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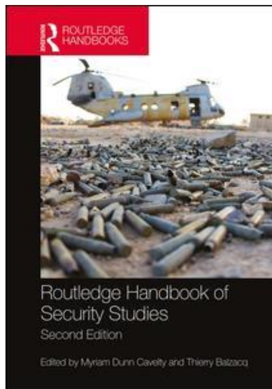

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Analysing Drug Violence In Mexico

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29

ANALYSING DRUG VIOLENCE IN MEXICO

Kimberly Heinle, Octavio Rodríguez Ferreira, and David A. Shirk

In the mid-2000s, Mexico began to experience an increase in violent acts perpetrated by organized crime groups (OCGs) involved in drug trafficking, even as overall levels of societal violence continued a decades-long decline. By 2007, when Mexico's homicide rate reached the all-time low of 8.1 per 100,000 inhabitants, the number of homicides attributed to organized crime groups involved in drug trafficking had more than doubled from about 1,000 such killings in 2001. Yet, this was only the beginning. Over the next five years, Mexico's homicide rate nearly tripled as a result of a dramatic increase in the number of so-called drug-related killings – or 'drug violence' – that accompanied an all-out shooting war among OCGs.

Amid this dramatic increase in violence, the authors coordinated a research initiative to track and analyse the patterns of homicide associated with OCGs involved in drug trafficking through a series of policy reports (Heinle et al. 2014; Heinle et al. 2015; Molzahn et al. 2012; Molzahn et al. 2013). This chapter draws on these efforts and the dataset collected by the authors to examine the patterns of violence associated with Mexican OCGs, and offers several observations about the nature and implications of this violence.

The chapter has three parts. In the first, we look at patterns of violence in Mexico, using data on homicides, looking specifically at the role of organized-crime-style violence. In the second, we present data on specificities of the violence, including local distribution, changing modes of violence, and victim characteristics. In the third, we analyse the data and link it to the broader context of politics and security in Mexico.

Understanding Mexico's recent violence

It is important to note that how one measures violence is contingent on many, often highly subjective factors. By some measures, the level of violence in Mexico is 'modest', particularly within the Western Hemisphere. Even when Mexico's organized-crime-related violence was arguably at its worst, the national homicide rate – one of the most commonly used indicators for comparing levels of violence – was much lower than in other countries in the Americas (UNODC 2014). However, other factors make it appear far less modest. This is the focus of the first sub-chapter. In addition to understanding the scale and rate of crime and violence in Mexico in recent years, it is also necessary to underscore its sources. In the second sub-chapter, we turn to the role of OCGs in the recent increase of violence, particularly those involved in drug trafficking.

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Mexico's homicide rate in comparison

Despite valid concerns about the problems of crime and violence in Mexico, the country's homicide rate was about average for the Western Hemisphere, even amid the dramatic increase in violence in the first ten to fifteen years of the century. However, while Mexico's violence is about average when it comes to the rate of homicides per capita in Latin America, its security challenges are arguably of significant concern for a number of reasons. First, the rate of homicides in Mexico escalated quite dramatically in recent years, reversing a multi-decade downward trend (see Figure 29.1). Historical data suggest that homicide in Mexico generally declined from the 1930s into the mid-2000s.[1] However, Mexico's rate climbed sharply from 2007 to 2011, increasing threefold from roughly 8.1 to 23.5 homicides per 100,000, according to figures from Mexico's National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Information (INEGI) (INEGI 2014).[2] By World Health Organization standards, a homicide rate over 10 per 100,000 is considered to be at 'epidemic' levels (UNDP 2013). While recent data suggest that the homicide rate has now fallen below this threshold, both domestic and international concerns about the problem of violence in Mexico persist because the problem of violence is also accompanied by rampant impunity (Heinle et al. 2015). As a result, the vast majority of murders are not investigated and, as a result, perpetrators go unpunished under the law.

A second reason why Mexico's violence has provoked such enormous concern has to do with the sheer number of murders in the country that resulted from these increases. Because Mexico had an estimated population of nearly 120 million people in 2014 – the third largest population among all countries in the Americas, after the United States and Brazil – even a modest increase in Mexico's homicide rate translates into the loss of thousands of lives. Indeed, during the four-year rise in violence from 2007 to 2011, the number of murders increased from 8,867 to 27,199. While Mexico might *appear* to be 'average' for the region, no other country in the Western

