

Drug-Related Violence in Mexico: State and Community Responses.

A qualitative Approach

Veronica Martinez-Solares¹

01.
Translated by
Monica Chagoya.

In the last decade, Mexico has moved from being a country of moderate violence and limited drug issues to a country that has experienced a huge loss of life and injuries associated with street violence and violence against women. Associated problems such as kidnapping, enforced and involuntary disappearances, extortion, and other serious and complex crimes have likewise substantially increased. However, until the end of 2013, victimization and its prevention were not on the national policy agenda, nor were they effectively featured in the public debate. In order for Mexico to effectively tackle drug-related violence, it is crucial to understand the experiences of victimization as well as to recognize victims as strategic actors in the recovery of their communities and the country's social fabric as a whole.

This study used a qualitative research methodology by documenting victims' realities and describing federal, local, and community responses to drug-related violence. The research project aimed to develop more effective policies for victims and prevent further victimization by identifying: (a) how the violent conflict, related to drug trafficking and the state response to it, has impacted individuals and communities in six municipalities with high presence of organized crime; (b) the logic behind the state's response to deal with people affected by this violence; (c) the mechanisms through which the state has sought to mitigate the impact of violence on victims and their communities; (d) community responses to both state violence and the violence of cartels; and (e) the impact of these strategies on the legitimacy and effectiveness of the state.

Despite some effective responses, critical elements for reducing violence are citizens' and business leaders' community participation in local security strategies. Key challenges remain however, including how to institutionalize such state-society collaboration and trust building

*Previous page:
Police roadblock
in Mexico and the
war on drugs.
Photo:
iStock/tillsonburg*

efforts; how to eliminate corruption of public authorities; and how to improve police, judicial investigation, and due process.

The new landscape of violence

After nearly two decades of steady decline in the homicide rate of Mexico, a new pattern of criminal violence emerged in 2007- linked to growing drug trafficking, the recent government strategy by the new administration of President Felipe Calderon, among other international factors. This new situation was characterized by an increase in the homicide rate, an expansion of the areas affected by violence related to organized crime and an increase in the incidence of high-impact crimes such as disappearance, kidnapping, and extortion, among others.

In the context of a post-electoral conflict that raised questions concerning the transparency of the presidential election of 2006 (Curc6 2010), the new government announced a “war against crime [and] against the enemies of Mexico”². Such a war against drug trafficking was intended to provide legitimacy for the battered electoral process. One of the first actions was to engage the Armed Forces in the realm of public safety.

In 2006, at the beginning of the Calderon administration and the “drug war”, the homicide rate in Mexico was 10 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. This rate rose to 13 in 2008, 18 in 2009, 23 in 2010 and reached a peak of 24 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011. Among the murder statistics, the specific increase of those allegedly related to drug trafficking was particularly dramatic: December 2006 counted 63 executions; in 2007, almost 2,600 were registered; in 2008, there were 6,183; in 2009, 8,906; in 2010, 15,185; and in 2011, these figures slightly dipped to 12,903.³ Drug-related violence concentrated in places historically associated with the cartels: Sinaloa, Baja California, and Chihuahua. However, by 2009, 27 of the 32 states had increased their intentional homicide rates between 30 and 439 percent.

02. Words pronounced by Felipe Calderon on September 12, 2008. Presidencia (2008). For some reason the original document has disappeared, but the statement was recorded by various electronic media agencies.

03. Deceases occurred due to alleged criminal rivalry. Attorney General’s Office database (2012)

Type of crime	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	% Growth
Thefts	545,251	610,730	656,877	680,566	738,138	749,414	711,168	30.42 %
Intentional Injury	175,738	189,383	186,585	183,421	176,451	160,995	155,567	-11.47%
Intentional Homicide	11,806	10,253	13,193	16,117	20,585	22,480	20,555	74.11%
Kidnapping	733	438	907	1,162	1,284	1,344	1,267	72.85%
Extortion	3,157	3,123	4,875	6,332	6,375	4,404	6,038	91.25%
Total of High Impact Crimes	736,685	813,927	862,437	887,598	942,833	938,637	894,595	21.43%

Since 2007, in addition to intentional homicide rates, violent robberies, kidnappings, and kidnapping extortion-related deaths also increased. Between 2006 and 2012, high impact crimes grew by 21 percent, while crime in general likewise increased by 13 percent (see Table 1). Among the fastest growing high-impact crimes were extortion (91%) and kidnapping (73%).

Table 1: High Impact Crimes 2006-2012. Source: México Unido Contra La Delincuencia, 2014

The process of militarization of public order saw about 60,000 members of the Armed Forces deployed to carry out tasks belonging to civil authorities: searches, arrests, and checkpoints. Between January 2007 and November 2012, the National Human Rights Commission of Mexico received 7,350 complaints of military abuses and issued reports on 109 cases in which it was determined that members of the Army had committed serious human rights violations.

As an emerging phenomenon, the country began to experience something that in people's minds belonged to the distant past and was linked to singular political moments: the dictatorship or "dirty war" with its disappearances. Between 1969 and 2001, only 557 involuntary or forced disappearances were registered; but at least 20,851 persons disappeared as a consequence of the „war on drugs" between 2006 and 2012.

