

Homicides and Organized Violence In Mexico, 1990-2008¹

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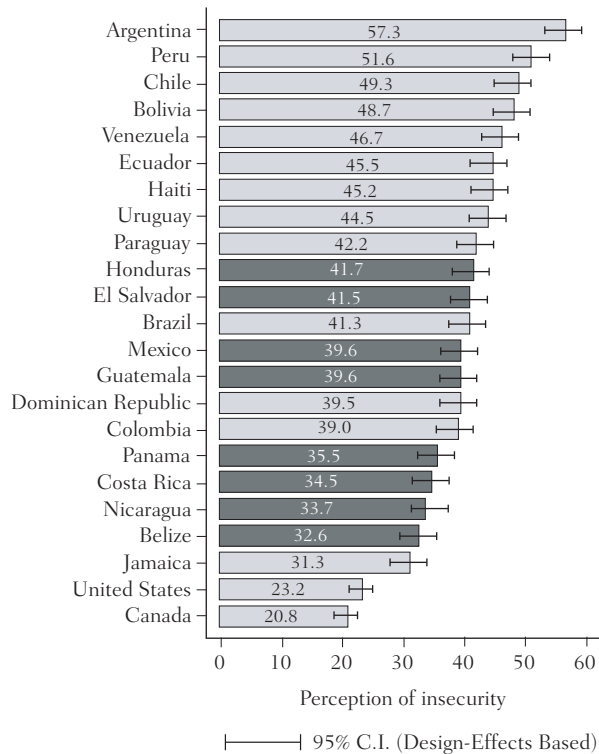
In recent years, the headlines in the Mexican media have been the number of drug-related killings, called executions or “narco-executions,” particularly since President Felipe Calderón’s administration began his “war on the drug cartels” when he took office in December 2006. The use of the armed forces to fight drug trafficking, mainly because of the public’s distrust of the police, has meant that public and nation security issues have been constantly mixed. By 2009, the Conflict Barometer categorized Mexico’s clash-

es between the drug cartels and the government as a severe crisis, ranked fourth among five types of conflict intensity. This article aims to address the need to examine social and organized violence through the study of surveys of homicides and drug killings, making comparisons whenever feasible. As a result, it presents possible causes of the increasing perception of insecurity, in contrast with the decline (until 2007) of the number of crimes that most shocks society: homicides.

In Mexico, homicides come under local (municipal) jurisdiction. On the other hand, the gangland slayings called “executions” are not classified under the law, and therefore there are no official figures for them. Hence, there is no reliable official source of data regarding drug-related violence; this article uses the figures used by the San Diego University

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FIGURE 1
PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC INSECURITY IN THE AMERICAS, 2008



Source: Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), “Americas Barometer Insights: 2009,” no. 28, José Miguel Cruz, *Public Insecurity in Central America and Mexico* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University, 2009).

Trans-Border Institute Justice in Mexico Project, gleaned mainly from Mexico City’s *Reforma* newspaper surveys. The official data on the number of deaths by homicide collected by the National Institute for Statistics and Geography (INEGI) are used. In addition, the Citizens Institute for Studies on Insecurity (ICESI) and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) constitute important sources of data used in this article.

THE PUBLIC’S PERCEPTION OF INSECURITY

Between 1990 and 2007, Mexico experienced a decrease in the absolute number of deaths by homicide, which dropped from 14,520 to 8,868. This contradicts the high perception of insecurity among Mexican citizens: 65 percent of society feels unsafe in their state. The impact of media dissemination

of crimes committed by organized groups is thought to be one of the factors that boost subjective insecurity. In fact, the amount of time dedicated to covering these crimes contributes to breeding the fear of crime among people who have not been a victim of one; as a consequence, increasing numbers of people make changes in their way of life.²

Despite media exposure, the feeling of insecurity may be derived from different causes than the high levels of real violence. Interestingly, it was in Argentina, Peru and Chile that in 2008 the largest percentages of Latin Americans surveyed perceived their neighborhoods as unsafe. Mexico is located in the middle of the graph (figure 1), showing the level of public perception of insecurity much below these countries (almost 40 on a scale from 0 to 100). On the other hand, the United States and Canada show the lowest levels of fear of crime, corresponding to the low levels of their crime rates. Even if it is a well known issue, it is important to underline the need to study the reasons for high levels of insecurity perception compared to low rates of real violence.

