



2013: The State of Security in Mexico

By David A. Shirk

Director, Justice in Mexico Project, University of San Diego

Global Fellow, Mexico Institute of the Woodrow Wilson Center

Is Security Better in Mexico Today?

The end of the year is typically a time of self-congratulatory reflection for every Mexican president, who presents his annual report to the Congress and—typically—showboats the accomplishments of his administration. Accordingly, during recent weeks there has been much public debate on the job performance of Mexico's new president, Enrique Peña Nieto, and whether he has anything to crow about after his first year in office.

The state of security in Mexico, in particular, has been a matter of ardent discussion among the Mexican intelligentsia and comment-o-cracia, as it is arguably the most important question facing Mexico today: Is the Mexican security situation better today than it was twelve months ago? And, regardless, how can Mexico make greater progress toward improving public order, increasing access to justice, and building overall public confidence in the judicial sector?

What Is Security and For Whom?

The prior question that often eludes discussion is: what do we mean by security, and for whom? How do we define and prioritize security threats? This was the question posed by my colleague, security expert [Phil Williams](#) at a recent security roundtable hosted by the United Nations Office of Drug Control Policy in Mexico City. While seemingly simple, the question illustrates the often divergent objectives with which politicians and the public approach matters of "security."

Professor Williams' point is that the concept of security varies depending on one's point of view. When we address the question at the global level, for international organizations and great powers the matter of security often hinges on topics like reducing nuclear proliferation or other forms of conflict among states, such as cyber-spying or defending territorial waters. Such threats violate the basic notions of state sovereignty that have governed the international system since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

At the national level, a country's leaders are typically more concerned with internal threats against the state, which the great sociologist Max Weber described as threats to a state's "monopoly on the legitimate use of force," such as the powerful organized crime groups that Mexico has faced in recent years, or insurgent forces that seek to topple the government.

Yet, while the above issues occupy much of the real estate on the front pages, they often have little meaning or importance for ordinary people. As bad as rates of violent crime have become in Mexico, the average person is still more likely to die from car accidents or preventable illnesses—particularly self-inflicted diseases such as cardiovascular disease cirrhosis, or diabetes—than a bullet from a drug trafficker. From a "human security" perspective, then, most Mexicans (and U.S. citizens, as well) should be more afraid of a cheeseburger and a soda than the notorious Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

That said, it would be foolhardy for the Mexican state to ignore the problem of violent crime, and crusade only against [soft drinks](#) and cholesterol. Indeed, looking again to the question of *cui bono*—who benefits?—it is clear that violent crime is a real life threatening problem for a significant sub-segment of the population in Mexico. Those sitting comfortably at the chic restaurant tables of the Condesa-Roma District in Mexico City face far fewer threats to their immediate existence than those living in Mexico's most marginalized communities, where crime and violence is too often the most proximate cause of death.

Indeed, far too many young, poor Mexican men will not have the "luxury" of death by disease because their lives will be cut short by [American-made bullets](#). Indeed, violent crime has become the major security threat for young men aged 18-40 over the last decade, as illustrated by the [Mexico Health Atlas](#) unveiled recently at the [UCSD Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies](#) by Alberto Díaz Cayeros, Melissa Floca, and Micah Gell-Redman. As posited in another study by [José Merino, Jessica Zarkin y Eduardo Fierro](#), young Mexican men—and a growing number of Mexican women—are three times more likely to die a violent death than in Honduras, the most violent country in the hemisphere.

What Has Changed in a Year in Mexico?

As illustrated by numerous studies and analyses, including the [Mexico Peace Index](#) published recently by Vision of Humanity, Mexico's security situation has seriously deteriorated on a wide range of measures over the last decade, especially those which affect the vulnerable populations noted above. Thus, it would be naive to think that a change in administration could reverse long-term trends in just a few hundred days. Still, Mr. Peña Nieto made several bold promises while on the campaign trail in 2012, including the claim that his administration would [cut violence by 50%](#) during his first year in office.

It would have been much wiser to temper expectations. Mexico's elevated rates of violent crime started rising well before Felipe Calderón, Mr. Peña Nieto's predecessor, took office in 2006. In an effort to address the problem, Mr. Calderón launched an all-out war on drugs that many security experts believe exacerbated the violence by splintering Mexico's cartels into smaller, less predictable, and more dangerous organized crime groups. As a result, Mr. Peña Nieto inherited a

country with a serious security threat or, really, dual security threats—both in terms of national security and human security.

