

Drug Violence in Mexico

Data and Analysis from 2001-2009



Trans-Border Institute

Joan B. Kroc School of Peace Studies

University of San Diego

January 2010

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Mexico closed the decade with an unprecedented level of violence, and a record number of drug-related killings in 2009. In light of the spectacular nature of this violence and the challenge it represents for the Mexican state, it raises serious concerns for the Mexican public, for policy makers, and for Mexico's neighboring countries. This report provides an overview of the trends found in available data on drug-related killings in Mexico, and offers some brief observations about the causes of violence and the effectiveness of recent efforts to combat organized crime.

Measuring Drug-Related Violence

Prior to discussing Mexico's recent problems of drug-related violence, it is important to offer a disclaimer. There are no reliable data for measuring violence related to criminal activity by drug-trafficking organizations (DTOs). This is because such violence does not correspond to a specific legal category of criminal activity.

Hence, despite common references to "drug violence," "narco-violence," "cartel-related violence," "drug war violence," etc. by scholars, government, and media sources, there is some disagreement over the terminology typically used to describe this phenomenon.¹ Lacking a more appropriate or widely accepted label, the term "drug-related violence" is used throughout this discussion.

In terms of data, the Mexican government collects information on drug-related violence through various public security and intelligence agencies. However, its data are not widely accessible to the public and are not reported with regularity. Recent media reports cite PGR and SEDENA figures which indicate that there were 7,724 drug-related killings in 2009.² However, these data are not reported by the government in regular intervals, which makes it difficult to evaluate trends over time. Moreover, state and local governments frequently report their own tallies, which often conflate both "ordinary" and drug-related homicides.

The next best available source of information is violence documented by media sources, several of which have made an explicit attempt to categorize and track drug-related homicides. Although they report their data more regularly and openly, media sources have important limitations and exhibit wide disparities. For example, one major source of data on drug-related killings is the Mexican newspaper *Milenio*, which recently reported that there were 8,281 drug-related killings —nearly one every hour— in 2009.³ Another major media source that follows drug-related killings is the daily newspaper *El Universal*, which reported 7,724 drug-related killings in 2009. Finally, at year's end, *Reforma* news-

paper reported that there were only 6,576 such killings in 2009 (See Table 1).

The range of 1,705 deaths, a difference of roughly 25% between the lowest and highest estimates, is likely due to the use of different classifications for drug-related killings and different methodologies for data collection.⁴ As noted in Table 1, there is disagreement among the major media sources on the number of drug-related killings in almost every state. Indeed, the sole exception is Yucatán, where all three major media sources report no drug related killings in 2009.

In general, with the exception of *Milenio*, the major print media sources that document drug-related killings appear to be on par with or more conservative than the government in classifying and reporting drug-related homicides.⁵ However, because it has the most conservative estimates and regular reporting of its data, *Reforma* has been the primary source of statistics on drug-related violence referenced by the Justice in Mexico Project of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego. Relying on these lower estimates helps to eliminate a type of data error known as a “false positive” or “type II” error.

Reforma is also a fairly reliable source because it has a large, national pool of correspondents who monitor and report the number of drug-related killings in their respective

Table 1. Media Reporting of Drug-Related Killings by State in 2009

	Mil- enio	Univ- versal	Re- forma
Aguascalientes	32	21	34
Baja California	691	444	316
Baja California Sur	4	n.a.	1
Campeche	10	n.a.	2
Coahuila	98	115	151
Colima	1	15	12
Chiapas	31	26	30
Chihuahua	3,637	3,250	2,079
Distrito Federal	97	74	173
Durango	341	734	637
Guanajuato	108	177	146
Guerrero	881	672	638
Hidalgo	26	23	36
Jalisco	60	92	212
México (Edomex)	227	150	350
Michoacan	417	356	371
Morelos	76	74	77
Nayarit	23	24	22
Nuevo León	71	82	99
Oaxaca	141	n.a.	6
Puebla	8	13	26
Querétaro	12	12	14
Quintana Roo	42	24	27
San Luis Potosi	n.a.	n.a.	7
Sinaloa	814	930	767
Sonora	294	222	152
Tabasco	46	42	54
Tamaulipas	31	32	49
Tlaxcala	1	n.a.	3
Veracruz	28	57	55
Yucatán	0	0	0
Zacatecas	28	33	30
TOTAL	8,281	7,724	6,576

n.a. Figures unavailable for some states with low reporting rates, but may be included in the total.

jurisdictions on a weekly basis. In terms of methodology, *Reforma* attempts to avoid the conflation of other homicides (e.g., those committed by drug users) that do not reflect the kind of high impact violence associated with organized crime. Instead, *Reforma* classifies drug-related killings as “narco-executions” (*narcoejecuciones*) based on a combination of factors related to a given incident:

- use of high-caliber and automatic weapons typical of organized crime groups (e.g., .50 caliber, AK- and AR-type weapons);
- execution-style and mass casualty shootings;
- decapitation or dismemberment of corpses;
- indicative markings, written messages, or unusual configurations of the body;
- presence of large quantities of illicit drugs, cash or weapons;
- official reports explicitly indicting the involvement of organized crime.⁶

The Justice in Mexico Project has compiled *Reforma*'s data on drug-related killings as reported at the state level on a weekly basis since November 2007, as well as the annual totals by state from 2006 to 2009. These *Reforma* data encapsulate the first three years of the administration of President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), and are made available to interested researchers through the project's website (www.justiceinmexico.org) as they become available.

