

Insecurity in Mexico

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Guadalupe Pérez/Reuters

"Missing"

INTRODUCTION

Since mid-1994, public security has become one of the recurring issues on the country's political agenda. However, amidst the myriad speeches touching on the issue, full of contradictions and confusion, grievances and complaints, two apparent certainties do stand out: people think it is both on the rise and out of control.

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In addition to the effects of crime on its direct victims, indignation and the inability to find answers has led to a social ethos of toughening up the criminal justice system and a stronger false dichotomy between safeguarding security and protecting civil rights. Therefore, we need to think carefully, going beyond anger, and at the same time avoiding naive positions about the limits and scope of an effective crime policy, capable of situating the problem in the framework of full respect for constitutional guarantees.

Although there are ample reasons to give credence to the importance of the issue in current public discussion (among them, that the existence of a single victim should suffice to render the question of crime important), a look at the facts allows us to hypothesize that there is a significant disproportion between the real magnitude of the problem and the way in which it has been socially constructed and regulated in terms of values. In the space available to me here, I cannot go through all the arguments relevant to this discussion,

some of which I have already developed in other writings.¹ However, it seems relevant to present some of them to prove that insecurity, in terms of statistics and other objective indicators, has not only not increased, but has even tended to decline. Without a doubt, I cannot interpret this tendency as the result of state policy, or attribute it at this time to any other macro-ten-

dency, and for that reason, I will leave that part of the analysis for a later essay. I believe, however, that this analysis can stimulate the debate about a central question: the fact that the figures are frequently used to create an apparent consensus around the idea that crime is on the increase and out of control, with the risk of crime policy being based on that premise.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE
RESEARCH ON CRIME

Without discussing the limits of empirical information in terms of compatibility, trustworthiness and validity, research results in recent years are the most objective indicator of the size of the problem. To present the most complete image possible of insecurity, it seems to me that it is a good idea to simultaneously offer official data, the results of surveys on victimization and the data obtained in these studies about unrecorded crime and the perception of insecurity.

According to Zepeda Lecuona, the average 4,412 daily criminal complaints received nationwide put the country over the international average of 4,047. Mexico's homicide rate (14.8 per 100,000 inhabitants) puts it among the world's top ten countries and among the top four in Latin America. The states with the highest crime rates are Baja California, Mexico City and Quintana Roo.²

A Mexican Republic Businessmen's Confederation (Coparmex) study says that most offenders are arrested and charged with crimes like robbery and assault, and the states with the greatest concentration of alleged offenders per 100,000 inhabitants are Sonora, Baja California, Baja California Sur, Colima and Tamaulipas.³ It is of note that between 1980 and 2000 nationwide, the number of alleged criminals grew three times more than the population.⁴ The same organization documented 345 cases of kidnapping in 2002, 160 committed in Mexico City.⁵ If we include cases that go unreported, but are known to the organization, the figures jump to 642 nationwide and 230 in the capital (see table 1).

TABLE 1
INSECURITY NATIONWIDE 2000-2002

INDICATOR	MAGNITUDE
Crime rate (2000)	4,412 a day on average
Homicide rate (2000)	14.8 homicides a year per 100,000 inhabitants
Kidnappings (2002)	345 reported in the year; 642 committed in the year
Victimization level (2002)	3.7 million people in 2002
Percentage reported (2002)	17%
Number of crimes not reported (2002)	3,071,000
Perception of insecurity	44% feel somewhat or very insecure

According to statistics and other objective indicators, insecurity has not only not increased, but has tended to decline.

TABLE 2
INSECURITY IN MEXICO CITY'S FEDERAL DISTRICT
JUNE-AUGUST 2004

INDICATOR	MAGNITUDE
Crimes reported (daily average, major crimes)	257 (July)
Homicides (daily average)	2 (July)
Victimization level	16% (June/August)
Percentage reported	16% (June/August)
Number of crimes not reported	1,018,860 (June/August)
Perception of insecurity	32% (June/August)

To complete the picture, we have to include the results of victimization surveys, which give us a more realistic idea of the magnitude of the problem. The last survey by the Citizens Institute for the Study of Insecurity (ICESI) showed that 3.7 million people were the victim of some crime in the first half of 2002, but that only 17 percent of them made a formal complaint.⁶ Based on these figures, we can say that the 3,071,000 crimes went unrecorded in that period.

Finally, an important component of insecurity is the public's perception. From the ICESI survey, we can also conclude that at least 44 percent of those polled said they felt somewhat or very unsafe in their area.

To compare, we can look at what is going on in Mexico City, with the nation's second highest crime rate according to Lecuona's figures, and the highest number of kidnappings according to Coparmex.

