17 years but said that the program had not worked as alleged witnesses changed their stories or lied about what they had really seen. President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) responded by drastically cutting back the program, and by the end of his presidency, only 11 witnesses remained.[229] According to journalists, problems with the witness protection program include the lack of financial resources and public mistrust in the Attorney General's Office, which prevents potential witnesses from testifying. According to a 2016 article published in *La Jornada*, a Mexico City-based newspaper, "55 witnesses were withdrawn from the witness protection program for reasons ranging from the end of judicial proceedings to the death of the witness." The same source reports that the PGR (Attorney General's Office) indicated that 66 witnesses were being protected in 2012, 53 in 2013, 40 in 2014, and 11 in 2015.[230] One famous case illustrating the ineffectiveness of the witness protection program is that of

[227] Monica Campbell, "What it's like reporting in one of the world's deadliest places for journalists," *The World*, Oct. 10, 2019, https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-10-10/what-its-reporting-one-worlds-deadliest-places-journalists.
[228] Carrie Kahn, "12 Journalists Have Been Killed In Mexico This Year, The World's Highest Toll," *NPR*, Sept. 12, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/09/12/759882660/12-journalists-have-been-killed-in-mexico-this-year-the-worlds-highest-toll.
[229] Cat Rainsford, "Mexico Leaving its Protected Witnesses in Limbo," InSight Crime, Aug. 7, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-leaving-its-protected-witnesses-in-limbo/.
[230] Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Mexico: Criminality, including organized crime; state response, including effectiveness; protection available to victims, including witness protection (2015-July 2017)*, 21 August 2017, MEX105951.E, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/59c117d44.html

"Venus," a former Zetas collaborator, who refused to provide further evidence after authorities withdrew her security measures, telling the press, "My life and that of my family is at risk, due to the constant threats I receive."[231] The lack of state protection for witnesses and reporters of cartel activity is particularly concerning given the extent of government collaboration with the cartels, indicating that these witnesses may face retribution from local authorities or law enforcement as well.

Threats to Attorneys in Mexico

The *Los Angeles Times* has reported on the risks faced specifically by lawyers in Mexico, who have actively been recruited by cartels to become so-called "narco-lawyers" or "narcoabogados" and face dire consequences when resisting these demands. According to the *Los AngelesTimes'* report, "The evolution of narco-lawyers and the violence they increasingly face highlight the weaknesses of a judicial system that is all too often manipulated by powerful drug cartels." Many cartel members will hire dozens of lawyers at a time to help manage enterprises such as selling properties, paying smugglers and bribing police, in addition to representing the cartel leaders themselves when faced with convictions. According to Cesar Luis Vea Vea, president of a lawyers federation in Sinaloa, refusing to cooperate with narco clients can have deadly costs: "They don't want to hear explanations. They hire the lawyer and want a secure outcome, whatever it costs." According to Ricardo Ravelo, a Mexican journalist who published a book called *Los Narcoabogados* in 2006, "To take the case of an important [cartel] figure… is extremely risky."[232] Not only are lawyers at risk of retribution when refusing to work for cartels, but also from disgruntled clients unsatisfied with a case's outcome, or from members of rival cartels if they do in fact take on a cartel's case.

In 2014, two murders of high-profile lawyers representing narco clients occurred in Monterrey and Mexico City. Lawyers have also been slain in the states of Sinaloa, Guanajuato and Morelos. In March 2008, gunmen stormed a law office in the city of Guadalajara and killed seven attorneys. The firm represented one of El Chapo's sons and had defended General Jose de Jesus Gutierrez Rebollo, who was Mexico's drug czar until he was arrested in 1997 on charges of helping the Juarez cartel. A lawyer who was found dead in Guanajuato in August 2014 appeared in a YouTube video posted later in which he confessed to working for La Familia Michoacana demanding extortion payments from

[231] Cat Rainsford, "Mexico Leaving its Protected Witnesses in Limbo," InSight Crime, Aug. 7, 2019, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/mexico-leaving-its-protected-witnesses-in-limbo/.
[232] Ken Ellingwood and Tracy Wilkinson, "Mexico's 'narco-lawyers' risk everything," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 16, 2014, https://www.latimes.com/la-fg-mexico-lawyers12-2009oct12-story.html.

merchants and vendors of pirated CDs and other goods.[233] According to *InSight Crime*, an estimated 245 law firms closed their doors in Ciudad Juarez from 2009-2012 due to violence and threats from organized crime, cutting by 70 percent the number of law offices in the city. During the same time period, 50 lawyers were killed in the state of Chihuahua; none of their cases had been resolved by 2012.[234]

Mistreatment and Violence Towards Migrants in Mexico

Unfortunately, many migrants have been unable to relocate to other countries such as Mexico due to high rates of violence towards migrants and discrimination, as well as restrictive living conditions, while seeking employment and housing there. The presence of drug cartels and human trafficking networks throughout Mexico makes transiting the country extremely dangerous for many migrants, especially women, children and LGBT individuals. As Mexican anthropologist Gabriela Martinez-Castillo resumed in a 2020 article tracing the disappearances of Salvadoran and Honduran migrants in Mexico, "The new uses and meanings of disappearances and the strengthening of restrictive migration policies set the stage for the Central America-Mexico-United States area as the only place in the continent where systematic disappearances of immigrants takes place." Martinez-Castillo has found that Central American migration through Mexico is unique due to the rapidly changing profile of migrants passing through the country (the number of minors grew 73% from 2018 to 2019 while the number of migrant families grew 400%), the employment of changing migration strategies such as hyper-visible caravans, and high levels of violence and militarization by both the Mexican state and criminal groups throughout the country. These conditions have created a context where migrant disappearances are normalized, and recourse to justice for the loved ones of victims are few. Between 2010 and 2017 for example, the Forensic Database of Disappeared Migrants in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and México had registered 1,082 cases of disappeared migrants.[235]

As US immigration policy has become increasingly restrictive towards asylum-seekers and refugees, the current and past presidential administrations have also pushed the Mexican government to crack down on migration to and within Mexico in an attempt to restrict other nationalities from reaching the US southern border. According to Tyler Mattiace, Americas researcher at Human Rights Watch, the "outsourcing [of] US immigration enforcement to

[233] Ken Ellingwood and Tracy Wilkinson, "Mexico's 'narco-lawyers' risk everything," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 16, 2014, https://www.latimes.com/la-fg-mexico-lawyers12-2009oct12-story.html.
[234] Christopher Looft and Elyssa Pachico, "'Narco-Lawyer' Killings Highlight Risks of the Trade," InSight Crime, May 10, 2012, https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/narco-lawyer-killings-highlight-risks-of-the-trade/.
[235] Gabriela Martínez-Castillo, "Desafíos y tensiones en la búsqueda de migrantes desaparecidos de Honduras y El Salvador," *Íconos* XXIV, no. 67 (2020): 75-78.

Mexico has led to serious abuses and forced hundreds of thousands to wait in appalling conditions to seek protection."[236] Both apprehensions of migrants and refugee-status applications in Mexico have grown dramatically in recent years. In 2021 Mexico apprehended 307,569 migrants, the highest number ever recorded. The same year, a record 130,863 people also applied for refugee status, constituting the third-highest number in the world according to the United Nations refugee agency UNHCR.[237] In response to these growing numbers, Mexico's president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador has deployed over 30,000 National Guardsmen to apprehend undocumented migrants, while the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) remains backlogged and underfunded in reviewing refugee and asylum applications.

The Red Cross reported in 2021 that migrants in Mexico often encountered "collapsed shelters," in "overwhelmed" areas of the country near the Northern and Southern border where they face discrimination and are often unable to find economic relief or basic services.[238] Representatives of UNICEF Mexico have described abuses towards migrants in Mexico such as the separation of children from their families, use of disproportionate force against migrants by members of security forces, and the theft and destruction of migration documents. Other abuses suffered by migrants in Mexico as reported by the UN Refugee Agency included forced deportations and extortion by Mexican migration officials.[239] Recent tragedies such as the deaths of at least 40 migrants who burned alive in a Ciudad Juarez detention center on March 27, and the 46 migrants found dead in a tractor trailer in San Antonio, Texas after crossing through Mexico in 2022 point to some of the perils faced by migrants in Mexico.[240] In August 2023, 491 migrants mostly from Guatemala, including 277 children, were found in a walled compound in Puebla state, where smugglers often hide migrants until they are able to transfer them to the US border.[241] Despite frequent abuses by smugglers, such as kidnapping and sexual assault, those who work with disappeared migrants have noted that most often the victims are those that do not contract the services of a