Data on earlier trends in drug-related violence are less readily available, given that there was less media scrutiny on the phenomenon prior to recent years. One source, a recent report by Guadalajara-based researcher Marcos Pablo Moloeznik, draws on a combination of data reported by the PGR and *Milenio* to estimate the number of drug-related killings from 2001 to 2006, under Mexican President Vicente Fox Quesada (2000-2006), as ranging between 1,080 and 2,221 deaths annually.⁷ While these figures are also referenced below, most data used in this discussion are drawn from the above-noted information provided by *Reforma*.

Major Trends in Drug-Related Violence in Mexico

There are a number of observable trends in the available data on drug-related violence. The first is that drug-related violence has become extremely elevated since 2005, with especially dramatic increases in the level of drug-related violence in 2008 and 2009. This violence took place in spite of —or perhaps, some would argue, as a result of— massive U.S. and Mexican government efforts to crack down on drug trafficking. The second is that there are important geographic dynamics to the distribution of violence; Mexico's drug violence is highly concentrated in just a few key states considered to be critical zones of production and trafficking. In terms of impacts, the extent to which drug-related violence affected public officials, police, women, and minors under the age of 18 was especially noticeable over the last year. Lastly, of significant concern to U.S. officials and citizens, is the perceived cross-border “spill over” of drug-related violence from Mexico, which is extremely difficult to quantify and outside the scope of this report.

The Number and Rate of Drug-Related Killings in Mexico

The two most immediately observable trends regarding drug-related violence in Mexico have to do with the growth in the absolute number and rate of drug violence (controlling for population). Media reports regularly reference the number of drug-related killings from 2006 to the present: over 16,000 killings, mostly concentrated in 2008 and 2009. However, taking a longer view from 2001 to the end of the decade, it is worth noting that the total number of drug-related killings exceeded 20,000 deaths (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Drug-Related Killings in Mexico, 2001-2009

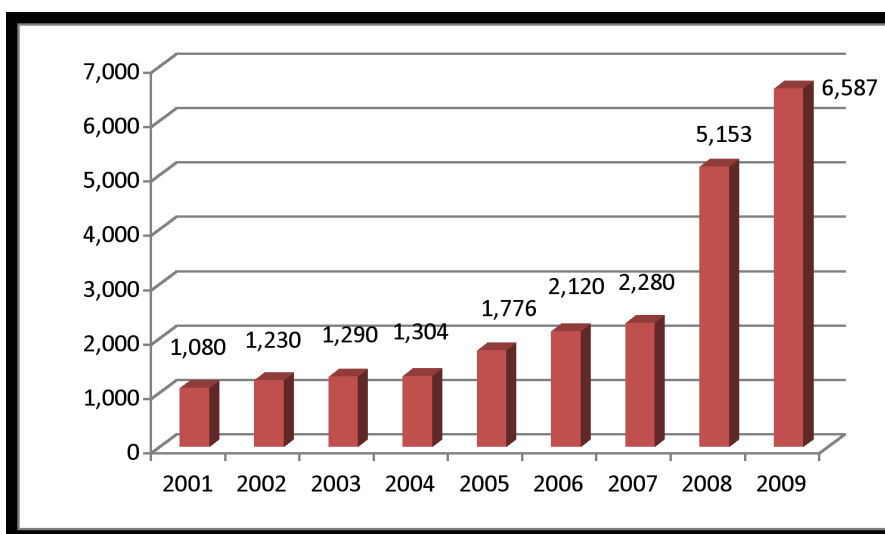
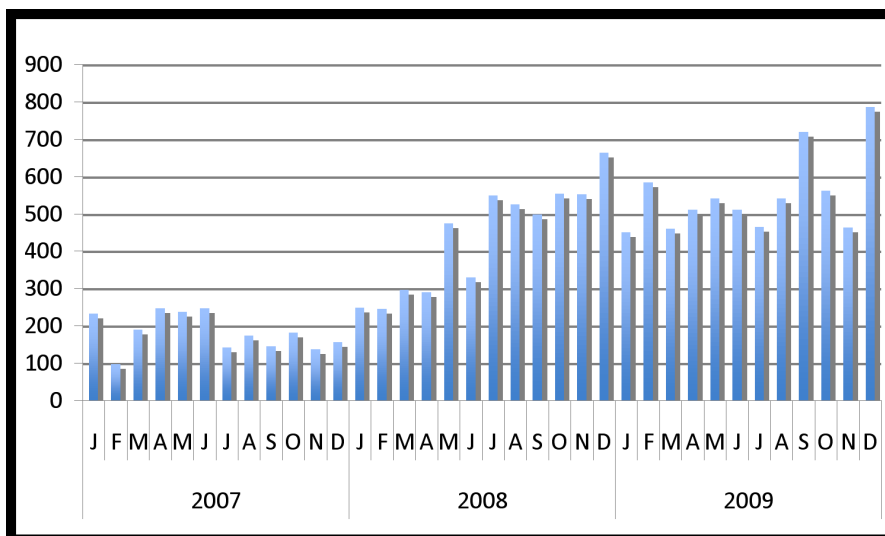