In July 2004, the capital's District Attorney's Office figures show that an average 257 of what it considered major crimes crossed its desk every day. Among them, we have two homicides, 86 stolen cars, 36 robberies of businesses, 19 robberies of homes and 55 muggings, as well as at least three rapes.⁷

Data from the quarterly victimization surveys by the *Reforma* daily newspaper shows that in August 2004, victimization in Mexico City was 16 percent, which means that at least three out of every 20 persons were the target of a crime.⁸ The survey also reports that 74 percent of victims did not report the crime. Thus, taking into account the population of Mexico City's Federal District (8,605,239, according to the last census), we can say that in

TABLE 3
VARIATION NATIONWIDE AND IN MEXICO CITY
2001-2002

INDICATOR	VARIATION 2001-2002	
	NATIONWIDE	MEXICO CITY*
Level of victimization	-12%	+16%
Percentage reported	-32%	+ 8%
Percentage of unreported crimes	+ 3%	+16%
Perception of insecurity	-6.3%	+ 6%

* Variation of averages of indicator according to *Reforma* newspaper surveys for those years.

A distorted image of insecurity
makes the public sure that maximizing sentences
is the way to fight crime.

that quarter, at least 1,376,838 people were victimized, and, of these, 1,018,860 did not report the crime.

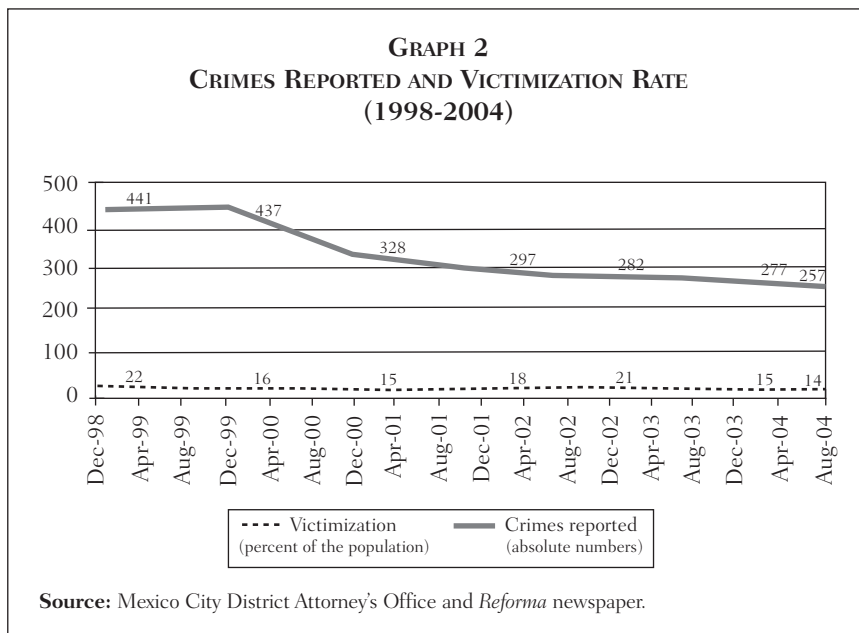
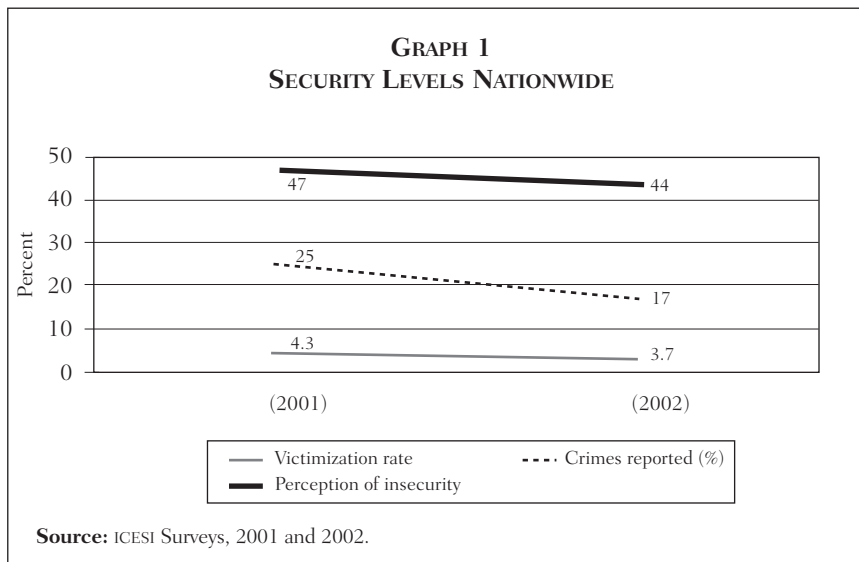
The last *Reforma* survey indicates that 32 percent of those polled thought that insecurity had gotten worse since 2003 (see table 2).

These figures give us a clear idea of the current magnitude of the problem, but they say very little about its gravity, which is a difficult indicator to measure except by using comparative methods. For practical purposes, a reference point for the severity of the phenomenon can be one or two measurements that can be compared with the size of the same variable in the past. On a national level, the results of the recent ICESI survey can be compared with those of the first ICESI poll a year before.⁹ Both the Mexico City District Attorney's Office and *Reforma* have kept a record on the city for several years, so that data can also be compared.