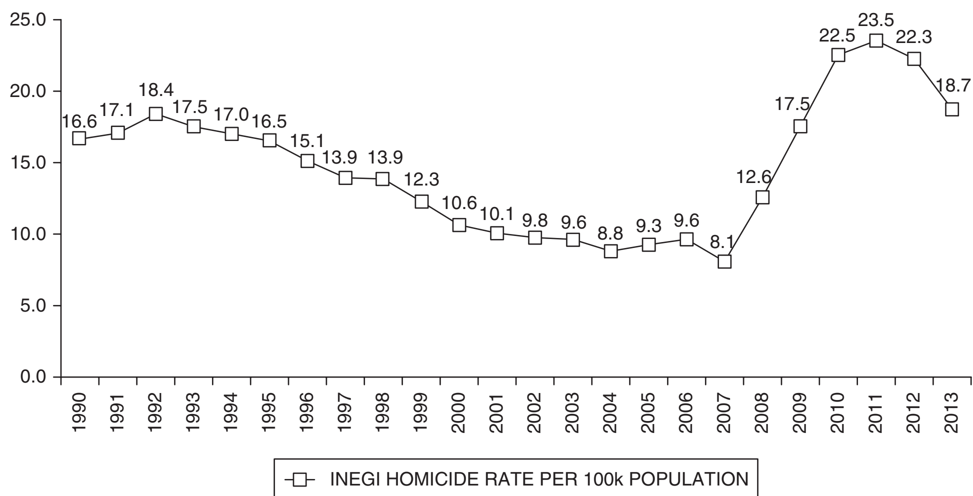

Figure 29.1 Homicide rate in Mexico, 1990–2013

Source of data: INEGI (2014). Authors' calculations based on INEGI homicide data and Consejo Nacional de Población's (CONAPO) population estimates for all years. Results vary when revised CONAPO population estimates from later years are applied (CONAPO 2014).

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Hemisphere saw such a large increase either in the homicide rate or in the absolute number of homicides over the last two decades.[3]

What is particularly concerning about Mexico's sudden increases in homicides in recent years is that much or most of this violence is attributable to OCGs, commonly defined as groups of individuals acting in concert over a sustained period of time with the objective of deliberately violating established law, often with transnational organizational capabilities and influences. Still, as scholars of organized crime have demonstrated, violence is not necessarily the norm even in the underworld (Andreas and Wallman 2009). Thus, Mexico's recent surge in violence requires some understanding of recent dynamics among Mexican OCGs, particularly those involved in drug trafficking.

The role of drug trafficking and organized crime in Mexico

Mexico's increases in violence have been closely connected to the problem of organized crime, and especially drug trafficking and related activities. Mexico's contemporary OCGs have their roots in the advent of alcohol and drug prohibition in the 1920s and 1930s. While alcohol smuggling from Mexico faded away almost immediately after prohibition was repealed in the United States in 1933, the smuggling of heroin and marijuana – both produced in Mexico – has continued into the present (Astorga and Shirk 2010).

Drug trafficking became dramatically more profitable and well consolidated in Mexico when it became a major transit point for cocaine trafficking from Colombia to the United States in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. Astorga and Shirk 2013; Shannon 1988). With the decline of Colombia's major drug-trafficking organizations, Mexican criminal organizations came to dominate the business by the late 1980s. As they did, Mexican traffickers also became involved in producing and trafficking synthetic drugs, like methamphetamines and MDMA (Ecstasy). Like the Colombians that they superseded, Mexican traffickers were commonly described as 'cartels' because they employed some of the same practices as business organizations that seek to generally reduce market competition (e.g., explicitly or implicitly negotiating territories for operation and distribution). Indeed, the lack of market competition was key to the success of Mexican drug traffickers, who are believed by many experts to have been directly involved in protecting and regulating the illicit drug trade (cf. Astorga 2000; Flores 2009).

This relatively harmonious arrangement changed in the aftermath of the 1985 murder of US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agent Enrique 'Kiki' Camarena, which led to intense US pressure on the Mexican authorities to arrest the three main leaders of the so-called Guadalajara Cartel. The splitting of the Guadalajara Cartel into rival, regionally based factions in around 1989 set in motion a competitive struggle for supply routes that has continued into the present. Starting in the early 2000s, that competition grew significantly more intense and more violent due to a series of government crackdowns, internal power struggles, and splits among Mexico's OCGs (Astorga and Shirk 2010).

Over the last several years, the accumulated toll of this violence has been the loss of tens of thousands of lives, and the problem has become a central preoccupation for both government officials and ordinary citizens. Moreover, as the level of violence in Mexico grew, it also became more diffuse in a number of ways. While there is now considerable evidence that the number of homicides in Mexico has begun to subside over the past few years, violence remains relatively high and the security situation remains highly problematic in certain parts of the country. Thus careful monitoring and study are still needed to understand the manifestations, root causes, and possible solutions to the problem of violence in Mexico.

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Drug violence in Mexico: data and findings

This section examines Mexico's drug-related and organized-crime-style violence in substantial detail, drawing on several years of data gathering and research, as well as the latest available data from a variety of sources.[4] This section has three sub-sections. The first looks at organized-crime-style violence in relation to other types of violence; the second at its local distribution and geographic dispersion. The third notices a change in modes of violence and looks particularly at the type of victims this violence is causing.