[236] "Mexico: Asylum Seekers Face Abuses at Southern Border," Human Rights Watch, June 6, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/06/mexico-asylum-seekers-face-abuses-southern-border
[237] "Mexico: Asylum Seekers Face Abuses at Southern Border," Human Rights Watch, June 6, 2022, https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/06/06/mexico-asylum-seekers-face-abuses-southern-border
[238] "Cruz Roja advierte que la violencia en México y Centroamérica mantendrá los grandes flujos migratorios en 2022," *Voz de America*, March 24, 2022, https://www.vozdeamerica.com/a/violencia-en-mexico-y-centroamerica-mantendre-grandes-flujos-migratorios-/6500360.html.
[239] Maria de los Angeles Graterol, "Migración venezolana por México: sin escapatoria a la extorsión y la violencia," *TalCual*, Sept. 19, 2021, https://talcualdigital.com/migracion-venezolana-se-suma-a-las-caravanas-historicas-de-centro-america-mexico/.
[240] "At least 40 killed as fire tears through migrant detention center in Mexico border city," *CBS*, March 28, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mexico-fire-migrant-detention-center-ciudad-juarez-today-deaths-latest-news/
[241] "Mexico finds 491 migrants in vacant lot en route to U.S. — and 277 of them are children," *CBS,* Aug. 5, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mexico-finds-491-migrants-in-vacant-lot-on-route-to-u-s-277-are-children/

smuggler or "coyote," indicating that engaging in these expensive services is often the only means of protection while crossing through Mexico.[242]

A report released by Human Rights Watch in March 2021 detailed the abuses suffered by hundreds of Venezuelans interviewed while in Mexico at the hands of drug cartels, police and migration officials. Venezuelan migrants described to interviewers the difficulties they faced in obtaining documentation to enroll their children in school, receive medical attention or work to support their families. Various families were denied employment opportunities or medical attention even when they presented documentation of temporary residency or other legal status. At least half the migrants interviewed by Human Rights Watch had been extorted by police, migration officials or cartels while in Mexico, and many also reported kidnappings related to these extortion requests. The report concluded that "migrants in Mexico are exposed to sexual abuse, kidnapping, extortion, violence and psychological trauma."[243]

[242] Personal interview by Elliott Young and Kate Wackett of Claudia Pinto, office coordinator, Fundación para la Justicia, Aug. 3, 2023.

[243] Carlos Salinas Maldonado, "Migrantes venezolanos denuncian violaciones en México: 'No sé qué es peor, si estar aquí o en Venezuela,'" *El País*, March 5, 2021, https://elpais.com/mexico/2021-03-05/migrantes-venezolanos-denuncian-violaciones-en-mexico-no-se-que-es-peor-si-estar-aqui-o-en-venezuela.html.
"México: Abusos contra solicitantes de asilo en la frontera con Estados Unidos," Human Rights Watch, March 5, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2021/03/05/mexico-abusos-contra-solicitantes-de-asilo-en-la-frontera-con-estados-unidos.

Chapter Seven: Gender-Based Violence and Femicide in Mexico

Gender-Based Violence

Mexico has a long history of suffering from a patriarchal and *machista* culture that devalues women and sees women as easy targets of male sexual conquest. Customary laws and a weak judicial system in Mexico result in severe underreporting of sexual crimes and a lack of justice for those that do. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has found that women are more often the victims of serious crimes than men: women are victims in 82 percent of rape cases, 82 percent of human trafficking cases, 81 percent of human smuggling cases, 79 percent of sexual abuse cases, 79 percent of domestic violence cases, 71 percent of statutory rape cases, 56 percent of crimes against the family, and 83 percent of crimes against freedom.[244] While current President AMLO has insisted that his government is more humanist and feminist than prior administrations, the reality is that the number of disappeared women in Mexico has more than doubled in relation to his predecessor Peña Nieto's administration, and is eight times that of the number of disappeared women under former president Felipe Calderón.[245]

The legacies of capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy in Mexico have created a context in which women's bodies are seen as disposable, and violence towards women is systematic. The current militarization of the country, the explosion of violence related to the state's war against cartels, and the state's "permisiveness" and collusion with such violence has continued this legacy of violence against women.[246] The epidemic of femicide and gender-based violence has thus continued to be fueled by "rampant impunity, corruption at all levels of government, and a strongly held patriarchal ideology," according to Mexican writer Cristina Rivera Garza.[247] Carmen Contreras, a government researcher for

[244] Aradna Estévez, "Sexual and Domestic Violence: The Hidden Reason Why Mexican Women Flee their Homes," *The Conversation*, 27 Sept. 2016, http://theconversation.com/sexual-and-domestic-violence-the-hidden-reasons-why-mexican-women-flee-their-homes-65352.

[245] Ana Luisa Sánchez Hernández, Miguel Angel Martínez Martínez, and Francisco Díaz Estrada, *Gender-Based Violence in Mexico Narratives, the State and Emancipations*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2023.

[246] Ana Luisa Sánchez Hernández, Miguel Angel Martínez Martínez, and Francisco Díaz Estrada, *Gender-Based Violence in Mexico Narratives, the State and Emancipations*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2023.

[247] Cristina Rivera Garza, "On Our Toes: Women Against the Femicide Machine in Mexico," *World literature today* 94, no. 1 (2020): 51.

the Mexican Institute of Family and Population Research (IMIFAP), elaborates that "machismo" paved the way for gender-based discrimination in Mexico, resulting in disparities in opportunities from a young age in fields such as education and labor. By 2020, according to Ines de la Morena at Harvard University, there were 30% more men in corporate roles than women; women spent an average of 40 hours a week in domestic duties while men only spent around ten; and 75% of men reported being the head of the household.[248] Despite a growing economy in Mexico and pushes for economic and labor equality for women, women's safety and security have actually decreased and femicide rates continue to grow.

Rates of femicide have skyrocketed in recent years, indicating the problem is nowhere close to being solved. Mexico recorded the murders of 3,723 women in 2020, with only 940 of those murders investigated as femicides. In 2021, an average of ten women were murdered every day throughout the country- double the rate of five years ago.[249] The number of cases registered as femicides rose 2.66% in 2021 to a total of 1,004, and other gender-based crimes also spiked, due in part to household quarantines related to the Coronavirus pandemic. A record 23,909 domestic violence cases were reported in May 2021 and rape cases rose 28.1% from 2020 to 2021, with 21,189 cases reported.[250]

Case after case of violent femicides, many at the hands of intimate partners, have received public attention in recent years and have left women in Mexico on high alert. In 2020, Mexico's national statistics agency (INEGI) reported that two-thirds of women in Mexico had experienced some form of violence, and almost 44% had been abused by a domestic partner.[251] In 2019, hundreds of women and girls reported kidnapping attempts in the public metro system in Mexico City. Detectives investigating the kidnapping cases found that police officers designated to protect metro users were actually collaborating with the captors.[252] In August 2019, two teenage girls were raped by police in the capital

[248] Ines de la Morena, "GENDER VIOLENCE IN MEXICO: MACHISMO, FEMICIDES, AND CHILD'S PLAY," *Harvard international review* 41, no. 3 (2020): 14–17.
[249] David Agren, "Ten women and girls killed every day in Mexico, Amnesty report says," *The Guardian*, Sept. 20, 2021,https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/sep/20/mexico-femicide-women-girls-amnesty-international-report.
[250] "Ola de feminicidios en México continúa imparable: 1,004 muertes en 2021," *Forbes Mexico,* Jan. 21, 2022, https://www.forbes.com.mx/noticias-ola-de-feminicidios-en-mexico-continua-imparable-con-1004-muertes-en-2021/.
[251] "Estadísticas a propósito del día internacional de la eliminación de la violencia contra la mujer," INEGI, 23 Nov. 2020, https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/aproposito/2020/Violencia2020_Nal.pdf.
[252] Marisol Martínez, "Secuestros y feminicidios en México: Historias de Terror paralizan a las mujeres del país [Kidnappings and Femicides in Mexico: Terror Stories Paralyze the Country's Women]," *Lifeboxset,* Jan. 29, 2019, http://www.lifeboxset.com/nota/186419/secuestros-y-feminicidios-en-mexico-historias-de-terror-paralizan-a-las-mujeres-del-pais/.
David Fuentes, "Policías, cómplices de delincuentes en Metro: procuraduría [Police officers, accomplices of criminals in the Metro: attorney general's office]," *El Universal*, Jan 31, 2019,

city, sparking large-scale protests.[253] The gruesome murder of Ingrid Escamilla in February 2020, who was skinned and dismembered by her husband in Mexico City, sparked a new wave of outrage and protest over gender-based violence in the country.[254] The week after Ingrid's murder, seven-year-old Fátima Cecilia Aldrighett Antón's body was discovered in a plastic bag after she went missing four days earlier while waiting to be picked up from school.[255]

The president of the National Citizen Observatory of Femicides (OCNF) announced in 2019 that in 70% of femicide cases in Mexico the perpetrator is unknown to the victim, indicating that these murders could also reflect a criminal context. According to her organization, the president of OCNF Maria de la Luz Estrada has explained that authorities refuse to acknowledge the criminal organizations behind these gender-based crimes, and have also refused to acknowledge the connection between femicides and other crimes such as trafficking, creating even greater conditions of danger for women in Mexico. OCNF has further reported how state and municipal governments refuse to classify violent murders of women as femicides, or blame their deaths on "intrafamilial violence," thereby dismantling the little recourse to justice that exists for victims' families.[256] For female deportees, these violent threats against their well-being are often exacerbated, and many have no or few family members or community members to turn to.