Thus, the ICESI studies state that in 2001, 4.2 million people nationwide

were victims of a crime, while in 2002, the figure dropped to 3.7 million. In 2001, 25 percent of victims reported the crime, while in 2002, only 17 percent did, indicating that what increased in that period was not the level of victimization, but the number of crimes that went unrecorded, going from 2,972,230 to 3,071,000. There was also a drop in the perception of insecurity, since the number of people who felt somewhat or very unsafe in their areas dropped from 47 percent in 2001 to 44 percent in 2002 (see graph 1).

In Mexico City's Federal District, according to *Reforma*, between 1998 and 2004 the annual average victimization rate dropped from 24 percent to 14 percent.¹⁰ That is, according to official figures, over the same period, the number of crimes reported dropped from 441 a day in 1998 to 277 in 2003, a decrease of 37 percent (see graph 2). With regard to the public's perception of insecurity, *Reforma* has been able



to document minimal variations between December 2000 and August 2004, showing that an average of 25 percent of those polled think the city is more unsafe. Thus, we can suppose that at least three out of every four people think that it is safer or more or less the same.

Putting aside objections about data-gathering methods, we can still make a new comparison of the size of the variation between national figures and

those of the capital for 2001-2001 (see table 3).

The data from this table allows us to conclude that, at least in Mexico City, the indicators have increased. However, even though the general trend from 1998 to 2004 was a decline, some increases were registered. Unfortunately, we still do not have the national data for 2003 and 2004, which would enable us to evaluate the variation in insecurity throughout the country and

compare it with what seems to be a notable reduction in insecurity in Mexico City. In any case, generally speaking according to the data presented here, insecurity seems to be on the decline and to a certain extent under control.

CONCLUSIONS

I have tried to show in general terms that the interpretation of insecurity figures depends to a great degree on our reading of them. A focus on a cross-section could offer an alarming scenario, but in and of itself it is not enough to calculate the gravity of the problem. A longitudinal reading, on the other hand, offers parameters for comparison that show how the phenomenon changes with time, but depending on the time period chosen, it may hide or show the peaks and valleys that may be decisive for understanding it. To use a well-known metaphor, the idea is to choose between looking at a photograph (the sequence we like the best) or the whole film. From the point of view of someone evaluating this data, the idea is also to take responsibility for what that choice implies, particularly if the judgment made based on it will determine the kinds of measures that should be taken to restrict the phenomenon.

The hypothesis born of this provocation is that, as has already been stated, to put together the value judgments in the discourse about insecurity, reasons are used that only instrumentally refer to the state of insecurity to strengthen their arguments. The problem arises when the possibility of generalizing public or private debates emerges from these arguments, on a level of communications, society, the

economy and politics. When these debates present a distorted image of insecurity, they make the public sure that the only way to fight against increased, uncontrolled crime is by maximizing prison sentences, even if this implies limiting rights.

Considering all of this, my conclusion is that public policies on matters of security and criminal justice cannot be based on the data offered by a changing criminal situation for the simple reason that this would imply making these policies into contingent responses. The criteria for validating that public policy, as we know, are in the Constitution, which establishes the limits and scope that both crime preven-

tion and the administration of justice must not exceed. **MM**

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Luis González Placencia, "La concepción sistémica de la seguridad en México (o la secreta adscripción del discurso preventivo a la razón de estado)," *Nueva Sociedad* 167, May-June 2000, pp. 87-98; and "El modelo de la seguridad, contra el sistema de justicia penal," *Diálogo y debate de la cultura política* 12, April-June 2000, pp. 53-75.

² Guillermo Zepeda Lecuona, "Entre la delincuencia y la impunidad: el desempeño de las instituciones de procuración de justicia penal frente a los desafíos de la seguridad ciudadana," *Debate* 4 at http://www.debate.iteso.mx/numero_4/index.htm

³ Centro de Estudios del Sector Privado, A.C., "La inseguridad pública en México," *Entorno* (September 2002), available at <http://www.coparmex.org.mx/contenidos/publicaciones/Entorno/2002/sep02.htm>

[coparmex.org.mx/contenidos/publicaciones/Entorno/2002/sep02.htm](http://www.coparmex.org.mx/contenidos/publicaciones/Entorno/2002/sep02.htm)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://icesi.org.mx/icesi-org-mx/images/contenidos/secuestros2002.gif>


⁶ ICESI, Segunda encuesta nacional sobre inseguridad en las entidades federativas, 2002, at <http://icesi.org.mx>

⁷ <http://www.pgjdf.gob.mx/estadisticas/index.asp>

⁸ P. Méndez, "Salen con miedo al hampa," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 16 August 2004.

⁹ ICESI, Primera encuesta nacional sobre inseguridad en las entidades federativas, 2001 at <http://icesi.org.mx>

¹⁰ J. Carrasco and J. Abreu, "Inseguridad: más miedo que delitos," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 12 December 2000, and P. Méndez, "Temer ir a cajeros," *Reforma* (Mexico City), 13 November 2003.



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