Organized-crime-style violence

A review of data generated by various independent sources shows that a large proportion of homicides in recent years bears characteristics typically associated with organized-crime-style violence: gun battles, group executions, torture, dismemberment, high-powered weaponry, beheadings, narco-messages, mass graves, and other methods used by drug trafficking groups and OCGs. About a third – and as many as half – of all homicides identified in 2014 bore such characteristics (Heinle et al. 2015). The solid lines in Figure 29.2 plot the available data on organized-crime-style homicides from National Public Security System (SNSP) (2007–11), and national media outlets *Reforma* (2006–12 and 2013–14) and *Milenio* (2007–14), while the dotted lines show the authors' projections for SNSP (2012–13) and also *Reforma* (2013).[5] All available figures and projections on organized-crime-style homicides are plotted as lines against the bars that show the official tallies of intentional homicides reported by both INEGI and SNSP.

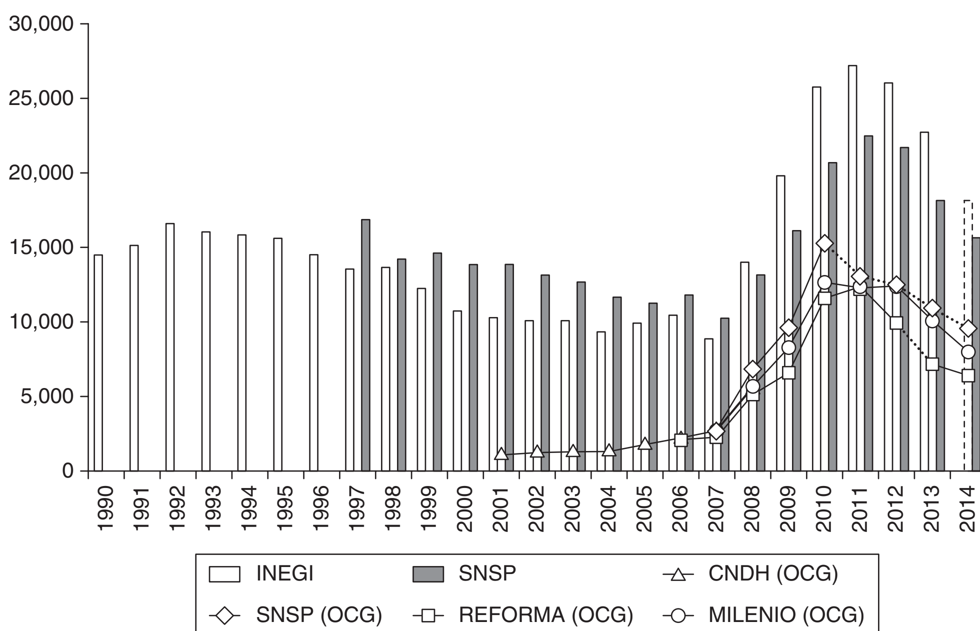

Figure 29.2 Comparison of homicide and organized crime homicide data for various sources, 1990–2014

Sources of data: INEGI (2014), SNSP (2014), *Reforma*, *Milenio*.

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The last complete annual dataset from the Mexican government on organized-crime-style homicides was released in 2010, so there have been no publicly available official annual figures on such killings since then. However, based on the trajectory of figures released in recent years, the authors estimate that the government's official tally for organized-crime-style homicides came to roughly 8,000 deaths in 2014. *Milenio*, which produced its figures throughout the year, reported 7,993 organized-crime-style homicides for the same year. Meanwhile, in 2014, *Reforma* put the figure for organized-crime-style homicides at 6,400, the lowest number reported by that newspaper since 2008. However, it is notable that *Reforma*'s tallies appeared to be less complete and less consistent in 2014 than in previous years.

Determining the approximate proportion of homicides resulting from organized-crime-style violence depends upon which sources are used to calculate each figure (see Table 29.1). Based on the estimated number of INEGI homicides provided above, in 2014 organized-crime-style homicides represented approximately 30–40 per cent of the total number of all homicides, according to figures from *Milenio* (38.7 per cent), *Reforma* (31.0 per cent), and the consulting firm Lantia (36.3 per cent).[6] Because SNSP intentional homicide figures are typically lower than those produced by INEGI, tallies of organized-crime-style homicides represent a significantly larger proportion – 40–50 per cent – of all homicides when SNSP data are referenced using these same tallies and estimates: *Milenio*, 51.1 per cent; *Reforma*, 40.9 per cent; and Lantia, 48.0 per cent. In short, whether organized-crime-style homicides represent just one-in-three or as many as half of all homicides, they constitute a major form of murder in Mexico.