Upon returning to their countries of origin, deported or repatriated women fall prey to many threats. In Mexico, structural violence against women is perpetuated by the traumatic threats, domestic abuse, sexual assault, and femicide that women face on a near daily basis. Upon return, many women must grapple with indefinite separation from family in the United States; permanent trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder; and the stigma and discrimination associated with presumptions that they abandoned their family

https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/metropoli/cdmx/policias-complices-de-delincuentes-en-metro-procuraduria?fbclid=IwAR2i4XW6kBYgeRQUWOgQUh-LivDVOF85jDYNri-GiEWnho2uXb4kT721JUs .

[253] "Mexicans march to vent anger over rape cases," *BBC News*, August 13, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-49327568.

[254] Mary Beth Sheridan and Gabriela Martinez, "A woman was killed and skinned. Now Mexico is up in arms." *Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/a-woman-was-killed-and-skinned-now-mexico-is-up-in-arms/2020/02/14/5a1f81f0-4f38-11ea-967b-e074d302c7d4_story.html.

[255] Keven Sieff, "The death of a 7-year-old girl in Mexico provokes new outrage," *Washington Post*, Feb. 18, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/the-death-of-a-7-year-old-girl-in-mexico-provokes-new-outrage/2020/02/18/44cf6416-51f2-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09_story.html.

[256] Andrea Vega, "Estado oculta feminicidios cometidos por crimen organizado y no investiga, acusan activistas de 23 entidades [State hides femicides committed by organized crime and does not investigate, accuse activists of 23 entities]," *Animal Politico,* Feb. 6, 2019, https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/02/estado-feminicidios-crimen-organizado-mexico/.

or engaged in sexual activity during their migration journey. Countless women are targeted, assaulted, and even killed by gang members or former partners within days of their return. In one case, an immigrant living without status in Texas was pressured to sign "voluntary return" documents after confrontations with U.S. Border Patrol in 2009. She was sent back to Mexico despite expressing genuine fears of violent retaliation by her abusive ex-husband, who was deported a year earlier. Shortly after, her remains were found in an incinerated car—the result of an apparent homicide perpetrated by her ex-husband.[257]

Sexual Abuse of Minors and Impunity in Mexico

Over the past years, sexual abuse of minors has increased by 39% in Mexico, with the number of registered cases rising from 2,081 in 2015 to 2,919 in 2018. The problem is nationwide, with cases registered in nearly every Mexican state, although the highest number of child sexual abuse cases in 2018 were registered in the State of Mexico. Juan Martín Pérez, head of the Network for Children's Rights (REDIM), claimed that "in eight out of every 10 sexual abuse cases against minors, the abuser is a family member." According to Pérez, Mexico's judicial system rarely takes minor's testimony into account: "Only the victim's parents or guardians are legally capable of filing a criminal complaint in said cases, even though sometimes the child's parents and guardians are behind the abuse." Pérez's organization REDIM has reported that only one out of every 10 crimes committed against minors has led to a sentence. According to Sandy Poiré, a director at Save the Children Mexico, "Violence against this segment of the population is usually ignored because abuse cases are often deemed 'a family matter'."[258]

In a study in 2000, the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy estimated that only 1 in 10 sexual crimes were reported in Mexico. In a 2007 article published in the *Review of International Studies*, Silvie Bovarnick examined the impediments to punishing sexual crimes in Mexico. For example, one of the major political parties, the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, National Action Party) opposed the implementation of a 1997 domestic violence law arguing that "conjugal violence did not exist" and that "marital rape" could not be conceived of as a

[257] Binh X. Ngo, "Women and LGBTQ Deportees Face Compounded Dangers Upon Return," Center for American Progress, August 10, 2018, https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2018/08/10/454637/women-lgbtq-deportees-face-compounded-dangers-upon-return/.

[258] Alexis Ortiz, "Child sexual abuse cases up 39% in Mexico," *El Universal*, April 30, 2019, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/child-sexual-abuse-cases-39-mexico.

crime.[259] Often the perpetrators of sexual violence are the Mexican authorities themselves, meaning victims cannot rely on the state or police for any protection.

Human Trafficking in Mexico

Human trafficking is a particular danger for women in Mexico, where sex trafficking cases rose by a third in 2019. According to government data, state authorities launched 515 trafficking cases that year, up from 385 in 2018. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) has said there could be between 50,000 and 500,000 victims of trafficking in the country, but many experts say the exact number is hard to pin down. Mario Luis Fuentes, an academic from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), has said that many trafficking cases are recategorized as homicides by underfunded prosecutors wishing to avoid difficult investigations.[260] The U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report from 2019 found that the most vulnerable groups to trafficking in Mexico included women and children, especially those working in commercial sex. The report also found increased participation by organized criminal groups such as cartels within trafficking operations since approximately 2014, and "the creation of complex alliances with federal, state, and local government officials in at least 17 of 32 states to commit trafficking and related crimes." Furthermore, the report stated that: "Observers, including Mexican legislators, noted links between violence against women and girls and between women's disappearances and murders and trafficking by organized criminal groups."[261]

Government officials reported in 2020 that a growing number of cartels had branched out into sex trafficking as criminal economies shift and certain businesses have become less lucrative. Examples include the Guanajuato-based Santa Rosa de Lima gang, which recently began transitioning from fuel theft to extortion and got involved in a table-dancing bar staffed by trafficked women. The Mexico City Tepito Union drug gang has similarly branched out to guard women forced into commercial sex, according to the head of Mexico's financial intelligence unit, Santiago Nieto. Nieto also stated that human trafficking is the third largest criminal activity in Mexico, after drug and arms trafficking.[262] A 2017

[259] Silvie Bovarnick, "Universal Human Rights and Non-Western Normative Systems: A Comparative Analysis of Violence against Women in Mexico and Pakistan," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Jan., 2007), p. 64-65.
[260] Christine Murray, "Mexico human trafficking cases rise by a third but many states found lagging," *Reuters*, Jan. 22, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mexico-trafficking-trfn/mexico-human-trafficking-cases-rise-by-a-third-but-many-states-found-lagging-idUSKBN1ZL2LY.
[261] U.S. Department of State, "Trafficking in Persons Report," June 2019, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Trafficking-in-Persons-Report.pdf.
[262] Reuters, "First drugs, then oil, now Mexican cartels turn to human trafficking," *NBC News*, April 29, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/first-drugs-then-oil-now-mexican-cartels-turn-human-trafficking-n1195551.

report from the Belisario Domínguez Institute of Mexico's Senate found that 47 criminal groups are involved in human trafficking in Mexico, primarily in Mexico City and 17 other states. According to the report, 45.4 percent of trafficking victims in Mexico are captured by people they know, 49.1 percent by unknown assailants and 5.5 percent by organized crime groups. Criminal networks have also increased their use of technology, primarily the internet, for recruitment, resulting in a growing number of minors involved in the sex trafficking trade.[263]

In Mexico, human trafficking relies on collaboration between political and business powers with organized crime groups. According to the Belisario Dominguez Institute report, criminal groups can pay between 25,000 and 80,000 pesos (between $1,300 and $4,400) to police agencies to freeze investigations into trafficking rings, and 800,000 pesos (around $44,000) to municipal authorities to stop enforcement operations. While the report found that Mexico has state, federal and international regulations on human trafficking, the fact that criminal groups are able to pay bribes to halt investigations and enforcement suggests that these legal mechanisms have done little to stop this industry.[264] Academic studies about sex work, especially in Northern border cities, have also found that police and other state authorities often charge bribes to sex workers themselves upon threat of imprisonment, and participate in routine abuses of sex workers including physical and sexual assault.[265]

According to the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, sex workers around the world have routinely reported police violence and brutality, including rape, extortion, kidnapping, illegal arrest and murder. These workers have often reported being coerced into providing sex to police in exchange for freedom from detainment, arrest and prosecution, indicating the levels of police corruption regarding sex work not only in Mexico, but around the world.[266] According to reports from the Mexican Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) and the UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (UN CMW), public officials, especially local and municipal police, but also personnel of the National Institute of Migration (INM) collude in or condone the crime of trafficking on a disturbingly frequent basis.[267]

---

[263] Parker Asmann, "Nearly 50 Groups Active in Human Trafficking in Mexico: Report," InSight Crime, Aug. 7, 2017, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/nearly-50-crime-groups-involved-human-trafficking-mexico-report/.
[264] Parker Asmann, "Nearly 50 Groups Active in Human Trafficking in Mexico: Report," InSight Crime, Aug. 7, 2017, https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/nearly-50-crime-groups-involved-human-trafficking-mexico-report/.
[265] Cepeda A, Nowotny KM, "A border context of violence: Mexican female sex workers on the U.S.-Mexico border," *Violence Against Women*. 2014 Dec. 20 (12):1506-1531. DOI: 10.1177/1077801214557955.
[266] "Documenting Good Practice by Sex Worker-Led Organizations," Global Network of Sex Work Projects, Dec. 2012, https://www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/DGP%20Violence.pdf.
[267] Lara Talsma, "Human trafficking in Mexico and neighbouring countries: a review of protection approaches," *U*N Refugee Agency Policy Development and Evaluation Service, June 2012, https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5142e3df2.pdf.