Moreover, the high levels of violence, and actions to combat it, also brought consequences in the form of forced displacement of individuals and entire families seeking a safe place to live. At the end of 2010, internal displacements had an estimated range of 115mil to 160mil people. Depending on the source, such displacement incorporated two identifiable dimensions: mass movements of populations directly affected by fighting, threats, or well-founded fear and the quiet abandonment by primary or secondary victims of their communities, which were generally barely perceived.

All of this coincided with a period in which Mexico moved from the so-called "inquisitorial justice" to another of "accusatory court"; a period where the acceptance of guarantor-type governance models, developed elsewhere in the region, were legalized through a constitutional amendment published in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* (Official Gazette) on June 18, 2008. Additionally, the reconfiguration of the national system of public order, juvenile justice, and a reform of larger scope in 2011 saw human rights become central to all national legislation. Accordingly, the Mexican state presented itself as an effective guarantor country and law enforcer.

With widespread violence and victimization, the reality that many people faced on a daily basis was completely different from the one envisaged by the Constitution. An immense gap between the daily violation of rights, effective access to justice, and full respect of the rule of law developed while the interconnection between these became either very weak or nonexistent. In particular, the Mexican state became unable to address the needs of victims of high-impact or complex crimes (these terms are used here to identify those associated with violence due to organized crime and the state's own acts of violence in response to it).

In order to provide empirical evidence for a better understanding of the effects of violence and likewise to supply a grounded information base for better public policies, an empirical research project called "state and community responses to drug-related violence in Mexico" was initiated. Funding was assured by the International Development Research Centre, which helped collect data on the following questions:

- What has been the impact of the violent conflict related to drug trafficking?
- How has the state's response affected communities living with different levels of violence, originating from organized crime?
- Which changes caused increased violence and victimization in terms of personal life, family life, and community life?
- What kinds of measures have been taken by individuals, families, and communities to prevent and protect themselves against victimization?
- What have been the experiences of violence and the impact of victimization?
- What proposals for the prevention and control have emerged from the victimized communities?

Methodology

This essay cannot comprehensively address all aspects of the research project. The information was mostly collected through interviews with primary and secondary victims of drug-related violence in six municipalities of four Mexican states. Further information was also collected in other locations with higher crime rates. As a matter of principle, ethical and security guidelines were given absolute priority before adding quantity to the project findings, in order to guarantee safety for the participants and research group itself.

The locations were selected according to the level of violence experienced in recent years. The first states considered were those whose homicide rates were above the national level and who had experienced an accelerated growth rate in the number of homicides two years prior to the commencement of the investigation (2012). Other selection criteria were ease in access to institutions, security aspects, possibilities of direct contact with academic institutions, civil society organizations, and local authorities. In two municipalities the investigating institution received support from the state's human rights commission. In two other municipalities, the state's attorney general's office assisted the investigation. In another state, support came from the government secretariat while in another there was no official support (the situation did not require it).

So far, 60 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with direct and indirect victims of serious crime: mainly kidnapping, murder, disappearance, rape, and injuries caused by the use of firearms. Another 240 people participated in focus group discussions. The participants were selected through the "snowball" strategy. The interviews covered the following topics: victimization experience, needs of recognition and emotional support, economic consequences of victimization, protection needs, contact with the police and other authorities, contact with the prosecutor, and participation and social activism.

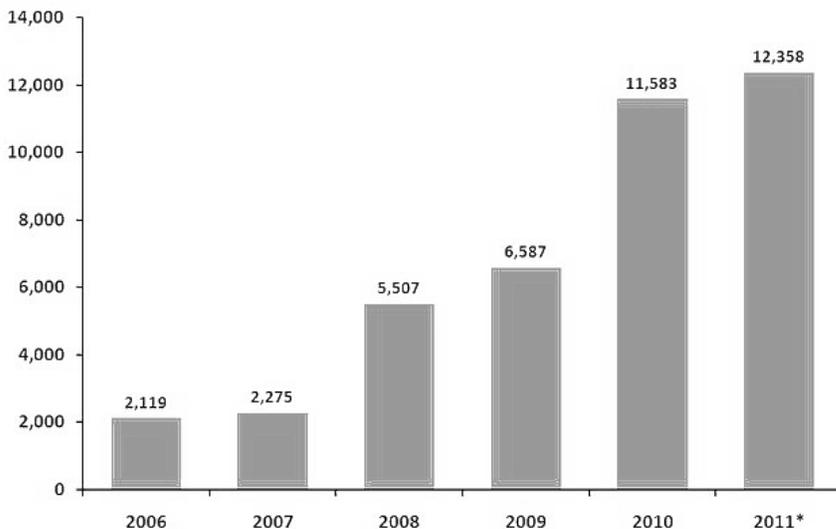
A very important point of discussion, within the research group and accompanying specialists was how far anonymity should be upheld in

Drug-War Related Murders in Mexico

Murders in Mexico since 2006 related to drug trafficking activities

Source:

Author = Grupo Reforma 2011/
wikimedia.org



* Estimated

Source: Reforma Ejecutómetro, Grupo Reforma

the interviews. Absolute confidentiality was a principle. All conversation transcripts from the focus groups and from the interviews were coded using the open coding technique of Grounded Theory.⁴ The investigation needed to exclude the possibility of relating the testimony to the victim; therefore, the victimization fact, the origin of victimization, the circumstances of manner, time and place, the state response, and the identity of the informant were kept anonymous. The territory where the information had been gathered was the only distinguishing characteristic of each data entry.