Here the authors observe two additional patterns associated with Mexico's recent increase in violence, and especially the pattern of violence commonly associated with drug trafficking. First, while there is a general perception that Mexico's violence is pervasive and persistent throughout the country, the reality is that violence has been highly localized, has been sporadic, and has frequently shifted from one geographic area to another in recent years. However, as the authors note below, the pattern of violence is spreading even as levels of violence have diminished. Second, the characteristics of victims of homicide in Mexico fit with some of the general

Table 29.1 Percentage of INEGI and SNSP homicides attributed to organized-crime-style homicide in *Reforma, Milenio,* and Lantia tallies, 2006–2014

YEAR	Milenio *OCG* *(as % INEGI)*	Milenio *OCG* *(as % SNSP)*	Reforma *OCG* *(as % INEGI)*	Reforma *OCG* *(as % SNSP)*	*Lantia* *OCG* *(as % INEGI)*	*Lantia* *OCG* *(as % SNSP)*
2006	n.a.	n.a.	20.3	18.0	n.a.	n.a.
2007	31.3	27.0	25.6	22.1	n.a.	n.a.
2008	40.5	43.2	36.6	39.0	n.a.	n.a.
2009	41.8	51.4	33.3	40.9	n.a.	n.a.
2010	49.1	61.2	45.0	56.0	n.a.	n.a.
2011	45.2	54.6	45.5	55.0	n.a.	n.a.
2012	47.7	57.2	38.1	45.7	n.a.	n.a.
2013	44.4	55.6	31.5	39.5	49.6	62.1
2014	38.7	51.1	31.0	40.9	36.3	48.0
Average	**42.3**	**50.2**	**34.1**	**39.7**	**43.0**	**55.0**

Sources of data: INEGI, SNSP, *Reforma*, *Milenio,* and Lantia for all available years and projections.

Note: This table shows the proportion of organized-crime-style homicides relative to all homicides, as reported by each source (relative to the two official sources of data on homicide: INEGI and SNSP).

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patterns of homicides around the world. Homicides are committed primarily by men and against men. Firearms, especially high-calibre weapons, are an important modus operandi for intentional homicide. However, there are some aspects of homicide, and especially organized-crime-style homicides, that stand out, particularly the extreme nature of the violence employed, the extent to which public officials and journalists are often targeted, and the extent to which the military and especially the police have been targeted (Heinle et al. 2015).

Local distribution and geographic dispersion

In 2007, the historic low point in homicide rates in Mexico, INEGI figures reported that approximately 1,073 of Mexico's roughly 2,450 municipalities had zero homicides.[7] Indeed, for the entire term of President Vicente Fox (2000–6) and the first year of the Calderón administration (2006–12), there was a historically unprecedented period in which over 40 per cent of Mexican municipalities saw not a single murder. Thereafter, Mexico experienced a fairly steady decline in the number of 'murder-free' municipalities each year, reaching a low of 727 municipalities in 2012. Meanwhile, during the same time period, there was a steady increase in the number of municipalities with more than 25 homicides, growing from 62 in 2007 to 178 in 2012. However, in 2013, the geographical dispersion of homicide reversed for the first time since 2007. That is, from 2012 to 2013, the number of municipalities with more than 25 homicides declined from 178 to 171, and the number with zero homicides grew from 727 to 776 (see Figure 29.3).

Taken together, the data show the increase and geographic dispersion of homicides from 2007 to 2012 (especially after 2009), as well as the relative increase of such homicides per capita during that period. We also see that violence receded significantly from 2012 onward, according to the available data from both INEGI and SNSP. There were also some important changes that became especially noticeable in 2014. For example, from 2010 to 2013, at least 35 municipalities have had more than 100 murders per 100,000 people, regardless of whether the rate is calculated using available INEGI or SNSP figures. However, in 2014, SNSP's data (though incomplete) suggest that the number of municipalities with more than 100 homicides per capita dropped to just 21.

Furthermore, the data also shows that homicides have been regionally concentrated in the major drug-trafficking zones in the north-west, the north-east, and the Pacific coast. The states that were hardest hit by violence after 2008 include the six Mexican border states – Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas – as well as the Pacific states of Sinaloa, Nayarit, Michoacán, and Guerrero. However, violence began to diminish in certain areas in 2011 and 2012, particularly as the number of homicides fell in key states in northern Mexico, including Baja California, Sonora, and Chihuahua.

In 2014, using the data available from SNSP on homicides, we see that the states with the largest number of intentional homicides were in the State of México (1,994), Guerrero (1,514), Chihuahua (1,086), Sinaloa (986), Michoacán (904), and Jalisco (900). Nearly all of these states (that is, all except México) saw a decrease in the number of murders compared to the previous year.[8] This is notable not only because the State of México is now thrust into the position of having the most homicides in the country, but also because the other states that saw declines are widely considered to have far more serious problems with crime and violence. Indeed, in 2014, Michoacán and Guerrero were easily the two states that attracted the most attention for their security challenges. The growth of organized-crime-style violence in the State of México also has political salience, given that President Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–18) was formerly its governor. Nationwide, the largest decreases in the number of homicides in 2014 were found in the states of Guerrero (−27.5 per cent), Chihuahua (−24.7 per cent), Coahuila (−39.5 per cent), Nuevo León (−31.8 per cent), and Sinaloa (−18.4 per cent). Meanwhile, the five Mexican states