The LAPOP study presents the four most relevant factors for strengthening the perception of insecurity. First, it takes into account socio-demographic variables among vulnerable groups. The younger population, especially poor women in metropolitan areas, tends to perceive their environment as more insecure than the rest of the society. Second, victimization —public sector corruption included— has been proven to reinforce the perception of insecurity. Third, a positive correlation exists between perceptions of economic conditions (national or individual) and feeling insecure; the worse the economic situation is perceived as, the more insecure the society considers itself. Fourth —and this seems the most relevant— is LAPOP’s evidence of the importance of the security environment in the perception of the place one lives, like police involvement in crime, drug trafficking and other illicit organizations.

Significantly, the LAPOP study provides contradictory results to ICESI’s. According to LAPOP, and contrary to the authors’ expectations, media exposure in Mexico and Central America is not a relevant variable for increasing the perception of insecurity. On the other hand, ICESI research indicates that it does have an impact on the perception of insecurity, as mentioned above.

It should be underlined that corrupt police forces, economic uncertainty and community and social individual vulnerability increase the perception of public insecurity even among those who have been never a victim of any crime. In

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other words, not only institutional efficiency and transparency but also the presence of drug cartels and organized crime reinforce the perception of public insecurity; in addition, it should be remembered that authorities' lack of efficiency implies lack of public trust in them.

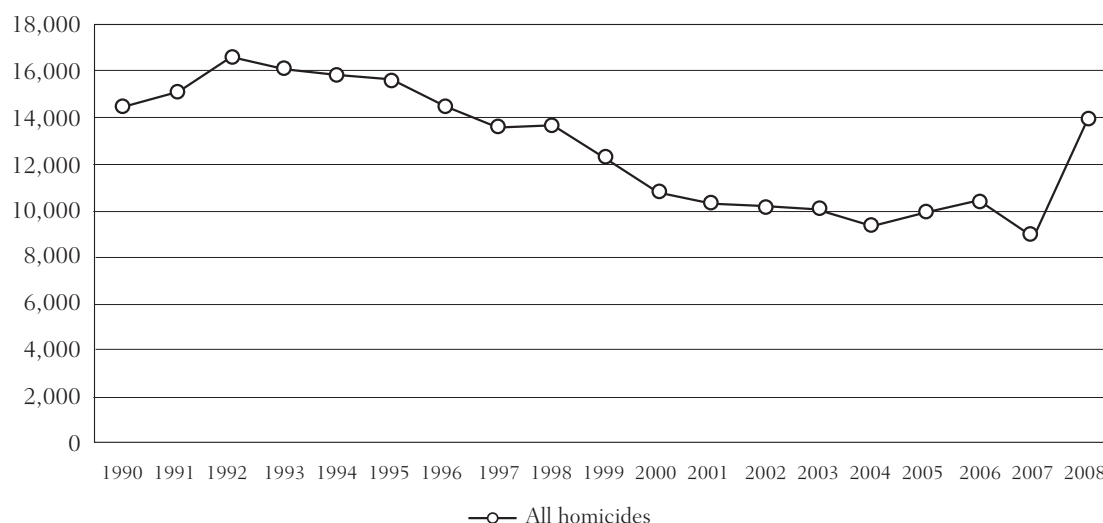
HOMICIDES AND THE PERCEPTION OF INSECURITY

The latest available data, from 2008, shows a significant change in trends in the number of victims: homicide rates throughout Mexico increased to 14,007. This number is almost the same as 19 years before, in 1990. This is not a simple return to the 1990 homicide rate; it constitutes a strong signal to authorities, civil society and the international community in terms of the fight against drug trafficking. It is important to underline that this increment is most probably not because of more efficient crime detection and investigation. On the contrary, impunity in Mexican society on

a national scale is increasing with time: in 2008 it rose to 85 percent.³

This article divides Mexico into five regions: the Northwest, Pacific, Central, Mexico City Metropolitan Area and the Southeast, based on execution rates. It is important to highlight that the northwestern region is considered the most unsafe in the country due to its execution rates and the highest spike in homicide levels. This is, in fact, the only region where homicide rates among the population —not including public security officials— are rising. On the other hand, the southern border region has the lowest homicide rates among citizens. At the same time, the state with the highest perception of insecurity (85 percent —the Federal District) experienced a national-record decrease in homicide rates, with the highest decline among security and defense staff. As a result, it can be said that in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area there are other reasons for such a high perception of insecurity. One of them may be the media and its sensationalist depiction of violence of organized crime in particular.

FIGURE 2
HOMICIDES IN MEXICO, 1990-2008



Source: Created by the author using the INEGI data base, www.inegi.gob.mx.

Between 1990 and 2007, throughout Mexico the number of homicides dropped 39 percent. Contrary to this trend, in just one year, 2008, there was a significant increase (58 percent) in the number of violent deaths among the Mexican population.