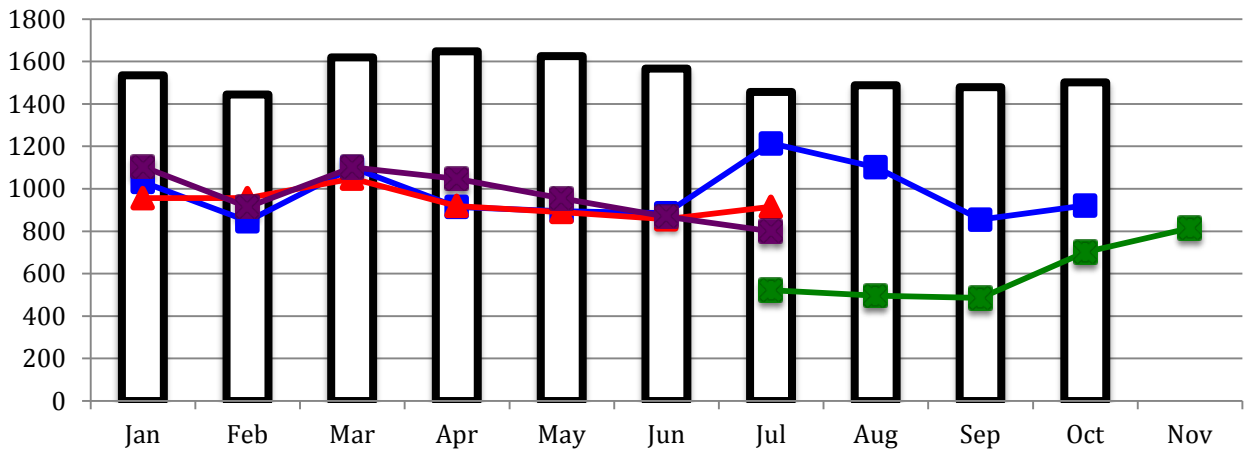
Among the flashy policy measures Mr. Peña Nieto announced a year ago—a National Gendarmerie and a consultancy for Colombia's top cop—there was little in the way of substance. Indeed, for most of the last year, it has seemed as though Mr. Peña Nieto has had no security strategy. Yet, there are, in fact, some very perceptible and consequential shifts in his approach. As [Alejandro Hope](#) points out in a recent article in *Nexos* magazine, the Peña Nieto administration has made a deliberate effort to shift the narrative away from problems of crime and violence. An important part of this effort has been to limit commentary and access to public information on security matters. Whereas the Calderón administration was obsessed with security, President Peña Nieto has been obsessed with *not* being obsessed with security. An aggressive press campaign has tried to make Mexico the new darling of international investors, as the BRIC countries have begun to lose their luster.

In addition to his efforts to change the narrative, Mr. Peña Nieto has also made an effort to greatly re-centralize control over security policy. When he came into office, the president promised more coordination of security matters with state governors than under his predecessor. With two thirds of Mexican governors coming from his own party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), that was an easy promise to keep. The question that many have posited is whether that coordination implied a return to the "bad old days" when PRI governors coddled drug traffickers and "controlled" organized crime by lining their own pockets with bribes. It may be too soon to tell, but a recent U.S. indictment of former-PRI governor Thomas Yarrington underscores this question.

This points to another, perhaps unexpected change under Mr. Peña Nieto: continuity in the U.S.-Mexican security relationship across administrations. Over the last year, U.S.-Mexico security cooperation has experienced significant setbacks. At the outset, the Peña Nieto administration insisted that Mexico's cooperation with the United States on security matters would be reined back and managed through the single "ticket window" (*ventanilla única*) of Mexico's interior ministry. Yet, over the last year, pressure from other federal and state level agencies has seemingly led to a softening of this policy of centralization. Many aspects of cooperation have continued, in part because of the close ties and tremendous interdependence that has developed between U.S. and Mexican law enforcement agencies working toward common objectives. Indeed, such cooperation helped Mr. Peña Nieto take down the head of the Zetas, Mexico's most notorious and violent drug cartel, as well as key leaders in the Gulf Cartel.

Ultimately, the key question is whether the current government's efforts have actually been accompanied by a decrease in violence. The answer is a qualified "yes." While violence appears to have declined somewhat under President Peña Nieto, it definitely did not go away. Last year, the Justice in Mexico project's [annual drug violence report](#) found that violent homicides probably reached a peak in 2010 and 2011, and began to decline significantly in 2012. Thanks to a significant drop in violence in places like Tijuana, Monterrey, and Ciudad Juárez, the number of homicides in Mexico dropped by the thousands. This trend has continued in 2013, and in the final analysis will likely result in a slight reduction in Mexico's overall homicide rate compared to the previous year, perhaps as much as 20 percent, but not quite what Mr. Peña Nieto had hoped for.

Officially Registered Homicides and Media Tallies of Organized Crime Homicides in Mexico in 2013



SNSP-SEGOB (All intentional homicides)
 ■ Lantia
 ▲ Milenio
 ■ SNSP-SEGOB (OCG)*
 ■ Reforma

SOURCE: Official data on all intentional homicides from the Mexican Interior Ministry (SEGOB) reports on data compiled for Sistema Nacional de Seguridad Pública (SNSP). Data on homicides classified as involving organized crime groups (OCGs) compiled by the Justice in Mexico Project (www.justiceinmexico.org) from SNSP-SEGOB, as well as independent media outlets Lantia, Milenio, and Reforma.