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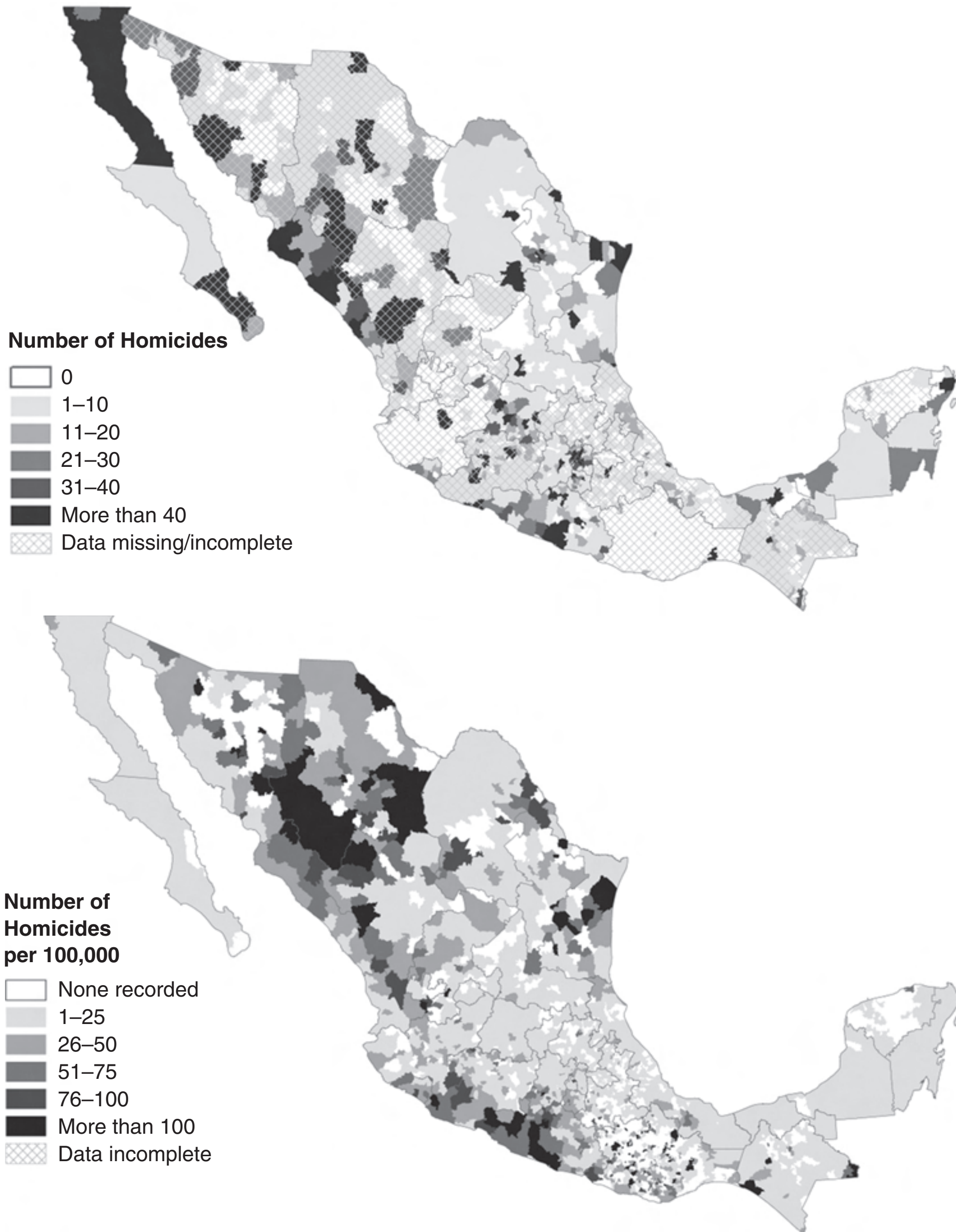

Figure 29.3 Geographic distribution of homicides by total number and homicide rate at the municipal level in 2014

Source of data: SNSP and CONAPO. Maps generated by Theresa Firestine.

exhibiting the largest numerical increases in homicide in 2014 were Oaxaca (19.4 per cent), Tamaulipas (13.2 per cent), Guanajuato (10.6 per cent), México (3.2 per cent), and Tabasco (20.9 per cent), according to SNSP.

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The decrease in violence in 2014 was also apparent in the data for the ten municipalities that registered the highest number of homicides. From 2008 through 2011, as measured by the number of homicides, the largest share of homicides was concentrated in the border metropolis of Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, but thereafter the number of homicides in that city declined significantly. In 2014, SNSP statistics still placed Ciudad Juárez as the municipality with the fourth highest number of homicides, though this number continued to decline by perhaps as much as 14 per cent from the previous year (with the caveat that Ciudad Juárez was one of many cases for which data were incomplete). Meanwhile, the number of homicides also declined again in Acapulco, Guerrero, the city that has registered the most homicides since 2012, from 883 to 590 homicides, a decrease of more than a third.