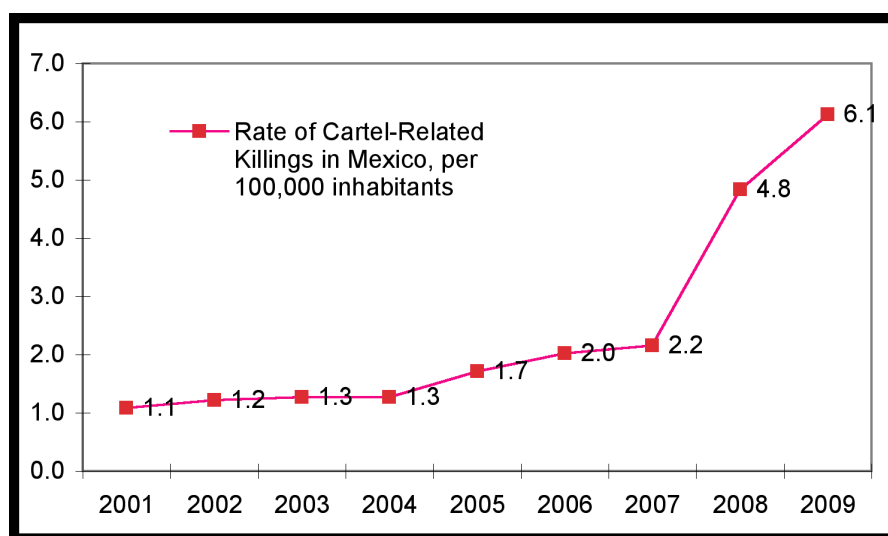
Figure 2. Monthly Drug-Related Killings in Mexico, 2007-2009



Sources: Data for 2001-2005 from Marcos Pablo Moloeznik, "Principales efectos de la militarización del combate al narcotráfico en México," in *Renjones*, No. 61, Sept. 2009-Mar. 2010, Guadalajara: Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente, A.C., 2009. Data for 2006-2009 compiled from *Reforma* in Justice In Mexico Project Narcobarometer Database (www.justiceinmexico.org).

While generally higher since 2008, violence spiked at different points in time. The earliest significant spike occurred in March 2008, the first time that the number of drug-related killings exceeded 400 in one month. However, after a one month lull in June 2008, drug related killings have consistently exceeded that number. While there are no clear patterns or cycles to the violence, there were major spikes in the fall and holiday season in both 2008 and 2009, as well as significant lulls at the start of each summer. In terms of major surges, September and December 2009 significantly surpassed the record number of drug-related killings observed in December 2008.

Figure 3. Drug-Related Killings in Mexico, 2001-2009



Population estimates from Consejo Nacional de Población (www.conapo.gob.mx).

These absolute figures must be contextualized by controlling for population to determine the “rate” of drug-related killings. From 2001-2007, the rate of drug-related killings was relatively low, ranging between 1 to 2.2 drug-related killings per 100,000 people each year. However, the rate of drug-related homicides increased dramatically over the last two years of the decade; more than doubling to 4.8 per 100,000 in 2008 and growing by nearly 20% to 6.1 per 100,000 in 2009 (See Figure 3).

According to conventional estimates, the total number of homicides in Mexico has steadily declined since the mid-20th century, and has ranged between 10 and 12 per 100,000 inhabitants over the last decade. Based on the above figures, drug-related killings represent perhaps 10-20% of all homicides nationwide for most of the 2000s. However, the dramatic increase in such killings in 2008 and 2009 suggests that they now represent a much larger proportion of intentional homicides, and have likely pushed Mexico’s murder rate significantly higher.