04.

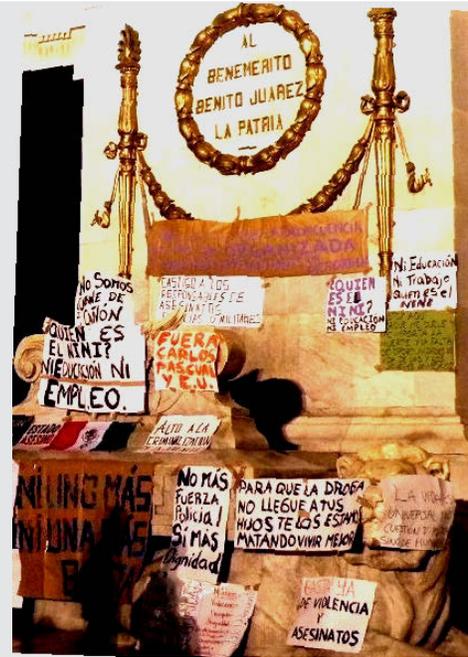
The software Atlas.ti was used to build a database

Insecurity and changes compared to the past: impacts

The new situation of unsafety

On August 11, 2011, a request for information was made to the Secretary of National Defense and the Office of the Presidency of the Republic for the documentation used “to design the project and plan combat strategies against organized crime, especially drug traffickers during the administration of President Felipe Calderon “ (Lizarraga, 2011). It was found that such documentation was non-existent. In other words, the use of federal forces (navy, army, and federal police) to combat drug trafficking had been decided without a diagnosis or plan and was only a unilateral mandate by the then head of the Federal Executive. Hence, the far reaching consequences of these top-down decisions took little account of possible suffering people and communities would experience.

The extent of violence that is gripping the country is now known and recognized. It is a phenomenon that developed through a number of identifiable stages but started from a dispute around a possible election fraud; it has been deeper entrenched through the ignorance of the



Photos:
Veronica Martinez

country's culture; and has been promoted under the name of the “war against the enemies of Mexico”, “war on narco trafficking”, and “the war against drugs”.⁵ The term ‘war’ was used initially as a metaphor whereas the effects were very real: death, pain, and destruction. The development was well monitored by the National Survey on Victimization and Perception of Public Insecurity (ENVIPE) by the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEGI 2013) as well as the National Crime Survey (ENSI) conducted by the INEGI (2011) and Citizen’s Institute on Insecurity Studies (ICESI). In the series of surveys conducted by ENVIPE until 2013, there was an increasing perception of violence in public: a greater presence of frequent assaults and drug use (38 percent), gangs or gang violence (30 percent), drug sales (21 percent); high-impact crimes extortion and kidnappings (9 percent), and homicides (12 percent). Furthermore, one in 10 Mexicans in 2012, reported having knowledge of kidnappings in the vicinity of their homes, a third of the population lived with violent gangs operating in their community, and nearly four in ten Mexicans were exposed to theft or robbery with violence in their neighbourhood.

Complementary to the ENVIPE’s survey, the perception of violence appeared rapidly in the discussions and focus groups conducted in the visited municipalities. Once the theme “major problems in their neighborhoods and municipalities” would be brought up, “insecurity” always ranked as the biggest concern. Later, often with caution (particularly by men), concrete details regarding personal or second hand experiences were communicated. It was not uncommon that the issue of insecurity would be brought up directly by naming those forms of crime or problems of violence that most concerned them. Representative accounts of the “new reality” of insecurity in their communities and municipalities were:

05.
Presidential statement from September 12, 2008.

- The main problems are of insecurity, because just the day before yesterday I happened to see a couple being mugged. (Women's Group, Municipio 1)
- Right now the main problem in my neighborhood, for example, is that many people are appearing dead on the street; there are about five of them every month. (Women's Group, Municipio 2.)
- The level of offences has risen from thefts to assaults, to kidnappings; all those crimes are becoming more violent each time. (Male, Municipio 3). The neighborhood where I live is not as problematic in itself, that is why we have shops here or you have groups ... But they come to throw away people that they already killed, or hanged ... they have done a thousand things to them. They come and throw away the bodies. (Men's Group, Municipio 4).