It is also notable that nearly all of the ten most violent cities in Mexico in 2014 experienced a decrease in the number of homicides, with the only exception being Ecatepec de Morelos in the State of México. Also, none of the top ten most violent municipalities came close to 1,000 homicides or had a homicide rate greater than 100 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, which is a significant and positive change from previous years. Amid these declining rates, three cities – Torreón, Coahuila; Monterrey, Nuevo León; and Zapopan, Jalisco – moved off the 'top ten' list entirely in 2014. Again, unless they have been significantly under-reported by SNSP, these figures show a significant shift in the number and rate of homicides in Mexico.

Changing modes of violence and victim characteristics

As the sheer number of organized-crime-style homicides has declined since 2012, the nature of this violence has also appeared to change. As the authors reported in 2014, there appears to be a significant reduction in homicide cases involving the use of torture, narco-messages (*narcomensajes*), and decapitation (Heinle et al. 2015). Unfortunately, in 2014 such details on organized-crime-style homicides were not forthcoming from the Mexican daily newspaper *Reforma*, the primary source that the authors have used to tally such information in previous years. While *Reforma* has a reputation as one of Mexico's most independent newspapers, its detailed monitoring of crime and violence has declined considerably since the start of the Peña Nieto administration, consistent with other news media organizations.

In light of the reduced availability of information from *Reforma* and other sources in recent years, Justice in Mexico has worked with a network of researchers and volunteers to compile the *Memoria* database, which includes more than 5,000 individual cases of organized-crime-style homicides that occurred from 2006 through 2014. The authors analysed a variety of victim characteristics and circumstances surrounding the cases collected, thus the *Memoria* database provides a useful sample of the kind of violence perpetrated by OCGs. Of the available information for all years, for example, firearms were used in over 2,800 cases (56 per cent) and the authors found evidence of torture reported in 739 cases (14.7 per cent). However, as noted above, reporting of such data is irregular and often incomplete, so these are conservative estimates at best.

The most obvious, but under-appreciated observation that can be made about homicide anywhere in the world is that it is a predominantly male problem. This is certainly the case in Mexico. As noted by José Merino and Jessica Zarkin in an article for *Animal Político* in December 2014, in terms of homicide, there are effectively two Mexicos (Merino and Zarkin 2014). Mexican men have a homicide rate of 33.5 per 100,000 people (on a par with South Africa), while Mexican women have a homicide rate of 4.6 per 100,000 people (on a par with the United States). When separated by age, however, the leading cause of death for young men in Mexico hinges on economic status, since wealthy young men are more likely to die in car accidents and those of modest means more likely to be murdered.

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With regard to organized-crime-style homicides, using the Justice in Mexico *Memoria* database, the authors have also found that the vast majority of victims – at least 75 per cent – were identified as men, with just 9 per cent of the victims identified as female (the remainder were unidentified). Surprisingly, the average age of victims of organized-crime-style homicides is about 32 years, which appears to contradict widespread assumptions that organized crime violence involves uneducated, unemployed, and disaffected youths. However, the authors also believe that the deaths of older persons – especially those of government personnel – are more likely to be over-reported in the media sources used to build the *Memoria* database, so these figures must be interpreted with consideration of the biases inherent in information gleaned from media reports.

Meanwhile, of the more than 5,000 homicide cases identified in the Justice in Mexico sample, the age of the victim was reported in nearly a third of all cases. There were also over 712 victims (14.2 per cent) whose corpses were accompanied by some kind of message (narco-message). Although not all of the messages' contents were publicly released, many at least mentioned a specific organized crime group: about 10 per cent mentioned the Zetas or its members; about 3 per cent mentioned the La Familia Michoacán Organization, or Knights Templar Organization, or their members; and about 1 per cent referred to the Sinaloa Cartel or its members. Also, based on the time of day that deaths were documented, a large proportion of organized-crime-style homicides (and the discovery of such crimes) occur during daylight hours, especially during the morning, contrary to common assumptions.

Three groups of victims stand out in particular: mayors, journalists, and police and military personnel.

Mayors

Justice in Mexico's *Memoria* database includes seventy-five mayors and former mayors killed from 2006 through 2014, many with the characteristics of organized-crime-style homicides. While the peak of violence in Mexico occurred during 2011, the year with the most killings of mayors was actually 2010, when seventeen cases were reported. Despite the reduction of the total number of homicides in Mexico since 2011, there have been a total of thirty mayors killed. However, the rate of mayoral killings dropped by half in 2014, with six mayors killed, compared to twelve mayors in each of the two previous years. This was the lowest number of mayors killed since 2007.