Another factor contributing to the increasing perception of insecurity is that those in charge of providing security for society are increasingly vulnerable. In a period of 18 years, homicides among citizens increased only in the Northwest; however, homicide rates among security and defense personnel have risen in almost all the regions studied. In other words, the gap is decreasing between the two groups analyzed: society on the one hand, and security and defense personnel on the other, which means security is decreasing for the military and police in particular.

NATIONAL LEVEL

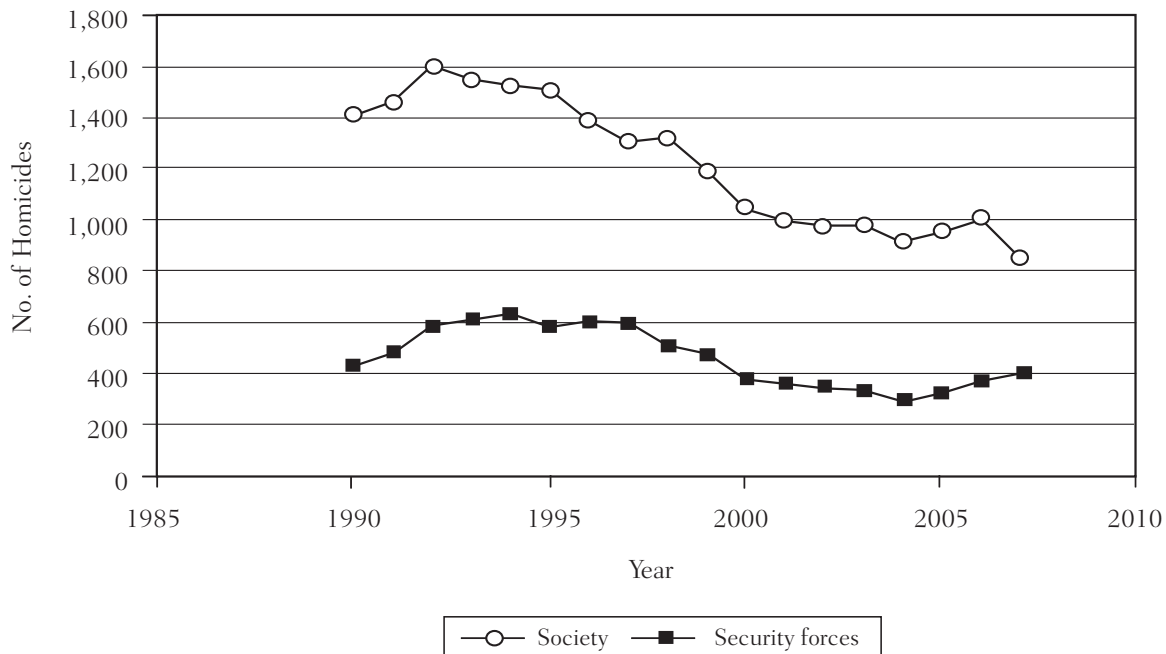
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As media reports underline, since 2006 there have been over 16,000 drug-related killings. In 2007 alone, drug-related killings constituted one-quarter of all homicides. One year later, this proportion shot up drastically to 37 percent. This means that in only one year the number of deaths related to drugs increased by 17 percent as a proportion of all deaths caused by killings in Mexico. It is important to point out that between 2007 and 2008, there was also a significant increase in executions and homicides.

In addition, at the moment of writing, there is no access to official data on homicides for 2009; however estimates for that year put the number of “narco-executions” at 6,587. It is important to mention that another press source, *Milenio*, quotes 8,281 drug-related deaths in 2009. Considering