Right now in the light of day we see things that we did not notice before. Those things only happened in the movies, right? [...] And right now this is the normal day and we get scared and say what's going to happen? Since children cannot walk on the street at certain times of ... well right outside the house playing, because certain people may pass by with guns ... and a bullet may hit them. These are very rough things. (Women's Group, Municipio 5)

Communities generally have a number of problems with violence and crime that concern most individuals, but, according to participants, the highest concerns are the killings (often referred to as the "dead" found in neighbourhoods or "executed"; clearly indicating the type of homicide), kidnappings, violent robberies, extortions, cartel's protection charges, and shootings and clashes between groups of drug traffickers or authorities. To a lesser extent, violence against women was also mentioned (particularly in two municipalities in the Midwest of the country) before other criminal or violent acts.

However, this range of crime and violence that takes place, that doesn't seem to have a logical pattern, according to participants, is consistently present. Furthermore, two of the northern municipalities mentioned the "dead", but the focus of concern, and the experiences reported, emphasized "shootings", "confrontations", and "operations". In the remaining municipalities, these problems, in addition to abductions, kidnappings, extortion, and other forms of social violence had greater resonance in the comments and stories from participants

Changes in reference to the past

On a more general level, common to all informants is the perception of increased violence and the concomitant fear of violence. The discourse on the situation of insecurity often includes a reference to the not-so-distant past, with five main features embodying this difference:

- 1) The new graveness of violence and crimes such as disappearances, executions, collections of cartel's protection fees, shootings, and confrontations. Assaults and robberies, where violence is a clear new manifestation, are also incorporated into this new form of violence.

- 2) The increased presence of firearms (especially larger gauge firearms).
- 3) The “appearance” of centrally organized entrepreneurship stipulating violence (i.e. drug trafficking or the “narco” and now gangs incorporated into drug dealing). It is also important to consider the detentions by the authorities that acted as the trigger for this transformation –clearly the case in two municipalities;
- 4) A much higher level of fear and social distrust among the population.
- 5) And finally, all these changes have a more or less a shared typology, with different time lines for each municipality -according to the views expressed by the groups- but that clearly falls between 2007 and 2010.

It's not only a dead person, someone beaten to death, a death from a bullet, now they do more sadistic things. So that is another fear. They disappear, and the lucky one pops up again, but appears in terrible condition; those who don't appear ... well you don't hear from them again. (Women's Group. Municipio 2.)

Before they would sell their [narco] things and even the governor knew that they sold, but there wasn't that "I don't like you, I will kill you" or "if you do not give me some of your share, I will take it out on you", we had never seen people hanged, butchered; we had never seen that. (Women. Municipio 4).

It is not just for organized crime ... there is many more people involved in these crimes, many, many women, but is not just for that that they have killed so many women ... it has been known in many cases, just because "look, at this pretty girl; pick her up" they rape her, extort money from her, and throw her out. (Male. Municipio 5).

In group opinions and evaluations the expanding violence was noted in three aspects: the level of violence in relation to offenses; the emergence of new forms of crime that are more violent, and an exaggeration of masculinity in interpersonal domination of women.

Also new was the increased presence of weapons which are not only used as instruments for killing, but also as cultural symbols of their hierarchical position as “men” (Page 2009; Dolan 2003). If the model of traditional masculinity requires demonstrations of dominance and intimidation over other men (while female subordination is a given), the weapon accomplishes this and explicitly represents it. In particular men that can be considered as socially or economically excluded can easily resort to violence, armed in particular, to gain access to consumer goods, but also for the articulation of status and power.

Also having access to “women” can seem attractive, which is considered another “consumer good” in this new status and lifestyle. That is why strategies for reducing gun violence should not be limited to economic markets and incentives, but also take into account the current cultural value of the weapons, which necessarily means the consideration of psychological and gender perspectives.

On the other hand, in the five municipalities, the incorporation of youth (the reference term is ‘padillas’ but the terminology is somewhat more fluid) into drug dealing gangs is one of the clearest changes in urban violence issues. The incorporation of the “youth”, “cholos”, “pandilleros” or “narco” (narco-trafficking) youngsters in (or nearby) their field of violent operations seems to be not only a new violence problem, but also a element that is deeply affecting the social dynamic of communities and hampering conventional forms of social control. Szabó de Carvalho, Garzón and Muggah (2013) underline:

“Cartels, commandos, and larger scale structures of organized crime service local criminal factions like gangs and bands, to expand their influence and gain territorial control. This explosive mixture has provided weapons, resources, knowledge, and contacts to these groups, which until now were considered minor structures. Through this symbiotic framework, which has become a problem of national importance, drug trafficking has infiltrated the local level and [become] a serious safety threat at the community level.”

The capacities of informal social controls of violent and criminal behaviour have eroded due to the presence of weapons and the involvement of youth and adults in criminal groups. The feeling that is transmitted in the interviews is that violence increasingly covers more spaces and forms and can be driven by more and different motivations, or worse, without identifiable motives.