Lack of State Response to Gender-Based Violence and Femicide

In spite of the prevalence of violence against women in Mexico, state authorities have been slow to prosecute abusers. According to the Association for the Integral Development of Abused People (Adivac), they see 100 rape victims every week, yet only 15 percent of them file lawsuits. Most women do not file claims because the public prosecutors have a reputation for not believing women survivors, or blaming the women for having provoked the attack.[268] As one 2012 report by a Mexican human rights organization, the Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CMDPDH), put it, "There is a systematic pattern of impunity in Mexico, a reflection of the lack of access to justice for women. Frequently, victims are battered and discriminated [against] when trying to access the justice system. Mexico lacks a comprehensive institutionalized policy for granting access to justice for women and presents severe failures throughout all stages of criminal proceedings. A large majority of cases involving violence against women continue to go without a formal investigation, judgment and sanctions by the justice system, both at the federal and local level."[269]

The current administration of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) has verbally committed to prioritize combating violence against women, but in reality has fallen far short of its promises. Despite rising rates of femicide and gender-based crimes in general, the administration has decreased the budget for agencies such as the Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres (National Women's Institute) and limited the number of prosecutors working on these types of cases.[270] A report released by Amnesty International in 2021 explains how the Mexican state and the current administration specifically have been unable to effectively investigate and prosecute gender-related crimes, often forcing victims' families to gather evidence on their own while seeking justice. According to the report, "investigations by the State of Mexico Attorney General's Office into feminicides preceded by disappearances are seriously flawed due to the inaction and negligence of the authorities leading to evidence being lost, all lines of inquiry not being investigated, and a gender perspective not being applied correctly. These shortcomings hamper the judicial

[268] "Impunity: Sexual Abuse and Harassment Plague Mexico City," *El Universal*, 10 Apr. 2019, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/impunity-sexual-abuse-and-harassment-plague-mexico-city.
[269] Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir (CDD) and Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CMDPDH), "Femicide and Impunity in Mexico: A Context of Structural and Generalized Violence," 17 July 2012, https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/CDDandCMDPDH_forthesession_Mexico_CEDAW52.pdf
[270] "Ola de feminicidios en México continúa imparable: 1,004 muertes en 2021," *Forbes Mexico,* Jan. 21, 2022, https://www.forbes.com.mx/noticias-ola-de-feminicidios-en-mexico-continua-imparable-con-1004-muertes-en-2021/.

process and increase the likelihood that cases will remain unpunished."[271] Given these conditions of impunity, women cannot rely on police or the criminal justice system to protect them or to investigate once an assault has happened. Distrust of the police and a corrupt and weak judicial system mean that the government in Mexico cannot effectively provide for the safety of women or girls in the country.

[271] "Mexico: Failings in investigations of feminicides in the State of Mexico violate women's rights to life, physical safety and access to justice," Amnesty International, Sept. 20, 2021, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/mexico-failings-investigations-feminicides-state-mexico-violate-womens-rights-life-physical-safety-access-justice/.

Chapter Eight: Violence and Discrimination Towards LGBT People in Mexico

Discrimination and Marginalization of LGBT Mexicans

There is ample evidence to suggest that gay individuals residing in Mexico face significant social, cultural, and legal barriers to their personal safety and encounter regular employment and social discrimination. Studies by academics have documented these discriminatory practices as well as the mental health effects on queer individuals. Legal rules that would provide a measure of governmental protection are in practice routinely ignored. Between 1995 and 2013, 887 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people were killed for being part of that group, making Mexico the country with the second highest murder rate for LGBTQ people.[272] In just the five years following, 473 murders of LGBT individuals were reported, an average of 79 per year. Looking at the years 2013-2018, only 10% of these murders were classified as hate crimes and only 28% of the cases resulted in prosecutions.[273] By May of 2019, the number of recorded homicides of LGBT individuals during the presidency of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador had already risen to 28 in just under six months.[274] In January 2022, a lesbian couple from Texas was brutally tortured and murdered in Ciudad Juarez, the border town across from El Paso in the state of Chihuahua, demonstrating the ongoing violence against LGBT people in Mexico.[275]

This generalized hostility is felt by all queer individuals; a 2010 national poll showed that the number one fear of the LGBT community in Mexico is discrimination, followed by a lack of acceptance and bullying. The same poll also showed that the police and the Church were the main institutions that practiced discrimination.[276] At a 2011 meeting of the Legislative Forum for Lesbian Human Rights in Mexico, data was presented that showed the family to be

---

[272] Dora Maria Gaudalupe Talamonte Lemas and René Ricardo Fujiwara Montelongo, "A la cabeza! Mexico 2 lugar mundial en homofibia y transfobia," *SDP Noticias* , 26 May 2014, HTTP://WWW.SDPNOTICIAS.COM/GAY/2014/05/26/A-LA-CABEZA-MEXICO-2-LUGARMUNDIAL-EN-HOMOFOBIA-Y-TRANSFOBIA

[273] "En 5 años solo 10% de los asesinatos de personas LGBT se han investigado como crímenes de odio," *Animal Político*, May 15, 2019, https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/05/asesinatos-lgbt-crimenes-odio-mexico/.

[274] "Violencia hacia personas LGBT no disminuye con 28 muertes con López Obrador" *Agencia EFE*, May 17, 2019, https://www.efe.com/efe/america/mexico/violencia-hacia-personas-lgbt-no-disminuye-con-28-muertes-lopez-obrador/50000545-3979021#.

[275] Joshua Rhett Miller, "Investigate Gay Couple's Brutal Murder in Mexico as a Hate Crime, Advocates Say," *New York Post*, Jan. 20, 2022, https://nypost.com/2022/01/20/gay-couples-murder-in-mexico-should-get-hate-crime-probe-advocates/.

[276] "Ataques a gays y lesbianas por gente de su proprio sexo," *La Jornada* , 22 April 2011, http://conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=382&id_opcion=243&op=448

another prime sources of discrimination, with mothers being the most likely to punish their daughters for being lesbians.[277] Discrimination is experienced by LGBTQ people in hospitals, clinics, courts, prisons and in schools. In 2014, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights warned about the rise of attacks throughout the continent, and pointed out that a LGBTQ student group in Monterrey, Mexico that wanted to launch an antihomophobia campaign was denied permission to operate.[278] One sign of the general hostility toward LGBTQ individuals in Mexico is the fact that 5 to 6 of every 10 tweets that mention the words homosexual or gay are laced with insults.[279]

While Mexico is not alone among Latin American countries that harbor a social animus towards LGBTQ individuals, in Mexico the police and other authorities are frequent contributors to the violence and general hostility. Although Mexico City legalized gay marriages in 2009, in 2010 a regional politician in nearby Queretaro proposed making segregated areas for gays and lesbians in bars to avoid "spectacles."[280] The marriage equality laws in Mexico City do not reflect the reality for most gay people who face discrimination in their workplaces, at school, in clinics, on the street, and also often in their homes. Recent examples of violence in the supposedly queer-friendly capital city include the 2019 murder of Armando González by security guards at a gay club in July and attacks against bartenders and arson attempts at trans lesbian bar La Cañita in May of the same year.[281] The lack of anti-discrimination legislation combined with the weakness of LGBTQ civil society organizations in all of Mexico means that few cases of discrimination are ever brought to court and even fewer succeed in gaining justice.

Furthermore, academics such as Jairo Antonio López of the University of Zacatecas, have studied how despite the fact that Mexico ranks as one of the highest countries in Latin America for LGBT-friendly legislation and has a Supreme Court that has been progressive towards LGBT rights in the past decade, the centralization of political power has led to an unequal passing of progressive policies throughout the country. Since each local state government and congress enjoy relative autonomy from the centralized federal government in Mexico City, most states throughout Mexico have been slow to adopt LGBT friendly

[277] "Ataques a gays y lesbianas por gente de su proprio sexo." *La Jornada* , 22 April 2011, http://conapred.org.mx/index.php?contenido=noticias&id=382&id_opcion=243&op=448
[278] "La CIDH expresa preocupación sobre ataques a personas LGBTI y otras formas de violencia y restricciones impuestas a organizaciones LGBTI en las Américas," Press Release from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights *(CIDH)*, 27 Feb. 2014, http://www.oas.org/es/cidh/prensa/comunicados/2014/023.asp.
[279] "Twitter epicentro de homofobia y ataques a gays, lesbianas e indígenas en México," *RevolucionTresPuntoCero*, 13 April 2014, http://revoluciontrespuntocero.com/twitter-epicentro-de-homofobia-y-ataques-a-gayslesbianas-e-indigenas-en-mexico/.
[280] Homosexuales en México ganan derechos pero siguen en una "cápsula," *Vanguardia*, 17 Aug. 2010, http://www.vanguardia.com.mx/homosexuales_en_mexico_ganan_derechos_pero_siguen_en_una_capsula_-532329.html.
[281] María Fernanda Ruiz, "Zona Rosa: la constante violencia del personal de los bares," *Pie de Pagina*, July 13, 2019, https://piedepagina.mx/zona-rosa-la-constante-violencia-del-personal-de-los-bares/.

legislation, presenting extreme institutional resistance to these policies, and allowing conservative local governments to slow the progression of LGBT rights throughout the country.[282]

The marginalization of LGBTQ people in cultural and social status plays out in a lack of political and legal rights. For example, unlike the United States where there is a well-established network of non-profit groups to defend the rights of sexual minorities, queer people are largely absent from the political process in Mexico, especially in rural areas or far from the capital city. In the past decades, there have been efforts to reform discriminatory legislation towards queer individuals in Mexico. Despite some gains, including the legalization of gay marriage in Mexico City in 2009, gay people report continued harassment by police, disrespect by health workers and job discrimination. LGBT activists also face constant threats and attacks, exemplified by the high profile murder of three queer activists who were shot and left on the federal highway between Mexico City and Acapulco in June 2018.[283] The academic studies cited above along with frequent news reports and the high incidence of anti-gay homicide suggest that Mexicans still discriminate against the LGBTQ community and the government is unwilling or unable to provide protection for these groups.