Regardless, now is certainly not the time to celebrate. As [Eduardo Guerrero](#) makes clear in the same edition of *Nexos* noted above, violence remains a persistent problem in Mexico. Moreover, violence has increased dramatically in certain categories and especially in certain parts of the country. Kidnapping and extortion are a growing concern, and rising crime and violence from organized crime groups and self-defense forces in Michoacán and Guerrero have become a mounting preoccupation in the Peña Nieto era.

Also, while Mr. Peña Nieto has tried earnestly to shift the narrative away from drugs and organized crime, there is no getting around these issues. The best available estimates suggest that organized crime accounts for between 45% and 60% of all homicides in Mexico. Moreover, even if the global drug prohibition regime were to collapse entirely over the coming years—as both activists and world leaders have increasingly called for—Mexico's organized crime groups will continue to present a serious threat through kidnapping, racketeering, and other violent forms of organized crime.

What Is To Be Done?

In the long run, a more comprehensive approach to addressing the macro-level causes of crime and violence—such as promoting job growth, investing in education, and fostering social development programs (e.g., after school sports programs) will go a long way to reducing the threats to both the Mexican state and ordinary Mexicans. Improving security in Mexico—security for all Mexicans—

requires action on addressing the long-term socio-economic problems that keep nearly half of its people living in poverty and create incentives to enter the informal economy and illicit markets.

While his detractors may ridicule the notion that he is more than a pretty haircut, Mr. Peña Nieto actually seems to understand this. In his first year in office, the Peña Nieto government has pushed forward a wide range of long languishing reforms to fiscal, energy, and education policy that even his political opposition believes are necessary to move Mexico forward. Better education and more jobs are key to keeping people out of the illicit economy that sustains Mexico's criminal underworld. More government revenue, properly collected and expended, will bring Mexico better police, courts, and—ultimately—security. The devil is, of course, in the details, and many knowledgeable observers rightly claim that Mr. [Peña Nieto's reforms are too watered down](#) to provide the medicine that Mexico urgently needs to cure its woes on these fronts. Whether he has the right solutions to Mexico's security crisis, Mr. Peña Nieto has at least begun to refocus the country's efforts on fixing the macro-level problems that contribute to the un-rule of law in Mexico.

One area where Mr. Peña Nieto needs to focus more of his attention, though, is in bolstering the limited capacity of the Mexican state to address the security threats it presently faces. While economic development and education will help move Mexico forward in the long run, the country faces a real and present danger in the form of organized crime. Unfortunately, Mexico's judicial sector is exceedingly weak. Current police salaries of \$9,000-10,000 a year are below the average for public sector employees and well below the average income for Mexico of about \$14,000 GDP per capita. As a result, Mexico largely gets what it pays for: police that are under-trained, poorly motivated, and highly corruptible. This fall, the Peña Nieto administration made an important start by channeling millions of dollars into state and local police forces through federal grant programs. However, further monitoring and analysis will be needed to ensure that these funds are being used properly and effectively to improve crime prevention and police response capability.

Also, Mexico's courts remain woefully inefficient in processing criminal cases, and the slow pace of reforms passed in 2008 means that only 633 of Mexico's 2,400+ municipalities have adopted new procedures that will help to modernize the criminal justice system. With a constitutionally imposed deadline to implement these reforms by 2016, Mr. Peña Nieto pushed forward an initiative this summer that seeks to introduce a uniform code of criminal procedure in all 31 states and the federal district over the coming year, though there are many questions about whether a single code is the best approach to deal with Mexico's widely varying state and local legal contexts. What no one has quite figured out is how to effectively monitor and measure the impact of judicial sector reform in Mexico, since there are few good metrics, almost no baseline indicators, and many different variables at play. In the last year, my colleague Matt Ingram produced an [important study for the Mexico Institute at the Wilson Center](#) that tracks the processing of criminal cases in court, which is an important step toward understanding the effects of recent reforms. Also, our Justice in Mexico Project has tried to focus on measuring capacity and professionalism through [surveys of judicial sector personnel](#) producing some of the first major surveys of police, judges, prosecutors, and public defenders in Latin America.

Final Thoughts

One indication of what has changed is the low-key approach that Mr. Peña Nieto has taken, as the

president has eschewed the typical pomp and circumstances of the annual "informe." Often what goes unsaid is the most important thing to look for. This is still the first leg of a long six-year term, and Mr. Peña Nieto is not running any victory laps after just one year in office. That is a prudent approach. The still very high rate of violent crime, as well as the occasional massacre or political assassination, shows that there is still an enormous amount of work to be done to improve security both for the Mexican state and for ordinary people in Mexico. Whether one supports him or not politically, we should all wish Mr. Peña Nieto success in doing so.