Geographic Distribution of Violence

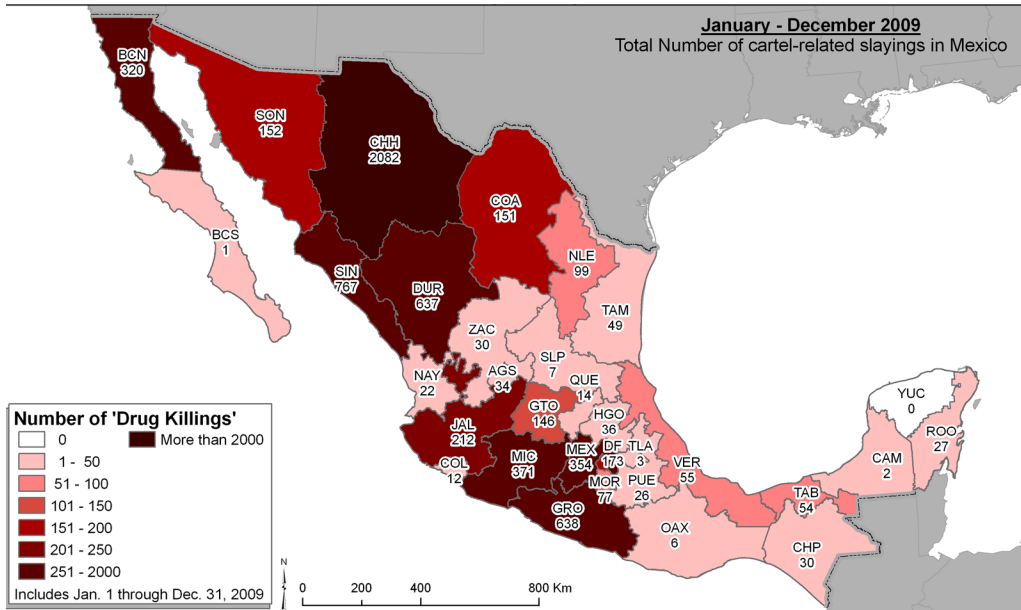
From the outset of the Calderón administration in 2006 to the present, there has been significant variation in the distribution of violence in Mexico. In 2006, violence was mainly concentrated in three Pacific coastal states: Michoacán, Sinaloa, and Guerrero. At that point, the national rate of violence was 2 drug-related killings per 100,000 people, while Michoacán's 543 killings (more than 25% of the national total) gave it a rate of 13 killings per 100,000 people. The following year, however, Michoacán saw a sharp decline to just 238 drug-related killings (10.5% of the national total), or 6 per 100,000; meanwhile, the national rate remained somewhat steady (2.2 per 100,000). Meanwhile, Sinaloa became the state most intensely affected by violence, with a rate of over 13 drug-related killings per 100,000 people in 2007. At the same time, other states began to experience significant increases in the number and rate of drug-related killings (particularly in the northern border region).

By 2008, as Mexico's overall rate of drug-related killings more than doubled, three states experienced rates of violence far greater than in previous years. The state of Chihuahua, home to the traditionally lucrative smuggling corridor of El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, accounted for nearly a third of all drug-related killings, with a rate of 49.1 killings per 100,000. Meanwhile, the already embattled state of Sinaloa saw an increase to 25.7 killings per 100,000. Lastly, Baja California's rate of drug-related killings nearly quadrupled to 19.6 per 100,000. Far from a national phenomenon, these three states accounted for more than half of all of Mexico's drug-related killings that year.

In 2009, drug-related violence increased significantly at the national level, thanks partly to absolute increases in Chihuahua and the dispersion of violence to other states. Especially notable was the increase in drug-related violence in Durango and Sinaloa, Chihuahua's neighboring states in the so-called "Golden Triangle" region. Also significantly impacted were the central Pacific states of Jalisco, Guerrero, and Michoacán. Still, the overall concentration of violence remained in northern Mexico, particularly in states along the U.S.-Mexico border. These states saw a significant increase in the overall rate of violence, from 12.57 to 13.45 drug-related killings per 100,000 from 2008 to 2009, in large part due to the extremely high death toll in Chihuahua.

One notable exception along the border was Baja California, which saw a significant drop in both the number and rate of drug-related killings throughout most of the year. Baja California went from a rate of 19.6 per 100,000 in 2008 (nearly one in eight killings nationwide) to just 10.1 per 100,000 (about one in twenty nationwide). As a result of this apparent turnaround, some authorities and experts began to suggest that Tijuana was a success story in reducing drug-related violence. However, the relative calm in Baja California was broken in late 2009, as a spate of violence brought a dramatic increase in killings beginning in late November. In December alone, Baja California saw roughly 80 drug-related killings, compared to an annual average of about 27 per month.

Figure 4. Drug-Related Killings in Mexico in 2009, by State



Source: State and national totals of cartel-related slayings in Mexico ("ejecuciones" and "narcoejecuciones") obtained from data provided by Reforma newspaper.