In respect to conflict conciliation opportunities within the community, the merger between local “youth” or “pandillero” gangs and the big drug trafficking syndicates introduced new challenges. On the one hand, although the drug trafficking networks in communities seems to include young people as well as adults, the use of the label “youth” gangs (or more disparagingly of the “cholos” in the north of the country) is a way to build the figure of the “others” as those who engage in and are responsible for criminal activities. Second, the presence of weapons and external resources or contacts (which in turn are capable of exercising violence) limits the intra- community containment potentials do deal with “criminals” and “gangs” without necessarily involving state instances (who, for example, will necessarily appear on the scene once a person is shot).

Changes in personal, family, community, and social life

Direct or indirect experiences of crime and violence have invariably modified many aspects of personal, family, and social life in communities. The participants’ accounts and opinions on new forms of violence and crime that have taken place in their towns and neighborhoods testify to the appearance of new levels of worry and fear. This is not to say that the new fear and anxiety are a simple consequence of the increased presence of violent crimes in their municipalities- especially in light of more complex mediation opportunities than in the past. However, the anxiousness and emotional stress resulting from the new social order in the communities are important elements in the narratives captured by the interviews.

Generic questions in population surveys like how safe residents felt in their neighborhoods at certain times of night or what crime generates more fear do not allow a full understanding of the type of fear and other emotions that most violent criminal activities, like kidnapping, executions, tend to produce... Such feelings may be communicated best from the stories where the talk of fear, anxiety, or despair is linked to crimes such as abductions or homicides. The level of self-concern, and even more so for children or other close relatives, drives most of the personal and family related measures that participants say they have taken to try and prevent victimization (or the repetition of victimizations, in several cases). It is a state of being permanently alert that has quickly become naturalized in Mexicans' daily activities and is something that has become as common as going to the market in the morning, transmitted in the following quotes:

- *It was Saturday and around there by the food market I found some heads.*

- *Yes, at eight in the morning and there it was: all the police "oh, now what happened!? Now what happened? Should I enter? Will I get there or not? What should I do?" So one is with fear, anxiety and stress and all that.*
(Woman. Municipio 5.)

Emotions surrounding violence and its impact on the lives of people and their families, and the ever-present risk of becoming a victim of violent crime, will have invariably led to the re-definition of spaces and activities that once were perceived without any potential danger. This social phenomenon of increased risk perception and anxiety could be associated with many contingencies of contemporary life (the risk of job loss, for example), which already existed in the communities under study along with other cities in Mexico where there was a general concern about becoming a victim of property crime (like forced sales or donations of land). However, in the case of the selected municipalities, the risks linked to serious forms of violence (abductions, kidnappings, rapes, murders), caused emotions that were much more extreme. The groups who expressed these emotions most frequently were women and, in particular, those with young children.

Another reason for fear and anxiety related to the phenomena of widespread violence alludes to the 'new solitude' that individuals or their families experienced while taking precautions against everyday risks of becoming victims. Community and institutional distrust has isolated the population, which does not know where to turn for help. In the following quote, the doubts of the boundaries between gang crime and the authorities are evident alongside the helplessness felt by people who are left with only their closest family circle as a resource.

One day there was a reunion at my house with my mom's friends and there was a call ... "Am I talking to the home of the John Doe family?" And I say, "Yes, how can I help you?" and the caller says "I'm from the police" I can't remember what kind of police he said, just that he was Commander of who knows what, and he said: "I have just been informed that close to

your house a van of drug traffickers just passed by, and you better tell me the truth because we're going to go there you son of a ..." I just hung up because if you go with the flow they will continue ... but I kept thinking ... "what if it is true that they are coming?" I was afraid, I was anxious and I said to myself "now what?" I told my mom "we better go inside"; we were in the courtyard. Yes I was left with that fear: "what if it's true and they arrive?" (Woman. Municipio 2).

The sources of fear and anxiety about crime are multiple and cannot be thought of as simply direct or indirect results of the actual occurrence of crime. To that, the impact of permanent accounts on crime and violence through the media, conversations with friends and neighbors, stories of crime victims, observation, and daily conversation about police activities and other security forces, as well as direct observation of violence in the street must be added. Therefore, it becomes a real challenge to develop anti-fear strategies by reducing the permanent "subjective" feeling of being at risk for violence. As for institutional security and justice actors, this implies that consideration of the emotional aspects of the people must cover all types of contacts between the public authorities and citizens who turn up for help. Of course, the way in which the police and justice institutions act also affects the public perception of crime and the possibilities to control it. If government institutions do not seem to care about the possible containment of crime and if their performance gives raise to certain levels of distrust, the chances for correcting negative effects of stress, anguish, and despair of people decreases. While changing beliefs and emotions about crime cannot be altered at will, the authorities must learn to adapt their style of communication to the affected population, particularly in areas where the crisis of insecurity and violence is lived firsthand.

Individual and community responses

The group conversations led to the conclusion that the authorities were not considered as an appropriate mechanism to solve security problems: sometimes they only provided a partial solution, while in other situations they even caused a new problem. Therefore, as the levels of violence rose (including retaliation) the already socially established pattern of "not reporting" became further strengthened⁰⁶.

Thus, the possibility of retaliation for reporting certain crimes (more if the perpetrators are part of or have links in the community) was always

06. According to ENVIPE 2013, in 2012 the overall percentage of non-reporting was 92.1%. This percentage reached 98% on the kidnapping by an estimate of 105,600 cases in the same year.