Sexual Violence and Harm to the LGBT Community

Gay and trans individuals in Mexico are at exceptionally high risk for sexual violence and rape. A study conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees revealed that two thirds of LGBTQ individuals fleeing similar violence in Central America experienced sexual violence while seeking refuge in or passing through Mexico, revealing the high levels of abuse in the country.[284] Often the perpetrators of sexual violence and abuse of gay and trans individuals are the Mexican authorities themselves, meaning victims cannot rely on the state or police for any protection. Newspaper sources indicate that homosexuals often experience sexual abuse by police officers while being transferred to the Ministry of Public Security, with 80 of these cases reported in Durango within a fourteen-month

[282] Jairo Antonio López, "Los derechos LGBT en México: Acción colectiva a nivel subnacional," *European review of Latin American and Caribbean studies*, no. 104 (2017): 69–88.
[283] "Violencia hacia personas LGBT no disminuye con 28 muertes con López Obrador" *Agencia EFE*, May 17, 2019, https://www.efe.com/efe/america/mexico/violencia-hacia-personas-lgbt-no-disminuye-con-28-muertes-lopez-obrador/50000545-3979021#.
[284] "No Safe Place: LGBTI Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans Seeking Asylum in Mexico," Amnesty International, Nov. 27, 2017, https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/no-safe-place-lgbti-salvadorans-guatemalans-and-hondurans-seeking-asylum-in-mexico/.

period.[285] In Guerrero in 2012, two gay boys were detained by police and forced to remove their clothes and engage in sexual acts in front of police and other detainees while being photographed.[286] A 2010 study by the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination found that 43 percent of LGBT interviewees reported experiencing "threats, extortion or arrests by the police because of their sexual orientation."[287]

Not only are LGBT individuals targeted by police, but also by drug trafficking organizations, bigoted neighbors, or even strangers. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights has reported that between 2013 and 2014 in Mexico there were 42 murders of trans individuals, 4 violent attacks on lesbians, and 37 murders and two violent attacks of gay men, including a case of mutilation where the victim's eyes were torn out. Over 80% of the records from the 1,218 murders of LGBT individuals in Mexico from 1995 to 2014 revealed that the victims suffered various forms of aggression and sexual abuse before being killed. These crimes often go unpunished, as judges frequently write them off as "crimes of passion," or fail to resolve the case meaning no one is accused in the end.[288]

In 2001, researchers from the Universidad Autónoma de México did an in-depth study of over 500 lesbian, gay and bisexuals in Mexico City. The results show that gay men experience most discrimination in the workplace followed closely by abuse by police. The same study also showed that gay men are more likely to be victims of sexual assault than the general population. In particular, the report notes that the police in Mexico frequently extort money, detain and threaten gay people rather than protect their rights.[289] In 2007, prominent gay activist Agustin Humberto Estrada received verbal and physical attacks after attending a gay pride march wearing a dress and high heels. In 2008 he was fired from his job as a schoolteacher and when he and supporters rallied for his reinstatement, they were beaten by police. The next day he was taken to prison, threatened, and raped.[290] The government, therefore, rather than protecting the civil rights of gays and lesbians in Mexico is often the main perpetrator of discrimination.

---

[285] Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Mexico: Reports of sexual abuse committed by police officers against sexual minorities*, 13 September 2012, MEX104172.E, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/50753cfe2.html.
[286] Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Mexico: Reports of sexual abuse committed by police officers against sexual minorities*, 13 September 2012, MEX104172.E, available at: https://www.refworld.org/docid/50753cfe2.html.
[287] Transgender Law Center, "Report on Human Rights Conditions of Transgender Women in Mexico," Cornell University (May 2016) http://transgenderlawcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CountryConditionsReport-FINAL.pdf, p, 14, 16, 18.
[288] "The Human Rights Situation in Mexico," Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, December 31, 2015, http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Mexico2016-en.pdf.
[289] Luis Ortiz Hernández and María Isabel García Torres, "Effects of Violence and Discrimination on the Mental Health of Bisexuals, Lesbians and Gays in Mexico City, Cad. Saude Publica , Rio de Janeiro, 21 (3), May-June 2005, p. 915-923.
[290] 2009 Human Rights Report: Mexico Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, U.S. Department of State, March 11, 2010, https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/wha/136119.htm.

Given this patriarchal context and the general impunity for perpetrators of homophobic violence, it can be stated that LGBT individuals in Mexico are at high risk for violence due to their sexual orientation or gender expression, and can expect little to no protection for the police or other authorities. Furthermore, given the history of sexual assault and harassment by the police against gay and trans people, it is likely that these individuals could be further victimized by the police. Distrust of the police and a corrupt and weak judicial system in Mexico mean that victims of hate crimes usually have no recourse but to flee.

Healthcare in Mexico and HIV

HIV-positive individuals in Mexico often face stigma, discrimination and a lack of access to antiretroviral drugs. According to a report prepared by the National Institute for Public Health, common obstacles include preventing individuals from being tested, inhibiting people from seeking care and treatment, and hindering the access of people living with HIV to housing, education, employment and mobility. In Mexico, the study found, there is a general lack of knowledge about what rights HIV-positive individuals have, compounded by a history of impunity and a lack of sanctioning of those who failed to comply with the law.[291] Dr. Martha Patricia Ponce Jiménez of the Red Mexicana de Organizaciones Contra la Criminalización del VIH (Network of Mexican Organizations Against the Criminalization of HIV), wrote in 2021 that in spite of constitutional protections against discrimination based on health status, "strong stigma and discrimination still persists toward people with HIV in their workplaces."[292]

An article published in 2008 before the 17th International AIDS Conference held in Mexico City stated that "deep-rooted" homophobia in Mexico had deterred thousands of HIV-positive people from seeking treatment or getting tested. According to the article, a survey conducted by Mexico's National Commission for Preventing Discrimination found that only 40% of Mexicans would be willing to live with someone who is HIV-positive and only 20% would offer an HIV-positive person a job. Many HIV/AIDS patients complain of discrimination by doctors, including refusal to perform life saving operations, and a general lack of access to antiretroviral drugs.[293] Another study found that of the health care providers interviewed, 22% believed that homosexuality was the cause of AIDS in Mexico, 26% believed that men living with HIV are guilty of their condition, and 63% do not accept same

[291] Ken Morrison, "Breaking the Cycle: Stigma, Discrimination, Internal Stigma and HIV," USAID, January 2006, http://www.policyproject.com/pubs/generalreport/Breaking_the_Cycle.pdf.
[292] Dr. Martha Patricia Ponce Jiménez, Red Mexicana de Organizaciones Contra la Criminalización del VIH, "Alto a la discriminación laboral de las personas que viven con VIH en México!" AIDS Healthcare Foundation (Mexico), 2 March 2021, https://pruebadevih.com.mx/alto-a-la-discriminacion-laboral-de-las-personas-que-viven-con-vih-en-mexico/.
[293] "*Houston Chronicle* Examines HIV/AIDS-Related Discrimination, Stigma in Mexico," *Kaiser Health News*, August 5, 2008. https://khn.org/morning-breakout/dr00053718/

sex unions.[294] HIV-positive individuals in Mexico thus face discrimination and threats to their safety and wellbeing, including a potential lack of medical attention.

Given the association of homosexuality with HIV/AIDS in Mexico, all LGBTQ individuals can be perceived by the general society to be potential carriers of the virus and thus suffer discrimination. One national survey conducted in 2006 found that 23% of Mexican health professionals erroneously believed HIV/AIDS is caused by homosexuality, and 59% believed that homosexuality was a "risk factor" for HIV/AIDS.[295] Given this widespread belief even among health professionals, it is not difficult to imagine that a higher rate of the general public would hold these misperceptions and thus assume that any LGBTQ individual was HIV positive, and therefore would suffer discrimination as a result.