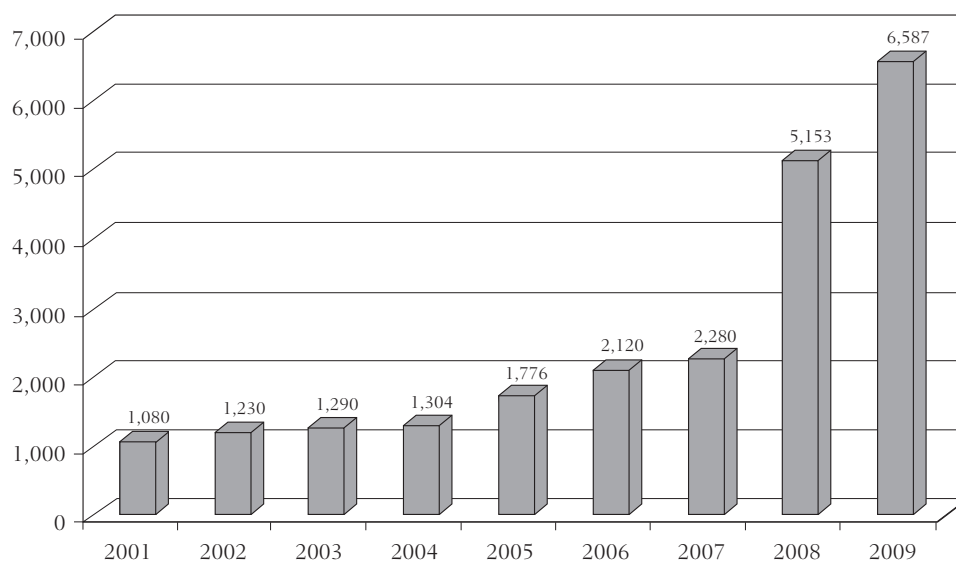
FIGURE 3
HOMICIDES IN MEXICO: SOCIETY AND SECURITY FORCES, 1990-2007



Source: Created by the author using the INEGI data base, www.inegi.gob.mx.

Note: Due to lack of data access, there is a division for security forces (military and police forces) and society only for the 1990-2007 period.

FIGURE 4
DRUG-RELATED KILLINGS IN MEXICO, 2001-2009



Source: Justice in Mexico Project, *Drug Violence in Mexico. Data and Analysis from 2001-2009*, Trans-border Institute, San Diego University, www.justiceinmexico.org (January 2010).

5,153 drug-related homicides solely for 2008, the increase was over 28 percent for the following year.

ON THE STATE LEVEL

The northwest region consists of eight states: six on the U. S. border plus Sinaloa and Durango, included because of their drastic increase in “narco-executions.” This region is the most insecure in Mexico in terms of drug-related killings as well as homicides in general. Regarding the latter, even though they are not the highest levels in the country in absolute terms, the dynamic of their increase is, indeed, the highest. In the case of security personnel, a 119 percent hike between 1990 and 2007 can be observed. Furthermore, in this region, homicides increased by 14 percent among society at large, excluding security forces.

Other observations indicate a significant rise in killings in the Northwest as a percentage of all Mexican homicides. In 1990, 16 out of every 100 soldiers or police killed in Mexico lived in this region. However, by 2007, the latest avail-

able data for this occupational group, they represented 37 percent of all victims among security forces nationwide.

The Northwest is Mexico’s most insecure region because it is the only one among the five where homicides among normal citizens, not only security forces, are on the rise; in addition, the spike in the number of killings is the most dynamic of all those studied.

What may come as a surprise for many is that in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area, surveys indicate an over 50-percent decline in homicides during the period studied, the biggest drop nationwide. On the other hand, due to its demographics, in absolute terms the number of murder victims is the highest. In contrast, in the entire country, the highest number of people who perceive their neighborhoods as unsafe are found in this region. As mentioned above, other significant factors must be taken into account to explain the high perception of insecurity among Mexico City Metropolitan Area residents.

Other observations indicate that the Pacific region, consisting of the states of Michoacán, Guerrero and Oaxaca,

report similar numbers of drug-related killings as the more dangerous northwest region. Moreover, these three states present similar numbers of homicides to 14 other states that make up Mexico's central region.⁴

It is worth mentioning that while the northern border is Mexico's most insecure, in contrast, the southern one has the lowest levels of both homicides and drug-related killings. During the period studied, homicides in the Southeast represented four to five percent of all killings officially registered in the entire country.

CONCLUSIONS


The fight against drug trafficking has not created greater security in Mexican society. Thus, though the considerable decline in Mexico's homicide rates over 18 years fueled optimism, the latest available data, from 2008, presented a significant increase in homicides: 58 percent in only one year. Moreover, drug-related killings represented more than one-third of all homicides that year and the proportion is expect-

ed to increase. Much remains to be done regarding the high perception of insecurity in Mexican society, and even more with respect to spiking levels of the most serious crimes, homicides and their spectacular variation, drug-related killings.


The war on organized crime does not curb drug cartel activities nor does it help guarantee security for Mexican society: it shows the state's inefficiency when it comes to accomplishing its basic tasks. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ These research results, including tables and trends, were published for the first time in *Atlas de la seguridad y la defensa de México 2009* (Mexican Security and Defense Atlas 2009), available for free downloading at <http://seguridadcondemocracia.org/>.
- ² Instituto Ciudadano de Estudios sobre Inseguridad (ICESI), ENSI-6 2009, *Sexta Encuesta Nacional sobre Inseguridad*, <http://www.icesi.org.mx/>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ The 14 states that make up the central region are Baja California Sur, Zacatecas, San Luis Potosí, Veracruz, Nayarit, Jalisco, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Querétaro, Hidalgo, Puebla, Colima, Morelos and Tlaxcala.



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