Maximum and Minimum values:

Maximum value: 2,082 in Chihuahua

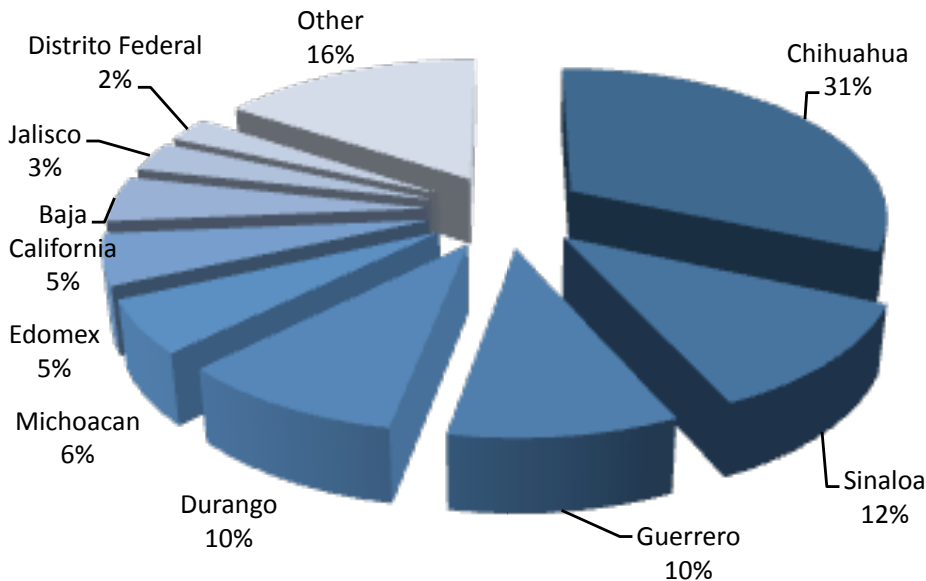
Minimum value: No 'ejecuciones' were recorded in the state of Yucatán according to the source for these maps, Reforma newspaper.

National average: The national total number of 'ejecuciones' (cartel-related slayings) Jan. 1 - Dec. 31, 2009 was 6,587



Maps produced by Theresa Firestone
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Figure 5. Total Share of Drug-Related Killings in 2009, by State



Source: Data compiled from Reforma in Justice In Mexico Project Narcobarometer Database (www.justiceinmexico.org).

The Casualties of Drug-Related Violence in Mexico

Overall, the odds of being the victim of a drug-related killing in Mexico in 2009 were fairly low (around 1 in 16,300).⁸ As noted above, this probability was significantly higher in certain states, notably Chihuahua (roughly 1 in 1,600), Durango (roughly one in 2,400), and Sinaloa (roughly 1 in 3,400). Still, the vast majority of drug-related violence occurs between and among organized crime groups. If you do not happen to be or have ties to a drug trafficker, the odds of being killed by one are extremely slim.

This said, drug violence has also impacted others. According to *Reforma*'s data, an estimated 35 soldiers and nearly 500 police died as casualties of Mexico's drug violence in 2009. This represents roughly 7% of all drug-related killings. Presuming that innocent bystanders reflected a relatively smaller proportion of the total remaining (e.g., less than 3%), this suggests—as government officials have claimed in the past—that roughly 90% of drug-related killings in Mexico involve ranking members and foot soldiers of the DTOs.

While the profile of DTO operatives is not well documented. Government statements indicate that the average drug-related homicide victim is male and 32 years old, though there appears to be a growing number of female and younger casualties. Meanwhile, in addition to dedicated, highly paid enforcers, DTOs also appear to employ otherwise unaffiliated, untrained young men as part-time muscle for as little as \$300 a job. It is likely that the latter are mainly drawn from among Mexico's low-income neighborhoods, though middle- and upper-class families are not immune from participation in—or by targeting—organized crime.

Meanwhile, in 2009, *Reforma* also reported a greater number (424) and proportion of women (10% of all drug related killings) among the deceased compared to the previous year, when the 189 women reported dead represented just under 4% of all drug-related homicides. The growing prominence of women among the dead was noteworthy as several lady “*capos*” (bosses) and “*narco-novias*” (narco-girlfriends) have caught national attention in recent years. Also noteworthy in the final months of 2009 was the fact that several minors—in their early- and mid-teens—fell victim to drug-related violence, possibly a sign of changing tactics or recruitment strategies among DTOs.

Lastly, in recent years, investigative reporters and newsrooms have been especially targeted for drug-related threats and violence, making Mexico one of the world's most dangerous countries for journalists. Journalists perceived by DTOs to be a threat are harassed or even killed, often with overt messages warning other reporters to take note. Since 2000, as many as 60 journalists have reportedly been killed in Mexico (at least 17 in reprisal for their work), with the Christmas murder of Alberto Velazquez marking the 12th journalist killed in 2009. Meanwhile, some DTOs have reportedly deployed “press spokespersons” who direct messages to newsrooms in northern Mexico, often with instructions to portray the Mexican government and military in a negative light.

Causes and Evolution of Drug-Related Violence in Mexico

Based on available data and current research on drug-trafficking in Mexico, the recent escalation and varied geographic patterns of violence appear to be the result of several immediate factors:

- the fractionalization of organized crime groups;
- changing structures of political-bureaucratic corruption;
- recent government efforts to crack down on organized crime (through military deployments and the disruption of DTO leadership structures).