[294] "Stigma and discrimination toward persons living with HIV/AIDS in health services in Mexico: The case of men who have sex with men (MSM)." *NLM Gateway*, July 2004.
[295] "El combate a la homophobia: entre avances y desafiós," Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación (CONAPRED), 2013, p. 10-11, https://www.conapred.org.mx/documentos_cedoc/DocumentoHomofobia_ACCSS.pdf.

Chapter Nine: Healthcare, Education and Employment in Mexico

Healthcare in Mexico

Mexico's healthcare system is overburdened, underfunded and leaves millions of people without adequate access to services. In a review of Mexico's health systems in 2016, the OECD found that the share of the national health budget spent on administration and individuals' out-of-pocket spending on health care is the highest out of any country in the OECD, signaling a failure of the Mexican state to provide effective insurance and high-quality care. The report stated that without significant reforms, "Mexico runs the risk of maintaining a low-value health system that fails to address rapidly rising burdens of age-and lifestyle-related disease."[296] In 2020, Mexico's health expenditure was 5.46% of the country's GDP, falling far short of other OECD countries. Out-of-pocket costs in Mexico had decreased from 55% to 45% of health spending by 2020, but remains a significant burden for the population. In a 2023 Columbia Public Health report, researchers found that Mexico's infant mortality rate has decreased by 11.5% since 2009 but remains the highest in the OECD.[297] Life expectancy in Mexico was the lowest across all OECD countries in 2021, and avoidable mortality was also high.[298]

General hospitals and family care clinics often lack materials and medicines, causing doctors to cancel surgeries and change treatments according to the drugs available and not the patients' needs. Luis Guerrero, a professor of medicine at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), has described how the general hospital he worked at began to "cancel surgeries because there weren't enough sterilized clothes for the patients." Guerrero has also spoken out about the dangerous conditions created by overworking doctors in their last year of social service before they can practice. These social service intern doctors must meet a minimum number of patients monthly and work over 31 hours straight every third day, leading to exhaustion and malpractice.[299] Chronic underfunding in public hospitals means that there is a general lack of medical technology and shortage of services.

---

[296] "OECD Reviews of Health Systems: Mexico 2016," OECD, https://doi.org/10.1787/19901410 .
[297] "Comparative Health Policy Library: Mexico," *Columbia Public Health*, Jan. 10, 2023, https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/research/comparative-health-policy-library/mexico-summary.
[298] Health at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators. https://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance.htm
[299] "Public health doctors protest conditions in Mexico," *The Yucatan Times*, June 24, 2016, http://www.theyucatantimes.com/2016/06/public-health-doctors-protest-conditions-in-mexico/ .

Another issue within the Mexican healthcare system is that insurance coverage is divided based on employment, and the quality of and access to healthcare varies across different institutions, each with its own network of doctors, hospitals, pharmacies, etc. Each person covered by a different institution has access to different medicines, devices and services despite having equal rights to access healthcare under the Mexican Constitution.[300] In 2020, President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) terminated the most extensive public health insurance program in Mexico, Seguro Popular, which covered over 52 million people (about 75% of the uninsured population) throughout the country that were unable to access the state's social security program because of informal jobs or unemployment.[301] Still, according to NACLA, over 20 million Mexicans never enrolled in Seguro Popular. Moreover, data maintains that the Seguro Popular program failed to improve the public's general sense of wellbeing or the population's overall health.[302]

Currently, more than 25% of the population lacks access to medical insurance and social services provided by the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS) or the Mexican State Employees Social Security and Social Services Institute (ISSSTE), which cover federal employees and workers in the private sector. What replaced Seguro Popular, destined for those unable to access social security through their employment, were two programs, the Institute for Health and Wellbeing (INSABI) and the IMSS-Opportunities Program. The INSABI program involved establishing integrated networks of the major entities that made up the National Health Care System (IMSS, ISSSTE, Pemex and the individual state health care systems). However, a mere two years after the creation of INSABI, López Obrador abandoned the program and introduced MAIS (the IMSS-Bienestar Model of Integrated Health Care).[303]

INSABI's implementation was complicated by internal conflicts within the Department of the Secretary of Health and by the emergence of Covid-19. Due to decades of cuts in public spending, healthcare institutions lacked staff, equipment, and training.

---

[300] "Mexican Healthcare System Challenges and Opportunities," Manatt Jones Global Strategies, January 2015, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/mexican_healthcare_system_challenges_and_opportunities.pdf .
[301] Georgina Jimenez, "¿Quiénes están en riesgo con la llegada del INSABI?: Lo que sabemos sobre el extinto Seguro Popular," *Nexos*, Jan. 21, 2020, https://datos.nexos.com.mx/quienes-estan-en-riesgo-con-la-llegada-del-insabi-lo-que-sabemos-sobre-el-extinto-seguro-popular/.
[302] Carole H. Browner and Gustavo Leal Fernández, "The Mexican Health Care System Under the Administration of AMLO," NACLA, June 8, 2022, https://nacla.org/mexican-health-care-system-under-administration-amlo.
[303] Carole H. Browner and Gustavo Leal Fernández, "The Mexican Health Care System Under the Administration of AMLO," NACLA, June 8, 2022, https://nacla.org/mexican-health-care-system-under-administration-amlo.

Long-standing chronic problems reemerged, including low supplies of essential medicines and equipment, corruption, lack of medical specialists, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and inexperienced government officials responsible for managing public health care. What replaced INSABI, MAIS or IMSS Bienestar, is operated by IMSS through agreements with individual state governments, with states governed by the ruling party (MORENA) receiving priority. The lack of transparency that has accompanied MAIS's implementation has generated doubts about its viability. Additionally, many doctors are unwilling to move to different states where poverty and narco violence are rampant, creating a lack of personnel and specialists in these areas where the Bienestar program was meant to be implemented.[304] By the end of 2022, IMSS Bienstar had reached almost 22 million people, only a third of the way to the goal of reaching more than 65 million people. The lack of specialists in rural communities was so grave that Mexico accepted 124 Cuban specialist doctors to be placed in the states of Morelos, Tlaxcala, Michoacán, Guerrero, Colima, Oaxaca, Campeche, Veracruz, Nayarit, Baja California Sur, Zacatecas y Sonora.[305]

Experts have claimed that these programs are insufficient to provide coverage to all Mexicans, and lack a clear framework of operation. According to Felicia Marie Knaul, director of the University of Miami Institute for Advanced Study of the Americas, "The reduced supply of medicines, long waiting times and the perception of poor quality of public care explains why even those affiliated with social security turn to private doctors… In the absence of an explicit, well-defined financial protection instrument for comprehensive access to the public health system, millions have had to pay out of pocket or postpone care. Eliminating the Seguro Popular reintroduced a huge source of inequity between 'haves'–Mexicans with social security or private health insurance–and 'have nots' those who, solely by virtue of their place of work, lack financial protection in health."[306]

Although Mexico has a universal healthcare system, in reality it is made up of fragmentary services offered based on employment, and has been characterized by lack of funding and equitable access to all. A research paper written by Dr. Ricardo Daniel Corona González for the National College of Integrated Medical Specialists

[304] Carole H. Browner and Gustavo Leal Fernández, "The Mexican Health Care System Under the Administration of AMLO," NACLA, June 8, 2022, https://nacla.org/mexican-health-care-system-under-administration-amlo. Rodrigo Andrade, "IMSS-Bienestar to Cover All of Mexico by 2023," Mexico Business News, Aug. 15, 2022, https://mexicobusiness.news/health/news/imss-bienestar-cover-all-mexico-2023.
[305] "IMSS-Bienestar brinda servicios de salud a 21.8 millones de personas sin seguridad social," IMSS Press Conference, Jan. 23, 2023, https://www.imss.gob.mx/prensa/archivo/202301/023
[306] "Why Don't More Mexicans Have Health Coverage," *The Dialogue: Leadership for the Americas*, April 20, 2021, https://www.thedialogue.org/analysis/why-dont-more-mexicans-have-health-coverage/#:~:text=Today%2C%20at%20least%2020%20percent,or%20private%20health%20insurance%20scheme.

(COANEMI) in 2017 concludes that the healthcare system fails to provide access to adequate care for everyone in Mexico.[307] Mexico's investment in the healthcare system is also quite low compared with the US, $1,227 versus $12,318 in 2020, and it ranks third lowest among OECD countries for healthcare spending.[308]

Every researcher that has studied the Mexican healthcare system has come to the same conclusion, namely that there is a lack of adequate access to broad sectors of the population, especially those who work in the informal labor sector or are unemployed. Because access to social security is provided through employment in Mexico, returned migrants and the unemployed often lack access to medical care and social services more generally. Analyses published in a 2018 medical study at the University of North Carolina reveal a large and persistent gap in access to medical care between recent return migrants and non-migrants, despite rising overall health coverage in Mexico. According to the study, "multivariate analyses suggest that unemployment among recent arrivals contributes to their lack of insurance. Relative to non-migrants, recently returned migrants rely disproportionately on private clinics, pharmacies, self-medication, or have no regular source of care. Mediation analysis suggests that returnees' high rate of uninsurance contributes to their inadequate access to care."[309] Specialized care is available through private therapists and healthcare professionals, but the cost of those services is prohibitively expensive for the average worker in Mexico.