Common non-violence stickers currently circulating in Mexico



one of the reasons for not reporting.⁷ In the conversations, the practice of “no complaint” was usually associated more with fear of reprisals than a waste of time. Retaliation is often facilitated through corrupt prosecutors and local police who frequently conspired with criminals or organized groups and identify the person who has denounced a criminal.

On the other hand, in a context where violence not only increased, but also where the uncertainty of its occurrence grew, omission strategies were not limited to the possible reporting of crimes. The group discussions also highlighted fears associated with getting involved in violent conflicts between others (such as helping wounded people or questioning police or strangers’ behaviors, etc.).

Not knowing which people may be involved in transactions of drug trafficking, were members of a gang, or might “simply” react violently (e.g. by owning a gun or pistol) represented the risk of publicly questioning any type of unusual behavior. This way, informal social control mechanisms were weakened while the terrain for social violence expanded. The risk of “getting involved” in others’ problems or behaviors is also communicated in various “instructive” tales, which, if followed, contribute to the dismantling of social capital and increased distrust and weakening of social ties.

07.
This logic was reinforced if reprisals increased in violence and authorities could not guarantee its containment.

Anti-violence protest march. Source: cipamericas.org.es - archive



The process of enforced social isolation, minimizing interactions, words, and wanderings in common space, have also become palpable. Some people who belonged to the middle classes, who lived in urbanised housing developments (known as the ‘colonias’ in Mexico), are less affected by the processes of social fragmentation, since for them the residential neighborhoods is not much more than the places they sleep and enjoy family life, while their social networks and the places they identified with extends to other locations and to social contacts beyond their own residential neighbourhoods. But the more popular section of society derives greater meaning, identity, and satisfaction from their involvement

in the local community and its space characteristics (St. Jean 2007). For them, the impact of isolation is greater and their community ceased to exist with the exception of a few family members and friends that they trusted without second thoughts.

On the other hand, a kind of “social agreement” in the popular language to not talk about the violence committed by specific gangs (which are often indirectly and loosely referred to as “they”, “the bad ones”, not to talk about “that”, etc), was reiterated by the group participants. These stories confirm, on the one hand, that conversations about violence and its consequences were daily practice among circles of friends and within the family, but on the other, that speaking about violence was forbidden by the rules of social interaction: local acts of violence should never be discussed with strangers and, with respect to new violence in communities, it should never be reported.

Practices, in respect to personal and family precautions against insecurity, varied considerably. Some measures related to securing the houses, most of them being protective and defensive. However, in the case of three municipalities where violence had a longer presence (and moreover, in households which had been engaged in some kind of commercial activity), more aggressive measures were indicated (presence of weapons and a belligerent attitude), which could have a deterrent effect, but also turn counterproductive in the case of exaggerated self-defense, as happened in another federal state (Michoacán).

Changes in the use of public spaces were even more varied. The victimization surveys showed that there are certain social routines that are not practiced any more, such as meeting relatives and friends. This is a commonly observed phenomenon in recent years and represents the weakening of social bonds. Both the focus groups’ discussions and the interviews with victims showed that rather than stopping routines, most of them are modified with clear intention to minimize risk.

This behaviour is in line with the common theory of situational crime prevention (Clarke 1997) or routine activities (Cohen, 1997). Participants understand that they have to reduce their probability of being available targets for potential offenders, especially in the absence of capable guardians (which in this case would be different types of police). However, such behaviour only favors a reduced perception of violence by mechanisms of depersonalization or avoidance of habit.

Also, individual, family, or community vigilante justice has become a common and legitimized strategy. Vigilante justice also applied to more ‘ordinary’ crimes, such as theft. The experiences of vigilante justice described by respondents constitute acts of retributive justice, made with some degree of planning and premeditation, and perpetrated by autonomous citizens (Johnston, 1996). In some cases they resorted to this strategy after the failure of the formal mechanisms, but vigilante justice has also been treated as a legitimate primary form of justice. Such vigilante justice only applied to certain types of violations of order and when there was certainty that the offenders lacked relations to organized crime (generally known youth neighbors). The typical proverb legitimizing a violent response goes like this: “One has to choose if there will

be crying in your home or crying in mine” (essentially, “better you than me”).

It can be assumed that [vigilante justice will occur] when we catch someone who got out of line, and since our government ignores us, we will give [that person a] lesson, and see if they return back to the neighborhood. But until now it was not necessary. We have seen thieves, but they know who we are and they will not return to our neighborhood again because they know that people will defend themselves. (Men’s Group. Municipio 1).

The State’s response.

One point of interest in this research project has been the contact of victims with the criminal justice system. After experiencing a violent crime, victims had to overcome several challenges. The first was how to overcome the personal experience of victimization: the physical, psychological, spiritual, economic, and social impacts of crime or violence on their lives. Second, there was the harm to which victims were subjected to by the justice system. That is, the damage that the victim experienced as a result of their interaction with the justice system, better known as secondary victimization.