In addition, experts speculate that there may be larger macro-level factors contributing to the violence, such as shrinking drug demand in the United States; falling drug prices; increased border interdiction; or growing domestic demand in Mexico. However, it is not clear to what extent any of these larger trends has a significant or direct impact on violence. What *is* clear is that there has been a dramatic shift in Mexico over the course of the last 30 years. During the early- and mid-1980s, many current top DTO operatives—virtually all of them with roots in Sinaloa—worked within the same loosely knit set of allied organizations that controlled different commissions, or plazas, for smuggling drugs into the United States. At that time, DTOs operated with a level of impunity not seen before (or since) thanks to the protection then afforded to them by corrupt officials at very high levels in the Mexican government.

Beginning in the late 1980s, however, the relative tranquility that existed among the first generation of major Mexican drug traffickers began to erode. Following the murder of DEA agent Enrique “Kiki” Camarena in 1985 and the arrest of Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo in 1989, the subsequent breakdown of the central mechanisms of protection and coordination was accompanied by greater coordination and violence among DTOs. Félix Gallardo’s protégé, Héctor Luis “El Guero” Palma Salazar, was among the first to come into conflict with other traffickers, including his former mentor. The murder of Palma’s two children and his wife (whose severed head was reportedly sent to Palma) was one of the first salvos in a new era of violence among Mexican DTOs, including the so-called Tijuana, Juárez, and Sinaloa cartels.

First, like other second-generation DTOs, the “Tijuana Cartel” or Arellano Felix Organization (AFO), originated from Sinaloa and had its origins working with Félix Gallardo (AFO leaders are believed to be relatives of the former kingpin). In the early 1990s, under Palma’s leadership, Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán and Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada began to directly challenge the AFO. After Palma’s arrest in 1995, his protégés consolidated the “Sinaloa Cartel” and a powerful network of DTOs, also known as “The Federation” by developing ties to other organizations. Finally, the “Juárez Cartel” was headed by Amado Carillo Fuentes, known as the “Lord of the Skies” because he pioneered large airborne shipments to transport drugs from Colombia. Until Carillo Fuentes’ death in 1997, the Juárez cartel was the most powerful Mexican DTO during the 1990s.

In addition, a separate and long-standing smuggling network based in the Gulf of Mexico, commonly known as the “Gulf Cartel,” was headed by Juan García Abrego until the late 1990s. After his arrest in 1995, the organization was brought to national prominence by his eventual successor, Osiel Cárdenas Guillén. In 2001 Cárdenas, famously recruited elite Mexican military personnel as enforcers for his organization, known as “Los Zetas.” Since Cárdenas’ arrest and extradition to the United States in 2003 and 2007, respectively, the Zetas are believed to have taken over the drug trade in the Gulf and parts of Mexico’s southeast.

Cárdenas’ arrest came after the arrest and killing, respectively, of AFO leaders Ramon and Benjamin. Amidst these blows to major DTOs, the web of drug trafficking networks in Mexico became significantly more complex. For several years, the larger cartels had maintained relationships with—and, in some cases, accepted tribute from—smaller, mid-level drug trafficking networks, like the Sonora-based Caro Quintero organization and the Colima-based Amezcua organization. More recently, though, a new generation of mid-level regional and splinter DTOs began to gain significance. Most significant, perhaps, was the Beltran Leyva Organization (BLO), which broke away from the Guzmán-Zambada organization in early 2008, contributing to a recasting of alliances and further violence. Another is the *La Familia Michoacana* (LFM) organization, which got its start in marijuana production and trafficking in the 1980s under the leadership of Carlos Rosales-Mendoza.⁹ Yet another was the Baja California-based network of Eduardo Teodoro “El Teo” García Simental, a former AFO operative known for extreme violence, kidnapping, and alleged ties with the Guzmán-Zambada organization. These organizations’ shifting alliances, diversified criminal activities, and clashes with authorities heightened the intensity and increased the overall toll of violence.

Anti-drug efforts have scored recent blows against these newly emergent organizations, which have been followed in several cases by further violence. In 2009, the U.S. and Mexican governments reportedly targeted LFM for a series of arrests on both sides of the border; in retaliation, LFM operatives reportedly killed a dozen Mexican federal police officers. Meanwhile, the Mexican government’s December 2009 killing of BLO leader Arturo “El Jefe de Jefes” Beltran Leyva and arrest of his brother Carlos were accompanied by a record level of violence during the holiday season and into January 2010. In January 2010, García Simental and other members of his organization were also arrested, though at the release of this report the implications of this arrest were too early to be determined.