Mexico's inefficient and oversaturated healthcare system has seen additional strain since March 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. While official Mexican government figures had reported around 324,000 deaths related to Covid-19 as of May 5, 2022, a report published around the same date by the World Health Organization found that just between 2020 and 2021, over 626,000 deaths occurred in Mexico as a result of the pandemic. These numbers include deaths from other illnesses that went unattended due to hospital failures and over-saturation throughout the country. The director of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, signaled that these numbers reflect a need for greater investments in essential health systems, especially that of Mexico where the number of deaths related to hospital failures almost equals that of official Covid

[307] Dr. Ricardo Daniel Corona Gónzalez, "El sistema de salud en México: De la fragmentación hacia un sistema de salud universal," *CONAEMI*, 15 Jan. 2017, https://www.conaemi.org.mx/single-post/2017/01/15/El-Sistema-de-Salud-en-M%C3%A9xico-De-la-fragmentaci%C3%B3n-hacia-un-Sistema-de-Salud-Universal .
[308] OECD (2023), Health spending (indicator). doi: 10.1787/8643de7e-en (Accessed on 14 February 2023).
[309] Joshua Wassink, "Uninsured Migrants: Health Insurance Coverage and Access to Care Among Mexican Return Migrants," *PubMed*, Jan. 30, 2018, https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29657545/

deaths.[310] The OECD found in 2021 that Mexico experienced the highest excess mortality of OECD countries and significant disruptions to other care with Covid-19. Compared with the 2015-2019 average, all-cause mortality in 2020 and the first six months of 2021 rose by 54.8% in Mexico. The pandemic also resulted in a sharp rise in healthcare spending, a 9% drop in in-person doctor consultations, and the third lowest vaccination rate compared to other OECD countries.[311] As recently as December 2022, cases rose dramatically in what health experts referred to as a "sixth wave" of Covid contagion, which only began to decrease around the middle of January.[312] Almost seven thousand new active cases were reported in one week for a total of 20,642 active cases by December 13, 2022.[313]

Educational System

Despite former president Peña Nieto's promises for education reform after his 2012 election, corruption and lack of resources have continued to plague the education system in Mexico. According to the OECD, Mexico is the country with the third-largest number of young people who don't study or work, ranking last out of the 35 participating countries in education. As of 2017, 21 percent of children gave up education before the age of 14. In addition, eight out of every 100 kids who enrolled in elementary school didn't attend classes, approximately 50 completed middle school, only 20 graduated from high school and only two went on to postgraduate education.[314] Those that do reach a university level face over-saturated public institutions with up to 92% rejection rates, or low quality private institutions that lack basic facilities and mostly offer limited programming in accounting or business administration.[315] The first education census taken in Mexico during Peña Nieto's candidacy revealed that tens of thousands of salaries

[310] Maria Julia Castañeda, "La OMS calcula en más del doble de los registros oficiales el número de muertes por la pandemia en México," *El País*, May 5, 2022, https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-05-05/la-oms-calcula-en-mas-del-doble-de-los-registros-oficiales-el-numero-de-muertes-por-la-pandemia-en-mexico.html.
[311] Health at a Glance 2021: OECD Indicators. https://www.oecd.org/health/health-at-a-glance.htm
[312] Beatriz Guillen, "López-Gatell anuncia un descenso acelerado de la sexta ola de covid-19 en México," *El País,* Jan. 31, 2023, https://elpais.com/mexico/2023-01-31/lopez-gatell-anuncia-un-descenso-acelerado-de-la-sexta-ola-de-covid-19-en-mexico.html.
[313] "Sexta ola de COVID-19 en México avanza; estas son las medidas de protección y lo que debes saber," *El Financiero*, Dec. 14, 2022, https://www.elfinanciero.com.mx/salud/2022/12/14/sexta-ola-covid-19-en-mexico-medidas-de-proteccion-y-lo-que-debes-saber/.
[314] "Mexico: The Power of Early Education," *Al Jazeera*, January 4, 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/rebel-education/2016/12/mexico-power-early-education-161216172434103.html .
[315] Marion Lloyd, "Mexico's Universities Struggle to Respond to Demand for Degrees, *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* July 5, 2010, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Mexicos-Universities-Struggle/66143.

were being paid to retired or deceased teachers, indicating a high level of corruption among educators and government institutions. An education specialist from the Mexican Institute for Competitiveness has stated that, "No matter how rich or poor you are in Mexico, your education is bad or very bad. Jobs are given based on connections not merit, so quality doesn't matter."[316]

In addition, many teachers and schools in Mexico are unequipped to deal with individuals who have previously been educated in the United States. Rather than attempting to integrate and build on knowledge that students might know in English, teachers have opted for a "sink or swim" approach to speed up the process towards Spanish fluency. Bilingual education programs for English-speaking students aren't even an option in most schools, as less than 5% of public school teachers across Mexico are able to communicate to students in English.[317] On top of language difficulties, many students and parents have difficulties navigating Mexico's education system and most Mexican schools don't accept transcripts from the United States.

In 2014, the Peña Nieto administration launched the initiative *Somos Mexicanos* (We are Mexicans) with the goal of helping returned citizens to reintegrate socially and economically. However, critics and returned migrants said that the initiative had a minimal impact, and it was effectively canceled in 2019 because it "didn't work," according to the director of the Institute for Mexicans in the Exterior.[318] Maggie Loredo, director of a non-profit organization, Otros Dreams en Acción, told me that since *Somos Mexicanos* ended, there is virtually no support for returning Mexicans.[319] While past government plans promised to facilitate the economic and social reintegration of returnees, in effect they are still stigmatized and often unable to finish schooling or find work in Mexico. Anyone returning to Mexico between March and June of 2015 did not even have the option of obtaining a voting card from the National Institute of Elections, the primary form of ID, because of restrictions imposed during the months before an

[316] Nina Lakhani, "'The help never lasts': Why has Mexico's education revolution failed?" *The Guardian*, August 15, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2017/aug/15/the-help-never-lasts-why-has-mexicos-education-revolution-failed .
[317] Claudio Sanchez, "'Invisible' Children: Raised in the U.S., Now Struggling in Mexico," *NPR*, November 2016, https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/11/13/498271392/invisible-children-raised-in-the-u-s-now-struggling-in-mexico .
[318] Edmundo Morelos, "Crearán nuevo plan para migrantes repatriados; 'Somos Mexicanos' no funcionó," *SDP Noticias,* March 14, 2019, https://www.sdpnoticias.com/nacional/2019/03/14/crearan-nuevo-plan-para-migrantes-repatriados-somos-mexicanos-no-funciono.
[319] Maggie Loredo, interview, 26 July 2019, Tepoztlán, Mexico. For more on Otros Dreams en Acción, see Cristina Hernandez, "Otros Dreams en Acción: What Happens After Deportation," *Prospect: Journal of International Affairs at University of California, San Diego*, 4 Dec. 2018, https://prospectjournal.org/2018/12/04/otros-dreams-en-accion-what-happens-after-deportation/.

election, meaning returnees were forced to live without documentation in their own country.[320] Although these measures have been altered in subsequent years, current integration efforts still fail to attend to the needs of returning students.

Many returned youth have lost years of schooling because of unreasonable requirements for notarized documents that would have to be obtained in the United States. Some of that red tape has been cut in response to activists' demands; however, once in school many students still face language and social barriers. Some community organizations have tried to combat these issues, but they get no backing from the Mexican government and there are still institutional barriers to recognizing U.S. educational credentials in schools. These programs additionally are unable to resolve the issue of the lack of social or cultural links to Mexico many US-born individuals face when returned. The lack of social linkages leaves this population unsure of how to later search for jobs, access education, or live within the Mexican context. Some civil society groups have tried to fill the gaps that government initiatives left open, but many of these organizations revolve primarily around finding jobs or other economic opportunities.[321] Thus, while there is a general federal reintegration program, it has failed to attend to the specific needs of current students returning to Mexico.