Police occupy a key position in the delivery of criminal justice; the same applies to crimes or human rights violations. This means that when victims decided to report a crime, the police were the gateway to justice. The result of the contact established between the two actors –police/victim- often depended on the nature of the crime in which the person was victimized: the kind of police that the victim approached for support, the paths taken thereafter to access law enforcement, and the actions taken by the officers themselves was often determined by the institution the victim contacted.

Most of the victims interviewed never got in contact with the police after witnessing or suffering a crime. The reasons were diverse: some victims decided to go directly to the prosecutor to report the crime. In other cases, the police never attended to the call for support, and in most cases victims distrusted the police or considered that the police could be linked to organized crime.

From the total number of interviews conducted with primary or secondary victims who contacted the police -which was mostly the municipal police-, the officer’s support was nil, both at the physical or emotional level. Only in the case of a rape that happened in the first municipality, the victim acknowledged that the police officers provided her with material and physical support in the immediate aftermath of the crime. In other situations, people described a general lack of concern and interest by the authorities to provide trust and security to victims; others reported a significant refusal by the authorities to provide physical aid to injured persons. A critical limitation in evaluating police performance was that just a few of the interviewed participants could differentiate between different police agencies (municipal, state, federal, or detectives).



*The War on Drugs:
Insertation of the
Fuerzas Especiales
Avanzadas of the
mexican army in
the raids realized
in Michoacán.
Photo: Wikimedia/
Diego Fernández*

Another point of interest for the research project was the assessment made by victims on the work done by the prosecutor, when they had contact with that authority. Testimonies can be divided into three main categories, derived from victims' opinions and perceptions. These are: (a) treatment and care; (b) legal procedure and performance of duties; and (c) suspicion of collusion and corruption. From the interviews one can conclude that the work of the prosecution, unlike the police, was more heterogeneous and, in some cases, more than one response was given within a singular account.

The general perception on the performance of the public prosecution service was inefficiency, dishonesty, and impunity. One of the arguments for reforming the criminal justice system was to overcome this perception and target better management of cases, greater transparency, and increased trust through better treatment. However, both in municipalities with the "new" system and those with the "old" model, victims faced the coldness of the criminal justice system, which was categorized as an excessively complex administrative setup with lengthy paperwork and bureaucratic forms. Moreover, indifference service with a lack of sensitivity and empathy on the part of public servants was noted.

The first duty of the prosecutor is to provide information to victims. But for a victim searching for help, the first encounter can rather turn into a demonstration on the deficiencies of the institutions or their staff. For them, the experience with the public prosecutor often transmit a feeling of lacking commitment in the first place and a refusal to provide essential information on the rights of victims or advise them on the procedures

and formalities of the investigation or trial. Such attitude causes feelings of abandonment, uncertainty, and sometimes helplessness and leaves many not knowing how to proceed or who to contact. Apart from the fear for reprisals from perpetrators, another reason was a lack of knowledge on an individual's personal rights and the proper functioning of the institutions themselves.

Overall, both the focus groups and the testimonies of the victims interviewed showed that the criminal justice system represented a hard and tortuous road. The participants identified contact with the public prosecutor service as a second victimization. Such victimization, as described by the respondents, was noted as being indifferent, apathetic, delaying, negligent, or dissuasive. Compounding these feelings was the victims' level of distrust due to infiltration, corruption, and suspected collusion with criminals. This perception was mostly accentuated among testimonies related to disappearances.

It is in this area where, in addition to the dimensions described, the stigmatization of the primary victim appeared as an excuse to leave the responsibility of the investigation to the victim, either through inaction or delaying, indifference, negligence, or even by encouraging the family to take over the inquiries themselves. In this last case, indeed, some victims conducted investigations with all the problems of someone that does not have the statutory mandate of authority: no access to legal resources to find evidence and no physical support to ensure their safety. Even relatives of disappeared persons went to places where bodies of executed people were found. Some participants told about relatives of victims who interviewed organized crime members and requested help from them to find their missing family members.

Another important point is related to the treatment given by the authorities of the "old" criminal justice system and the changes attributed to the new procedure implemented nationwide since 2008. Of the five visited municipalities, three of them had the accusatory system.⁸ However, from the testimonies of victims, as well as from the focus groups, a widespread ignorance was identified regarding how the new system was supposed to work. For the victims, there was no change in treatment and care: procedure and performance of duties, as well as the suspicion of collusion and corruption persisted. The perception of victims was that the new system created more gaps for impunity because it became easier to get rid of the criminal sanction and carry out the process, which increased the threat to the victims. But neither the „old" nor the "new" criminal justice system has been capable to deal with high-impact crimes so far.

One common thread in the answers of victims was the legitimacy and capacity of State institutions at all levels (federal, state, and municipal) to instigate the appearance of violence, including the "legitimate" use of force in the communities and neighbourhoods of the affected municipalities. The local security institutions were only partially able to deal with current levels of crime, even if complemented by informal responses from the community.

In other sectors of provision with basic needs, like housing or infrastructure, a failure by the state to provide the needed assistance, the

08.