Overall, one thing that stands out about the evolution of drug-related violence in recent years is the extent to which it has been driven by the splintering of and competition among DTOs. As noted above, this competition was virtually non-existent as Mexican DTOs began to take over smuggling routes from struggling Columbian traffickers in the 1980s. Effectively, in the 1980s, Mexican DTOs operated primarily under a single hierarchy, with significant protection from the state. Many experts, therefore, speculate

that the centralization of power and pervasive corruption under the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (1929-2000) contributed to the relative harmony and success of Mexican DTOs at this early stage.

Today, however, Mexico enjoys much greater political pluralism, and has experienced significant decentralization of power to state governors and mayors. By and large, this has been a positive development, since the lack of democratic competition and the excessive centralization of power in Mexico for most of the 20th century led to significant corruption and abuses. However, as a result of Mexico's contemporary political situation, the dynamics among DTOs have changed in ways that contribute to greater competition and violence.

Lacking a unified, overarching hierarchy of corrupt state officials to limit competition, the organization of drug trafficking has become more fractionalized. Competing organizations now vie for influence at both the national and sub-national level, sometimes competing to corrupt officials in different agencies within the same administration. As DTOs vie against each other they are rumored to have negotiated various pacts and truces; however, these appear to be short-lived. With the added effect of government counter-drug efforts —sometimes to the benefit of one DTO over another— the end result is a much more chaotic and unpredictable pattern of violent conflict among organized crime groups than Mexico has ever seen.

Final Considerations

The ultimate question is whether the Mexican government has a strategy that can achieve its frequently stated goal of breaking DTOs into smaller and more manageable pieces. Thus far, its de facto strategy has included four components: (1) the direct involvement of military personnel in combating organized crime groups; (2) the sequential targeting of specific organizations for the dismantling of leadership structures; (3) long-term investments and reforms intended to improve the integrity and performance of domestic law enforcement institutions; and (4) the solicitation of U.S. assistance in terms of intelligence, material support, and the southbound interdiction of weapons and cash.

At least in the short term, this strategy appears to have had some success in dismantling organized crime networks, and seems to indicate a sea change in political will among Mexican government officials. Indeed, there have been disruptions of the top leadership structures of virtually every major DTO except for the Guzmán-Zambada organization. These efforts are in accordance with the Calderón administration's explicit agenda to breakdown the operational structures of organized crime, with the hope of turning a national security problem (i.e., DTOs capable of corrupting and directly challenging the state) into a local public security problem (i.e., disaggregated, essentially local criminal organizations). In the end, government officials hope to achieve a result similar to that seen in Colombia, which dismantled its major DTOs in the 1980s and 1990s.

One problem, however, is figuring out whether the government is achieving the ultimate outcomes desired. Higher levels of drug-related violence are not a very helpful indicator: when violence increases, the government claims that it has succeeded in destabilizing the DTOs; when violence declines, the government claims that it has asserted control. If it intends to succeed in achieving its ultimate aims, the Mexican government will need to show both continued progress in both disabling the major DTOs —particularly the formidable Guzmán-Zambada organization— while also significantly reducing the violence that persists in conflict-ridden “hot spots” like Chihuahua, Sinaloa, Durango, and Baja California.

Meanwhile, critics charge that none of the gains thus far have made any significant progress toward the larger goal of reducing the illicit flow of drugs to consumers or the profits earned by organized crime groups, let alone in reducing the overall level of violence. Still others note that the involvement of the military opens a Pandora’s box that includes alleged human rights violations by the armed forces, as well as the defection of military personnel (like the Zetas) to work for the enemy. Finally, critics also note that in Colombia drug trafficking has entered a new phase in which multiple actors —DTOs, violent criminal gangs (*bandas criminales*), former-paramilitaries, and other armed groups— contribute to various forms of crime and citizen insecurity. Comparing Colombia and Mexico is problematic, for many reasons. However, critics assert that the Mexican government strategy’s may trade high-profile DTO violence for more pervasive localized violence that will overwhelm sub-national governments and communities in the years to come.

Such criticisms may prove relevant as political maneuvering intensifies in the lead up to the 2012 presidential elections. Some members of the leftist political opposition, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), claim that Calderón’s crackdown on organized crime was an intentional strategy to gain legitimacy after a highly contested 2006 electoral victory. Meanwhile, members of the old ruling party assert that Mexico’s current security crisis is the result of an inept, inexperienced hand at the wheel of state. The PRI hopes to convince voters that it can get violent organized crime back under control. Some politicians from various parties —including Mr. Calderón’s National Action Party (PAN)— have gone so far as to suggest a return to complicity with the DTOs as a means of restoring order.

Meanwhile, in Mexico and abroad, many have pointed to the on-going bloodshed as a reason to re-think current strategies and approaches to the war on drugs. In 2009, several leading Latin American leaders, including former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, spoke critically against the current policy emphasis on the criminalization of drugs, and called for a new approach centered on “harm reduction” through prevention and treatment. Along these lines, Mexico significantly revised its minor drug possession laws in 2009 to specify the quantities for which a person can be arrested by authorities. The measure —which has been criticized for effectively decriminalizing drugs— has not yet taken full effect, but is intended to reduce street-level corruption and facilitate treatment for habitual drug users. However, many in Mexico argue that, without changes in U.S. drug policy, efforts to combat DTOs or to address Mexico’s own growing domestic demand for drugs will be futile.