Journalists

Dozens of reporters and media workers have been killed or have disappeared in Mexico, making it one of the world's most dangerous places for journalists. The various organizations tallying homicides involving reporters in Mexico use different criteria for tallying and classifying this violence, since motives are often difficult to confirm. For example, one of the most respected sources, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), focuses primarily on cases where a murder was confirmed to have been committed in relation to the journalist's profession (CPJ 2015a). From 1992 through 2014, CPJ reported that there were thirty-two confirmed cases, forty-one unconfirmed cases, and four media-support workers killed in Mexico. Over 80 per cent of those cases involved reporters working the crime beat, a third involved reporters working on issues related to corruption, and a fifth involved reporters working on issues related to politics (CPJ 2015b).

CPJ's criteria for identifying the murders of reporters and media workers are fairly conservative, since they focus only on cases where there is a confirmed motive associated with the journalist's profession. The Justice in Mexico *Memoria* database includes cases of organized-crime-style homicides, and includes cases of journalists who may have been killed for a variety

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of motives not limited to their reporting. From 2000 to 2014, Justice in Mexico identified 127 journalists and media-support workers who were murdered, with the vast majority of these deaths (98) occurring after 2006. This tally includes journalists and media-support workers employed with a recognized news organization at the time of their deaths, as well as independent, freelance, and former journalists, and media-support workers.

By this tally, 2011 was the worst year on record for murders of reporters and media workers in Mexico. However, the sharp increase in 2014 – the second-worst year on record – goes against the overall trend of reduced violence and substantiates ongoing concerns about protection for journalists in Mexico. For this reason, the organization Artículo 19 claimed that 2013 was the most dangerous on record for journalists in Mexico, taking into consideration other types of violence such as kidnappings, beatings, threats, and other types of aggression (Articulo 19: 2013). According to Justice in Mexico's tally, on average at least eight members of the media were killed each year since 2000, and an average of twelve were killed in each full year of the Calderón administration (counting 2007–12) and in each full year of the Peña Nieto administration (counting 2013 and 2014).

Police and military personnel

Over the last several years, hundreds of police officers and dozens of military personnel have been killed in the line of duty in circumstances that appeared to involve organized crime. In recent years, *Reforma* newspaper has been the only source that consistently tracks and reports these deaths. However, in 2014, *Reforma* stopped reporting these figures. Using the Justice in Mexico *Memoria* database, the authors identified over 550 federal, state, and local law enforcement personnel, and 60 military personnel who have been victims of OCG-style violence since 2006. This database provides only a sample of cases, and details were not available in every case.

Analysis and conclusion

The data available in recent years suggest that the situation in Mexico is improving, particularly as measured by intentional homicides and those related to OCGs. However, there does remain room for further improvement, particularly in areas of the country where the causes of public insecurity are particularly deeply rooted and supported by local populations. For example, the southern Pacific state of Michoacán has presented persistent challenges across both the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations. In Michoacán, many citizens have so little faith in the federal government authority that they have supported vigilante groups as a means to stave off the influence of organized crime. In early 2014, the federal government officially recognized the so-called self-defence groups (*autodefensas*) that had emerged to counter the criminal activities of the organized crime group known as the Knights Templar Organization. Despite efforts by the federal government to deputize such citizen vigilante groups, this resulted in ongoing problems and concerns, including allegations that some such groups were in league with organized crime, and persistent clashes among rival local defence groups.

Another important lesson from Mexico is that eliminating one OCG may simply create opportunities for another. Meanwhile, as the Mexican government has made headway in some locations, problems have broken out elsewhere. In 2014 and 2015, for example, the Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG) grew significantly in power and scope in its home state of Jalisco, as well as Colima, Michoacán, Guanajuato, Nayarit, Guerrero, Morelos, Veracruz, and the Federal District (Mosso 2015). The group burst onto the national scene in Mexico in 2010, and was able to capitalize on the weakening of other groups in the region such as the Knights Templar

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in Michoacán.[9] The group emerged as the predominant force in Jalisco thanks in large part to its ties with the Milenio Cartel, the organization that dominated Michoacán prior to the rise of the La Familia Organization and the Knights Templar, which effectively took over that state in the 1990s and early 2000s. The CJNG struck off on its own and has held a strong presence in neighbouring Michoacán since 2000 (Pérez Caballero 2014). The CJNG directly challenged the state in several attacks in 2015, killing dozens of state and local police mid-year, and causing the federal government to deploy federal police and military personnel throughout the state.

A third lesson from Mexico is that state corruption can lead to serious human rights abuses. Perhaps the most reviled case of official corruption in recent years in Mexico was the 2014 case of local authorities in Iguala, a small inland town in the state of Guerrero. On 26 September 2014, dozens of student protestors and innocent civilians came under fire and were assaulted by police, and dozens were taken into custody. Of these, forty-three students from a rural teachers' college based in the nearby town of Ayotzinapa, who were taken into custody, were never seen again, and quickly became known as the 'Ayotzinapa 43'.