It was not possible to collect testimonials about the judiciary process because none of the cases that we knew came to court, even though some of them had a date of 2006.



community tends to search for a (often collective) self-help solution. When it comes to protection from armed violence, such approach rarely presents a solution. The Mexican research data confirmed that the community action on its own has clear limits in facing of the real power of armed drug-trafficking groups.

In the context of ‘petty violence’ the situation can be different, but necessarily desirable either: in such situations of local authorities, professional, and reliable institutions of justice failed to function, various forms of vigilante violence and “mob justice” became spontaneous methods to deal with problems of violence at the community level in other countries in certain periods.

Community action

While there were very few respondents who participated in some form of social activity following victimization, in some cases, efforts were made to demand clarification on their case while others came together to meet, engage with, and create support networks for other victims and/or their families. Activities, protests, and complaints were intended to highlight the flaws of the institutions of justice, the lack of attention their cases received, corruption, impunity, and the abuse of their rights. In short, such actions were made to address the lack of access to justice, to demand their right to know the truth about what happened, and preserve the memory of victims, especially in cases of abduction and murder. It should

also be noted that such activities by the victims were a response to an emotional need: through such actions, empathic processes and cathartic, emotional recognition between people who have gone through similar circumstances could be achieved.

In this sense, three types of social participation of victims can be identified in the testimonies. The first is that such social interaction tried to communicate victim's experiences so that they served as an exemplary case from which others could obtain empirical knowledge on how to prevent victimization or how to act in light of it (where to go for recognition and emotional support from people who have gone through similar circumstances).

Another way that social participation was manifested was through more public and collective situations, where victims began to promote or participate actively at the neighborhood level. The third type of social participation had to do with an open participation in larger organizational processes through which victims sought to exert pressure on the authorities to provide answers -individually and collectively- to the needs of victims and their families.

Moreover, an important point to consider in the design of public policy is related to the use of social networks. Though not considered in the interview guide, primary and secondary victims, community members, and civil society reported the importance of making visible the reality of their communities, counties, and states. While some censorship issues on drug-related violence and the state response were described, participants stated that social networks were a key to alert one another, learn about violence, and encourage sufficient responses by the authorities to actions of organized crime.

References

- Attorney General's Office database** (2012): deceses occurred due to alleged criminal rivalry. <http://www.pgr.gob.mx/prensa/2007/bol12/Ene/b01112.shtm>
- Clarke, Ronald V.** (1997) "The Theory of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design" Available under www.e-docs.net.
- Cohen, Lawrence and Felson, Marcus** (1979). "Social Change and Crime Rate Trends: A Routine Activity Approach", *American Sociological Review*, 44 (4), pp. 588-608.
- Curc6, Felipe** (2010). *La guerra perdida: dos ensayos cr6ticos sobre la pol6tica de combate al crimen organizado 2006-2010*. M6xico, Ediciones Coyoac6n
- Dolan, Chirs** (2003). *Collapsing Masculinities and Weak States - a case study of northern Uganda*. In: Cleaver F (ed), *Masculinity Matters: Men, Masculinities and Gender Relations in Development*. Zed Books, London.
- INEGI** (2011). Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. Encuesta Nacional sobre Inseguridad (ENSI) <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/proyectos/encuestas/hogares/especiales/ensi/default.aspx>. Consulted 02/08/2014.
- INEGI** (2013). Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. Encuesta Nacional de Victimizaci6n y Percepci6n sobre Seguridad P6blica (ENVIPE). <http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/proyectos/encuestas/hogares/ regulares/envi/ default.aspx>. consulted 8/2/2014.
- Johnston, L.** (1996). "What is Vigilantism?" *British Journal of Criminology* Vol. 36 No. 2 (1996).
- Lizarraga, Daniel** (2011) Public information request folio number 0000700117911 by Daniel. <http://www.sedena.gob.mx/leytrans/ifai/pdf/2011/RI.0000700117911.pdf>, Consulted 02/08/2014
- M6xico Unido Contra La Delincuencia**, (2014). *Seguridad P6blica en M6xico 2006-2012*. <http://mucd.org.mx/recursos/Contenidos/Estudiosycifras/documentos2/Seguridad%20Publica%20en%20Mexico%202006-2012.pdf>. Consulted 02/08/2014
- Page, Ella** (2009). *Hombres, masculinidades y armas de fuego, ¿podemos romper el vinculo?* Ella Page, Red de mujeres de IANSA (<http://www.ianasa.org>)

www.iansa-women.org/cs/)

Presidencia (2008). Words pronounced by Felipe Calderon. www.presidencia.gob.mx/2008/09/en-la-guerra-contra-la-delincuencia-no-habra-tregua-ni-cuartel-presidente-felipe-calderon/ Consulted on November 11, 2011. (For some reason the original document has

disappeared, but the statement was recorded by various electronic media agencies).

St. Jean, Peter K.B (2007). *Pockets of Crime. Broken windows, collective efficacy and the criminal point of view.* The University of Chicago Press. Chicago