Change may already be under way. The United States has shown increased willingness to recognize its shared responsibility for drug-related violence in Mexico, under both President George Bush and President Barack Obama. Both governments have pledged their support to help Mexico's counter-drug efforts through direct assistance—in the form of the three-year, \$1.4 billion aid package known as the Mérida Initiative—and U.S.-side efforts to crack down on the southbound flow of weapons and the “iron river” of deadly firearms that supply Mexican DTOs. Some additional support has been directed to drug use prevention and treatment programs, though critics charge that much more support is needed in these areas to have any significant effect on U.S. drug demand.

At the same time, as in Mexico, there appears to be an emerging discussion on alternative approaches to managing illicit drug use in the United States. Over the last few years, several U.S. states have decriminalized minor drug possession by favoring fines over incarceration, and several states have legalized medical marijuana consumption. In March 2009, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder signaled that his office would no longer focus on prosecuting medical marijuana dispensaries that are compliant with state law, despite federal prohibitions on all marijuana consumption. Meanwhile, at the urging of Congressman Eliot Engle, an ardent supporter of the Mérida Initiative, the lower chamber of the U.S. Congress approved a new commission to evaluate U.S. domestic and international counter-drug initiatives. The Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission Act (H.R. 2134) was debated and passed by the House of Representatives on December 8, 2009, and was referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee the next day.

Whether or not H.R. 2134 is approved, developments in Mexico in 2010 will no doubt play a significant role in the ongoing debate over the effectiveness of current U.S. drug policy. Given the extraordinary number of drug-related killings, 2009 was a year of unprecedented, high-profile violence in Mexico. Since recent blows against key DTOs may produce more turmoil over the ensuing months, the toll of drug-related violence remains high at the start of the new decade. Such violence must be taken in context, since drug-related killings are heavily concentrated in a few key states and very few members of the general population are casualties of this violence. However, the number of drug-related killings has clearly increased to unacceptable levels and creates serious concerns for both Mexican policy makers and citizens. While the problem of drug-related violence should not be exaggerated, it must be addressed. Identifying the best practices and strategies for both the short and long term must be a top priority for both Mexico and the United States.

Endnotes:

¹ For example, references to “drug violence” are deemed by some scholars to be imprecise and insufficiently focused on the relationship to organized crime. References to “narco-violence” are problematic because “narcotic” refers more properly to only one subset of illicit drugs. Other security experts avoid references to Mexican organized crime groups as “cartels,” since the term has different connotations in the field of economics. Still others bristle at the use of the term “drug war” because of the policy approaches that follow from metaphorical references to warfare. While these arguments have merit, they ultimately come down to semantic differences beyond the scope of this discussion.

² These figures from PGR/SEDENA were reported on January 5, 2010 and obtained by the Trans-Border Institute from the news agency Imagen del Golfo (www.imagendelgolfo.com.mx). According to this article, there were 560 killings in 2006, 3,537 in 2007, 5,903 in 2008, and 7,742 in 2009. The same report indicates that there were 195 females killed in 2008 and 425 in 2009; 535 police in 2008 and 470 in 2009; and 52 and 35 military personnel in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Meanwhile, a recent El Universal article reports the same figure for 2009, but different figures for all previous years: 1,573 in 2005, 2,221 in 2006, 2,673 in 2007, and 5,630 in 2008. Esther Sánchez, “Aumenta nivel de violencia del narco,” El Universal, January 1, 2010.

³ “Un ejecutado cada hora durante 2009,” Milenio, January 2, 2010.

⁴ Milenio, for example, reports nearly 700 cartel related killings in Baja California, a figure that appears to include virtually all homicides for the state.

⁵ This could reflect a lack of access to complete information from official sources, as well different classification systems by official sources, and even erroneous reporting on the part of either the government or the media.

⁶ These criteria were outlined for the Trans-Border Institute by a Reforma reporter who works closely with these data.

⁷ Moloeznik, M. P. (2009). “Principales efectos de la militarización del combate al narcotráfico en México.” Renglones(61).

⁸ In Mexico, a country of more than 100 million people, the odds of being killed in a drug-related homicide in 2009 were one in 16,328; almost three times less likely than being killed in an automobile accident in the United States (about one in 6,500). Bailey, Ronald. “Don’t Be Terrorized: You’re More Likely to Die of a Car Accident, Drowning, Fire, or Murder.” Reason.com (<http://reason.com/archives/2006/08/11/dont-be-terrorized>).

⁹ Drug Enforcement Agency, “La Familia Michoacana Fact Sheet,” <http://www.justice.gov/dea/pubs/pressrel/pr102209a1.pdf>

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