It took the federal government until January 2015 to confirm that the students were actually dead. While authorities searched, they unearthed dozens of other victims whose bodies had been buried in and around Iguala in recent years, suggesting that such disappearances – perhaps with similar government complicity – were a serious problem. The families and the public decried the complicity or ineptitude of government officials at all levels. Marches, public demonstrations, and even acts of violence took place around the country, including an assault on the state capitol in Chilpancingo, which was subsequently set ablaze by Molotov cocktails. Even though the immediate blame for the massacre was placed squarely on Iguala's local authorities, the state's governor stepped down in disgrace within weeks of the incident and, while federal authorities ultimately captured the perpetrators of the massacre, many also severely criticized the Peña Nieto administration for failing to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis. In public protests and social media, some even adopted the more critical view that the Iguala massacre should be considered an act of state ('fue un acto de estado'), and called for the resignation of Peña Nieto himself.

Finally, one consideration that cannot be ignored when evaluating homicides committed in Mexico is the number of disappeared people, underscored by the continued discovery of clandestine graves in a number of states throughout Mexico. 2014 was the year with the highest number of disappearances on record, due partly to increased monitoring by the country's new National Registry for Missing or Disappeared Persons (SNPED). As this chapter went to press in late September 2015, only one of the students from Ayotzinapa had been positively identified among many charred remains found scattered in a riverbed close to where the students disappeared. One possible explanation for an apparent increase in disappearances is that criminal organizations – no longer as extensively involved in open, armed conflict with one another – now tend more towards concealing the remains of their victims, in contrast with the peak of cartel violence in 2011–12 when bodies were regularly displayed in public, often mutilated and displaying narco-messages directed toward rival groups. With increased contact between criminal organizations and the general public, it is plausible that the groups might wish to keep a lower profile, as unsanctioned illicit activities such as extortion might be hindered by increased attention from the authorities.

The general conclusion of this chapter is that Mexico's wave of violence appears to have crested, with significant decreases in recent years. However, the data presently available are incomplete and widely viewed with circumspection because of concerns about possible government manipulation and pressure on media organizations to de-emphasize problems of crime and violence. In other words, the problems related to the availability and credibility of data that can help to monitor and evaluate Mexico's security situation allow for only tentative conclusions when it comes to specifics. The widespread perception that the Mexican authorities have failed

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to properly report the level of violence seriously detracts from the credibility of government efforts. Indeed, there has been widespread disenchantment with Mexico's public authorities and key institutions in general in recent years. In 2014, over a third of Mexicans expressed little or no confidence in the Mexican army (a considerable decrease compared to previous years), over half expressed little or no confidence in the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), more than two-thirds expressed little or no confidence in the presidency, and three-quarters expressed little or no confidence in the country's political parties (*Parametría* 2014). These indicators reflect sharp increases in public dissatisfaction, and have been accompanied by the lowest measures of support for democratic governance more generally since the year 2000. Mexico's public security crisis has created a serious political crisis that may take many years to resolve.

Notes

1 Shirk and Ríos Cázares (2007) use data from homicide prosecutions to show the longer term downward trend in homicide cases from the 1930s to the mid-2000s. Escalante Gonzalbo (2009) uses actual homicide data to demonstrate that this trend continued from the 1990s to the late 2000s.
2 It is important to note that these INEGI figures do not differentiate between intentional homicides and unintentional homicides (e.g., car accidents).
3 Information drawn from Heinle et al. 2015.
4 For a full discussion of the data and methodology employed here, see Heinle et al. 2015.
5 Mexican national media outlets *Reforma* and *Milenio* tally homicides presumably related to organized crime in Mexico, and are probably the most-used independent source of such data. One of the limitations of both official and non-governmental tallies of organized-crime-style homicides is that there are significant gaps in reporting by some sources, notably SNSP and Reforma.
6 Lantia is a consulting firm headed by Mexican security expert Eduardo Guerrero. Lantia's data are not publicly available for previous years.
7 These figures are approximate because there is no data for some municipalities. Also, the number of municipalities in Mexico changes from time to time as new ones are created. From 2012 to 2013, for example, it appears that dozens of new municipalities were added to INEGI's homicide dataset.
8 In fact, only nine Mexican states saw an increase in homicides in 2014: Aguascalientes (7.7 per cent), Baja California Sur (25 per cent), Guanajuato (10.6 per cent), Hidalgo (13.7 per cent), México (3.2 per cent), Oaxaca (19.4 per cent), Tabasco (20.9 per cent), Tamaulipas (13.2 per cent), and Yucatán (5.0 per cent).
9 The CJNG, led by Nemesio Osegera Cervantes, 'El Mencho', was formed after the death of Ignacio 'Nacho' Coronel, who had been the leader of the Sinaloa Cartel in Jalisco.

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