

CRIMINAL NETWORKS AND HUMAN SECURITY IN MEXICO

By Lee Cotton and Cassy Dorff
University of Denver

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Military action in 2006 against the main drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) transformed Mexico into a more fragile and violent state, resulting in higher levels of human insecurity, greater government corruption, and an increase in the number of DTOs overall.
- Community building and education are the keys to fostering mediums of transparency and accountability. Military policing lacks the developmental and democratic tools required to diminish the territorial control of DTOs.

FEDERAL INITIATIVES, NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

Prior to Felipe Calderón's inauguration into the office of President of the United Mexican States, there were four primary drug cartels: the Gulf Cartel, the Juárez Cartel, the Sinaloa Cartel and the Tijuana Cartel.¹ Each of these drug trafficking organizations commanded its own region of Mexico, operating in relative independence with few violent clashes prior to the Calderón administration.² Ten days after assuming office, President Calderón deployed 4,000 troops to his home state of Michoacán in response to an increase in drug violence at the end of the Fox Administration.³ Operation Michoacán served as a catalyst for future deployments of military servicemen across the country to snuff out the leaders and networks of these groups. Despite the president's profound initiatives to eliminate an illegal market that threatened Mexican national and civilian security and development, the "War on Drugs" yielded higher levels of violence and revealed webs of corruption at many levels of the Mexican government across the entire country.

Building off of machine-coded data provided from the ICEWS project,⁴ we examined actor-coded event data that captures conflict events from different "sender" and "target" actors from the 2006-2012 drug war period in Mexico. Our data shows that there was a 63% increase in the number of violent events in the years that President Calderón was in office as a result of two factors: (1) intra-governmental coordination problems; and (2) the rise of the military's presence in conflict-affected areas. Due to expanded military activity and presence in more localized communities, cartels and criminal gangs fractured into smaller, more competitive violent DTOs. The number of incidents in which Mexican civilians were targets of violence rose 61.7%.

The Mexican government responded to this increase in violence by engaging in a strategy of leadership decapitation by capturing or killing DTO leaders. For example, the military killed the head of the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, Arturo Beltrán Leyva, in 2009. But with his death came the formation of smaller but equally violent Cartel Pacifico Sur (The South Pacific Cartel). Like the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, members of La Familia Michoacana defected at the end of 2010 to form Los Caballeros Templarios (The Knights Templar).⁵

WHY SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT NEED EACH OTHER

One key takeaway from our analysis is that the government's dependency on military force as the primary response to DTOs has been ineffective. Our research provides evidence that more military action – whether arrests or targeted killings – does not bring the government any closer to eliminating DTOs, nor does it diminish violence against civilians. The systemic problems of impunity and injustice require sustained, non-military attention at the local level. The

Federal government must consider avenues for resource reallocation that strengthens local institutions, rather than solely expanding the capacity of the armed forces. By creating trusted political spaces at the local level, citizens have a formal setting to express grievances that directly affect them. At present, local authorities remain underpaid and lack proper institutional incentives to act accountable to the needs of their community.

Localized development cannot, of course, exist independent of security measures. Currently, Mexico is potentially in the beginning of a slow transitional period as it reforms its judicial systems to increase transparency and combat impunity. During this time, military and police forces will be needed to facilitate the transition. Rather than leading efforts to crush DTOs, however, local police forces must work to provide protection and security to ensure that judges can operate safely and that citizens feel secure and empowered within the walls of their community meetings. The United States has provided Mexico with at least \$1.368 billion since 2010 to reduce drug-related violence under the Mérida Initiative; therefore, it should exercise the power of the purse to ensure Mexico continues development projects that focus on non-military solutions to resolving collective problems at the local level.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Korbel Quickfacts concisely explore the policy-relevant dynamics that characterize contemporary security challenges. The series is produced by the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy, a center of excellence within the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver, with support from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The views expressed are those of the author.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Cotton is a graduate student at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. Cassy Dorff, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of New Mexico. Previously she was a research fellow at the Sié Chéou-Kang Center for International Security and Diplomacy at the University of Denver. Her research investigates the causes, consequences and evolution of political conflict, with an emphasis on civilian agency in violent settings. Dr. Dorff's current projects employ a variety of methodological approaches, including surveys and network analysis, to understand the ways in which civilians influence the evolution of political conflicts.

ENDNOTES

- 1 June Beittel. "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations." LIBRARY OF CONGRESS WASHINGTON DC CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE, 2015.
- 2 Kimberly Heinle, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk. "Drug violence in Mexico: Data and analysis through 2013." *Justice in Mexico Project, University of San Diego* (2014).
- 3 Nathaniel Parish Flannery. "Calderon's War." *Journal of International Affairs* 66, no. 2 (2013): 181.
- 4 Integrated Conflict Early Warning Systems (ICEWS) is a project that uses automated machine-coding to collect data related to conflict events.
- 5 Beittel, "Mexico: Organized Crime and Drug Trafficking Organizations."