Special Education in Mexico

Special education services are scant and expensive in Mexico, meaning they are inaccessible to most of the population, particularly those with a low socio-economic status. Despite the fact that disabled people in Mexico make up 6.6% of the total population, there is an acute lack of services and educational opportunities for those living with various disabilities. Almost a third of disabled children in Mexico don't attend school, and those that do have an average attendance of 4.7 years, half the national average. Less than half of disabled children in Mexico have attended at least one year of basic education and only 5.2% go on to attend higher education.[322] In all of Mexico, there are a limited number of schools that are able to accommodate learning impaired students

[320] Alexandra Délano Alonso, "Mexico supports its 'migrant heroes' in the U.S., but ignores them when they get deported," *LA Times*, May 4, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-delano-alonso-mexico-deportees-20180504-story.html.
[321] Rachel Schmidtke and Raquel Chuayffet, "Reintegrating Returned Mexican Migrants through a Comprehensive Workforce Development Strategy," *Forbes*, Aug. 22, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/themexicoinstitute/2018/08/22/reintegrating-returned-mexican-migrants-through-a-comprehensive-workforce-development-strategy/#3cc972c666ff.
[322] Judith Pérez-Castro, "Can Mexico achieve an Inclusive Education? An Analysis of Higher Education Policies of Recent Decades," *American International Journal of Social Science,* November 2014, http://www.aijssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_6_November_2014/10.pdf.

and even fewer that go past middle school. Public education services generally aren't able to provide efficient language development or programs to allow those with disabilities to satisfy their basic communication needs, leaving only the option of paying large sums for private tutoring or special programs.[323]

The general state of the Mexican educational system is poor and it is a complete failure for children with special needs. A study published by the National Autonomous University (UNAM) in Mexico concluded that if the decentralization of the educational system in Mexico "was a failure for the whole educational system, it was a catastrophe for the education of handicapped children."[324] It is not often that academics use words like "catastrophe" to describe anything, let alone an educational system. Mexican government statistics also prove the lack of special education opportunities for students. According to this data, 45 percent of children with handicaps are unable to find schools, either public or private, that will take them. One-quarter of handicapped children over 15 years of age don't know how to read or write, and 60 percent of hard-of-hearing students over age 15 simply don't attend school.[325]

There is extremely limited access to special education in Mexico, and all of the examples I could find were of expensive private schools offering special education. The State Department's document, "Overseas Schools Offering Support to Children with Special Needs 2017-2018," makes it clear that "schooling for children with special needs in overseas locations is not comparable to that available in the United States." Furthermore, this list includes schools in US border towns such as El Paso, Texas, that would not legally be available to children living in Mexico, and the rest of the schools listed are private schools oriented toward the expat community in Mexico. In other words, none of the schools listed in this document are part of the public educational system in Mexico, demonstrating the absence of such educational access in the public system.[326] This document shows that special educational services in Mexico are only available in private schools, and only accessible to people with sufficient resources to pay tuition.

The tuition at private schools in Mexico is simply out of reach for average Mexican workers, and therefore they cater to wealthy Mexicans or expatriate communities in

[323] Instituto Pedagógico para Problemas del Lenguaje, 2018, http://ippliap.edu.mx/boletin/.
[324] Clara Lourdes Meza García, "la educación de los niños y las niñas con discapacidad en México: algunos elementos para su análisis," https://www.uam.mx/cdi/pdf/publicaciones/prim_inf/educacion.pdf, p. 77.
[325] Georgina Navarrete, "La inclusión educativa no existe en México," *Milenio* 5 Aug 2016, https://www.milenio.com/estilo/la-inclusion-educativa-no-existe-en-mexico.
[326] US State Department, "Overseas Schools Offering Support to Children with Special Needs 2017-2018," https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/176076.pdf .

Mexico. For example, tuition at the American School in Guadalajara (one of the schools listed on the State Department's document), ranges from over 10,000 to over 15,000 pesos per month, which is between 500 and 800 US dollars per month.[327] The 2023 minimum wage in Mexico is about $10.60 US dollars a day.[328] This means that the average monthly salary in Mexico is approximately 319 US dollars, while monthly tuition at a private school is between 500 and 800 US dollars. There is simply no way for an average worker in Mexico to afford private school tuition.

Employment and Standard of Living in Mexico

Compared to the United States, unemployment is high and many jobs are extremely low paying in Mexico, especially due to the economic crisis triggered by the Coronavirus pandemic. On January 1, 2023, the Mexican government raised the daily minimum wage 20% from the 2022 rate to approximately $10.60 USD ($319.14 USD monthly).[329] The wage remains far below U.S. levels however, and also follows a marked uptick in inflation during 2021 and 2022. According to a study conducted by the Iberoamerican University that considers the wages necessary in order to exceed the poverty line, these wages are not enough to allow a family of four to leave poverty indefinitely. The report points out that in the last 25 years, income of employees has remained virtually the same since in 1992 53.8% of the population was below the poverty line, while in 2016 a little over 50% of Mexicans are in the same situation, caused by a continuing decline in purchasing power for these wages. The researchers concluded that an ideal daily minimum wage for the head of a family of four should be the equivalent of approximately $18 USD, instead of the current wages which are equal to the poverty line.[330]

The average base salary in 2021 for an entry level manufacturing worker in Mexico was approximately $3.50 (USD) per hour, well below the average federal U.S. minimum wage of $7.25 (USD) per hour. Additionally, even for skilled workers, wages in Mexico are approximately $6 - 7 (USD) per hour, compared to an average of $16 – 18 (USD) per hour for similar positions in the U.S.[331] According to Mexican economist Valeria Moy,

---

[327] The American School, Foundation of Guadalajara, March 2019 Tuition, http://www.asfg.mx/admissions/tuition.aspx

328"México recibe 2023 con aumentos al salario mínimo y a los días de vacaciones," Swiss Info, Jan. 1, 2023, https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/m%C3%A9xico-trabajo_m%C3%A9xico-recibe-2023-con-aumentos-al-salario-m%C3%ADnimo-y-a-los-d%C3%ADas-de-vacaciones/48174854#:~:text=%E2%80%9CHoy%2C%201%20de%20enero%20de,6%20d%C3%B3lares)%22%2C%20explic%C3%B3..

329 "México recibe 2023 con aumentos al salario mínimo y a los días de vacaciones," Swiss Info, Jan. 1, 2023, https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/m%C3%A9xico-trabajo_m%C3%A9xico-recibe-2023-con-aumentos-al-salario-m%C3%ADnimo-y-a-los-d%C3%ADas-de-vacaciones/48174854#:~:text=%E2%80%9CHoy%2C%201%20de%20enero%20de,6%20d%C3%B3lares)%22%2C%20explic%C3%B3..

[330] Teresa Moreno, "Ideal daily minimum wage in Mexico: MXN $353, according to study," *El Universal*, July 1, 2018, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/ideal-daily-minimum-wage-mexico-mxn353-according-study.

[331] "Mexican Labor Rates," *Ivemsa*, 2021, https://www.ivemsa.com/manufacturing-in-mexico/mexican-labor-rates/.

factors such as meager wages and hiring practices such as short-term contracts, or underreporting income for tax purposes, keep the majority of Mexican workers in the informal labor market. Fifty-six percent of Mexico's workforce is informal, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), lacking benefits such as medical care or social security because of short-term contracts. In 2019, even the over 17 million formal workers only made between one and two times the minimum wage, according to INEGI, indicating that neither formal nor informal jobs in Mexico provide financial stability.[332] Data published by the OECD has shown that Mexican workers labored 2,327 hours on average during 2014, far ahead of the 1,796 hours worked by Americans. Those workers, however, were only paid $12,850 (based on purchasing power parity) during the year, which ranks at the bottom of the OECD's list. Americans earned $57,139 during the same period.[333]

Aside from low wages, workers with certain limitations including age, disability or lack of education often face discriminatory practices in hiring. According to the Association against Employment and Workplace Discrimination by Age or Gender in Mexico, 55 percent of private and government companies require that applicants be a maximum age of 35. Meanwhile, only 10 percent will even consider applicants over 50. A report prepared by the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) in Mexico showed that 90 percent of job openings posted exclude individuals over 35 years, and 10 percent offer low-paying jobs which don't consider the academic background of the applicant.[334]

Social protections and services in Mexico have been found to have significant gaps in coverage, overlaps in beneficiary lists, and fragmented programs. Around 40 percent of households with children/adolescents and a head (or spouse) of household of working age did not have social protection in 2018, higher than the average in Latin America. Overall social assistance spending in Mexico declined from 2.5 percent of GDP in 2015 to around 1.8 percent of GDP in 2018, with considerable variation across states. While AMLO's administration has developed new social service programs and revamped some old programs, researchers at the International Monetary Fund have found that coverage and lack of sufficient benefits continue to be the largest problems plaguing these social

[332] Suman Naishadham, "Mexico's new minimum wage: Thanks for trying," *Al Jazeera*, Jan. 31, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/1/31/mexicos-new-minimum-wage-thanks-for-trying.
[333] Christopher Woody, "Mexico's wage crisis is so bad 'that it violates what's stipulated in the Constitution'," *Business Insider*, Aug. 2, 2015, https://www.businessinsider.com/mexicans-get-paid-less-for-their-work-than-any-other-developed-country-2015-7?r=MX&IR=T.
[334] Suzzete Alcántara, "Mexicans over 35 are denied job opportunities," *El Universal*, Aug. 17, 2017, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/english/mexicans-over-35-are-denied-job-opportunities.

programs.[335] Given the prevalence of wage and employment discrimination, the lack of fair wages in general, and the lack of social services, programs, and access to healthcare, those returned to Mexico clearly cannot rely on government assistance to support themselves and their families.

[335] Juan Pablo Cuesta Aguirre and David Bartolini, "Social Spending in Mexico: Needs, Priorities and Reforms," International Monetary Fund (IMF e-library), Oct. 18, 2021, https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/journals/001/2021/244/article-A001-en.xml.